

# Book Reviews

---

**Returning to Reality:  
Thomas Merton's Wisdom  
for a Technological Age**

Phillip M. Thornton  
The Lutterworth Press,  
Cambridge, 2013  
ISBN 9780718892951  
(pbk) 112 pages  
£15.00

Thomas Merton is not thought of as a writer whose life's writings can be seen as adding up to a systematic theology. He never claimed to be putting a body of work on any specific field into place and more than likely would have laughed at the idea. Yet shouldn't the function of theology today be all about the present—trying to represent a pro-

phetic voice for today that engages with the deepest social currents? Such a theology can only be unsystematic and plural and this is what we see with Merton's different kinds of writing—the way he came at things from different angles whilst always respecting the idea of a contemplative life not centred on the one who lives it.

This book gathers together Merton's views on technology—ranging from his vision of the absurdity of people blessed with all God has to give sitting in front of the TV looking at dancing toilet rolls, to his insightful remarks on Shaker furniture. Amazingly, what comes out is a really interesting and complex over-

all view that is well worth reading as a comment on technology in 2013, not just as an indication of how with it he was in the 1960s. Of course the actuality of technology today is wildly different to what Merton knew and it is to the author's credit that he introduces us to the very latest wonders and horrors in two of the most rapidly changing fields—information technology and genetic engineering. By doing so he shows that what Merton had to say on technology is still highly relevant.

One area that remains horribly the same is the technology of nuclear warfare where recent refinements of insanity do not alter Merton's terrific denunciations of modern weapons and his exploration of the deepest aspects of their invention—how evil is made to appear something different when it's discussed as 'work at the frontiers of science'. The chapter on the possibility of nuclear apocalypse is as desperately gloomy as one would expect. It is followed, however, by two chapters respectively on information technology and medical engineering which led this reader at any rate into new worlds that seem just as gloomy. These technologies can be thought about in two ways at the same time—as introducing wonderful inventions that will advance the human race and make everything (finally) perfect and as a world of un-thought-through interference to our very beings and our ways of thinking. It is this anxious

ambivalence that paralyses us and perhaps hides the reality that many new products and interventions are of the shadiest ethical value, driven by organisations intent on power and profit.

Merton wrote again and again about the stranglehold that new technology had on our ways of thinking—how advertising and the media made opposition difficult. He rejected the position forced on opponents of modern technology of being on the other side of an invented fence as Luddites and traditionalists. For in fact science and technology all flourish within a world view which has been more or less reduced to rubble by the terrible outcomes of utilitarian rationalism over the last century. Outside science and technology few areas of current thought see knowledge as soundly based, permanent and incremental.

At one point in the book the author describes a presentation he attended in the Texas Senate on widening stem cell research. The glossy presentations by academics, biotech companies and bioethics foundations were all in favour, all arguing on the basis of saving lives and aiding the Texan economy. Merton years ago realised that advertising, academia, corporate profit and the media are one interlocking process (as was, after all, the insight of the 60s). Then and now, despite the racket of opinions, they keep real thought at bay, the thought that comes from silence, self-

abandonment and contemplation. It may be that suddenly, as with the collapse of the communist world, the poetic, imaginative and prophetic voices of people like Merton will enter in and prevail, and if so this excellent book will be seen as one more breach in the seemingly triumphant iron curtain of modern technology.

**Peter Ellis** is interested in contemporary spirituality.

---

**Thomas Merton  
and Thérèse Lentfoehr:  
The Story of a Friendship**

Robert Nugent, SDS  
St. Paul's  
New York, 2012  
ISBN 0818913396  
(pbk) 194 pages  
\$14.95

In the opening chapter of this book the author states that whilst he hopes that it might be of some interest to Merton scholars 'it is directed primarily to the many Merton aficionados who might enjoy seeing one more side of the multi-layered personality of the monk'. Whilst not a scholarly work in the strictest sense it is an important account of a previously unexplored aspect of Merton's life and work and of a friendship that was of some significance. It also importantly gives some insights into the life and achievements of a woman who was an accomplished musician, lecturer

and author long before Merton became well known.

The story of the twenty year friendship between Thomas Merton and Thérèse Lentfoehr, a Sister of the Society of the Divine Saviour began seriously in 1948 though they had already had some brief exchanges earlier. Following the publication of *The Seven Storey Mountain* Thérèse wrote expressing her admiration for the work. Merton replied, not with the standard card he was using but in a personal letter. He then subsequently sent her an uncorrected manuscript copy of his autobiography. This set the tone for what was to become a relationship and friendship maintained until Merton's death, almost exclusively by correspondence. His decision to make a gift of his manuscript is a key event in the story of this friendship. Why he did so remains unclear. For Thérèse it began what can only be described as a lifelong obsession with Merton and his writing and with collecting every letter, note, manuscript and photograph she could obtain. Her collection was to become the first major archive of his writings and remains a valuable resource now. Interestingly, Merton only began to keep her letters in 1963 and this book gives some insight into Merton's developing understanding that his manuscripts and writing should be preserved. Eventually Thérèse was correcting, typing and photocopying work for Merton and in a sense she became his extern secretary.