

Book Reviews

Merton's Contentious Catholic Vision

Man of Dialogue: Thomas Merton's Catholic Vision

Gregory K. Hillis

Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN, 2021

ISBN 978-0-8146-8460-3 (pbk) 297 pages

£18.06

Signs of Hope: Thomas Merton's Letters on Peace, Race, and Ecology

Gordon Oyer

Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 2021

ISBN 978-1-62698-430-1 (pbk) 275 pages

£17.90

A reader may have to wait for a book to be published on Thomas Merton's writings on social concerns and then two publications appear on the same topic during the same year. This is the case with *Man of Dialogue* by Gregory Hillis and *Signs of Hope* by Gordon Oyer. I will review both books within this review essay specifically because the authors have chosen to focus on Merton's social writings from the perspective of Merton as a writer who was concerned with promoting dialogue, which is the perspective Hillis has addressed, and Merton as a writer who promoted a person-centredness within his writings on social concerns, which is the perspective that Oyer has taken. Both authors share in common the task of studying Merton within the context of his historical moment while also proposing ways of reading Merton that suggests the ongoing relevance of Merton's concerns as a social writer for contemporary readers.

Gregory Hillis, who teaches theology in Bellarmine University in Kentucky, poses the question: how Catholic was Thomas Merton? By

asking this specific question, Hillis is addressing a specific concern for American Catholics who relate to their denomination as being a badge of cultural identity as much as a living faith community. Hillis has chosen to follow the evolution of Merton's Catholicism biographically and each of his nine chapters surveys a perspective in Merton's evolving Catholic identity from his conversion in 1938 until his sudden death in 1968. Hillis frames Merton as a man of dialogue by explaining that Merton 'did not understand dialogue to mean capitulating to the world, but understood it to be opposed to the logic of a world bent on perpetual enmity and fragmentation.' (p.237) Despite Hillis's argument that Merton's contribution to Catholic social action is best explained by Merton's willingness to be a man of dialogue, nevertheless, there is an inherent tension that Hillis wrestles with, but which remains unresolved, namely, Merton the Roman Catholic convert who never neatly fits into the culture of American Catholicism. Hillis is right to highlight the intellectual nature of Merton's conversion in his opening chapter. Hillis reminds readers of the impact that Merton's reading of Étienne Gilson and Jacques Maritain had on him by nudging him to embrace Roman Catholicism. Hillis describes Merton's engagement with the Eucharist in aesthetic terms (p.25). The aesthetic sensibility can be seen in Merton's engagement with the writings of the Roman Catholic convert poet Gerard Manley Hopkins (p. 26). Hillis is correct in pointing to the intellectual and aesthetic nature of Merton's engagement with Catholicism before the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). What strongly comes through the narrative of Merton's conversion is an impression of Merton's private yearning for Catholicism as a stable symbolic system within a transient material world characterised by disruption and dislocation. Hillis, however, does not make enough of the fact that intellectual engagement for conversion was typical of religious converts before liturgical changes as a consequence of Vatican II. Merton's experiences of religious conversion was not typical for cradle American Catholics who grew into their faith from within the life of their parishes amid the overwhelming influence of American material culture. Hillis doesn't really amplify this vital distinction between the quality of Merton's Catholicism and that of the mainstream American Catholic experience. In fact, drawing such a distinction does help readers to appreciate just how different Merton's experience of Catholicism was from that of his fellow American Catholics.

Given Merton's commitment to ecumenical dialogue, Merton's Catholic identity has been regularly questioned since his death in 1968. Some go so far as to label him a rebel whose ideas went against the

Roman Catholic Church. Hillis argues that readers can only fully appreciate Merton as a social critic by becoming aware of the extent **Merton's thought was intertwined with his identity as a Catholic priest** and how his thought emerged out of a thorough immersion in Roman Catholicism's liturgical, theological, and spiritual tradition. **What is largely missing from Hillis's account is how Americans took to Merton's theological reading of politics, the author spending more time justifying Merton's political perspective as based on the authenticity of Scripture and Catholic Tradition.** This is valid, but it does not explain just how Merton was viewed by contemporaries and continues to be viewed as an outlier within Roman Catholicism. Perhaps, the reason is that Merton was a convert who did not quite suit mainstream American Catholic cultural experience.

In framing Merton as a man of dialogue Hillis draws parallels between Merton and the current pontificate of Francis I. However, this reading of dialogue offers a note of presentism that does not reflect the historical Merton whose experiment in ecumenical dialogue aligned with the pontificate of John XXIII on the eve of the Second Vatican Council. It is Pope John who offers a pontifical model for Pope Francis. The open secret as to why Merton is misunderstood is precisely because Merton took a theological view of politics and racial relations in his writings which was different from the experience of mainstream American Catholics and **which can best be understood from the perspective of Merton's conversion to Catholicism and his life as a priest, and monk within the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky.** The book begins with a complaint that Merton is not Catholic enough for Americans, and the irony is that Hillis justifies Merton through theology, which is why mainstream Americans **haven't understood Merton.**

On entering the Trappist Abbey of Gethsemane in 1941, Thomas Merton initially saw himself as withdrawing from the secular world. But in later years his sense of monastic vocation changed. His contemplative life became a point of prophetic engagement with his fellow men and women in their struggles, their hopes, and their questions. This social engagement was particularly fuelled by his wide correspondence.

Gordon Oyer in *Signs of Hope* **traces Merton's social engagement through the medium of Merton's correspondence around themes of peace, race, and ecology with notable individuals, including Dorothy Day, Daniel Berrigan, and Vincent Harding, presenting an in-depth study of Merton's contemplative insight into the social and spiritual transformations needed to address the concerns of our globalised**

society. Oyer, through Merton, questions the priorities that drive Western society, but he also covers familiar ground covered by Hillis, namely, that Merton's conversion to Catholicism is best understood as being an intellectual conversion through Merton's reading of Étienne Gilson and Jacques Maritain. However, early on (pp. 5-6), Oyer interprets Merton's social writings as engaging with the philosophy of personalism. Oyer defines this philosophy as follows: 'Personalism emerged in Europe in response to challenges posed by the Enlightenment and French Revolution. Those events prompted some to revisit St. Thomas Aquinas's ideas on the 'human person' which in turn pointed back to Aristotle. This led to distinctions between "persons" grounded in God's immanent presence and modern ideas of rational and autonomous "individuals".' (p.5) By implication, personalism has always been a rarefied philosophy and the fact that Merton engaged with this rarefied discourse highlights his intellectual elitism that contrasted with the experiences of his mainstream Catholic readership.

It is fair to say that Oyer's big idea is to connect Merton's letter writing within the tradition of European personalism that places personhood at the heart of human relationships. Indeed, a philosophy of personalism is a dimension shared by Hillis and Oyer. With Hillis, however, it is more tacit and is primarily mediated through his account of the theology of Incarnate humanism, but for Oyer personalism is much more explicit as it is communicated through his close historical reading of Merton's letters as primarily encounters with the personhood of his interlocutors. Merton's correspondence was his communitarian personalism in action.

Each of Oyer's ten chapters reveals themes from Merton's life of dialogue, his apostolate of friendship, and his probing assessment of social issues still vital in our time. Admirably, Oyer is trying to link Merton to a tradition of intellectual thought in a manner that moves readers away from the exclusive examination of Merton as a singular author to seeing Merton in relationship with his interlocutors who partially shaped his social and political consciousness. Oyer examines key personal exchanges between Merton and his correspondents that explore dismantling racial oppression of African Americans and indigenous peoples, advocating for peace in the nuclear era, and re-calibrating the technological domination of nature and human freedom that impairs life on our planet. The book is divided into three parts: the first part considers Merton's engagement with the peace movement and the ethos of nonviolence, his interlocutors being Dorothy Day, Jim Douglass, and

Jim Forest; the second section considers Merton and race issues through his correspondences with Marlon Green, Fr. August Thompson, Robert Williams, and Vincent Harding; the third section on ecological **consciousness reflects Merton's engagement with Rachel Carson and Barbara Hubbard. In the section on race, Oyer amplifies Merton's** contemplative quality of compassionate listening to his correspondents while also being conscious of his own white privilege as a barrier to such listening, and of the patience required to work for the removal of race discrimination. Oyer, in the three sections, is making the point that Merton did not engage as a systematic intellectual on the issues of nuclear proliferation, race, and ecological crisis; nevertheless, he was deeply committed to the implications of these moments of crisis from a personalist perspective. Each chapter reveals themes from his life of dialogue, his apostolate of friendship, and his probing assessment of critical issues that remain vital for our time. Oyer shows how Merton connects these views with reading materials that informed his thought **and helped address his recipients' immediate concerns about those social dilemmas.** Oyer is looking at the fundamental integration and common **source of humanity that is at the core of Merton's writings and his** tendency to present Merton as an integrative thinker. This is one **meaning of his catholicity. Merton's catholicity of reading implies a** variety of reading and a willingness to read widely: reading for improvement and reading to live where books speak to books and widen perspectives from what one receives through the act of reading and writing. Oyer is asking how one responds to change and how this is **implemented and enacted. He argues that Merton's contemplative** wisdom and understanding of the distorted priorities that underlie social and political concerns, which transcend both his time and ours, emerge through the interaction of his correspondence.

Merton personally invested in the two broadest social movements of his day: opposition to nuclear proliferation during the Cold War and the **'hot' proxy war in Vietnam, and support of civil rights for African** Americans. His emphasis in both cases was a need to address the roots of these cultural dynamics. It is for this reason that Merton was a prophetic voice because he was not ashamed of facing the uncomfortable truths that justified the maintenance of the military-industrial-complex and the preservation of a racist culture in parts of the United States of America. **We need to keep in mind the particularity of Merton's Catholic vision, in** his historical moment, which was decidedly different from the mainstream American Catholic experience at the time that had a

tendency to rally-round-the-flag. This observation is implicit in both publications. Nevertheless, both authors could have made the point more explicitly in their narratives. The presentism that is in both publications focuses on an aspect of Merton as a model of compassionate listening. Both Hillis and Oyer **explain Merton's Catholic vision as offering a way to get beyond the polarised opinions that continue to divide discourse in our contemporary culture and which is at the core of American cultural and political life in this present moment. Merton engaged with social issues that remain relevant, but also endanger American politics and cultural life by becoming more divisive as public opinions become more polarised. In this toxic atmosphere, Merton's mode of engagement through compassionate listening offers a model for us all to imitate in our social interactions. Both Hillis and Oyer remind readers that Merton's correspondence continues to offer readers hope to act for a better world, despite the discouraging realities we may continue to face.**

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