

# Book Reviews

## **Engaging Thomas Merton: Spirituality, Justice, and Racism**

Daniel P. Horan, OFM

Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 2023

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£23.67

The American Franciscan Daniel P Horan OFM is well known to many within the family of the worldwide Thomas Merton fraternity. He is a professor of philosophy, religious studies and theology, and director of the Center for the Study of Spirituality at St Mary's College Notre Dame, USA. He is also professor of spirituality at the Oblate School of Theology in San Antonio USA.

His latest book on Thomas Merton is the fruit of many years fascination and passionate engagement with Merton's life and writings, and this is very apparent in this excellent, and to my mind, important contribution to Merton scholarship.

In the Introduction the author declares that for him, 'Merton is a hobby that grew out of control.' Any of us, far less able than Daniel Horan, will appreciate this remark and identify fully with its sentiment. I for one am very glad that he is still pursuing his hobby and have enjoyed and learnt so much from this book. It should be on the shelf of every Merton enthusiast, no matter what their interest or involvement in the world of Thomas Merton might be.

The book, comprising of papers, lectures, talks and homilies, many of them revised and reworked especially for this book, presents us with an invitation as readers to engage at many different levels in Merton's lifelong commitment and concern for social justice at all levels of society, and his deep belief that the life of prayer and the life of social justice are intimately bound together. Daniel Horan expands our vision on Merton's thought and helps us to new levels of understanding. One of his primary

concerns is to ask the question: 'What relevance does Thomas Merton have for us today?', particularly, though certainly not exclusively, for the young people that he comes into contact with through his university teaching. In these days when technology rules and so often has a detrimental effect, what has Merton, a Trappist monk of a different generation and world view, to offer to these 'Digital Natives', a phrase coined I think by Daniel Horan himself and discussed in the chapter entitled 'Digital Natives and the Digital Self'. His answer is very much in the affirmative as he explores the idea of the 'true self', one of Merton's abiding themes and concerns.

The book is divided into five sections, covering a range of topics and concerns. The first section is introductory in nature and concerns Merton's life, appeal and significance for today. If you knew nothing about Merton this would be a good place to start. The two anniversary homilies, on Merton's birth and death, are particularly interesting in this respect. In this section Daniel Horan begins to explore what wisdom and insight Merton can offer to our present generation.

The second section offers thoughts on Merton's understanding of contemporary Christian life; his understanding of marriage as a vocation as valid and as important as the vocation to the priesthood or religious life. The next chapter, alluded to above, looks at Merton's relevance for the Millennial Generation and Generation Z; if you have children or grandchildren that you find puzzling and confusing this would be a good chapter to read and be encouraged by! The section ends with a consideration of Merton's pastoral insights and concerns for those called to and living out the vocation of priesthood.

The third section, entitled 'Insights about Key Christian Virtues', considers four important themes within the Christian tradition: revelation, holiness, poverty and love. Mercy and God's all-embracing, forgiving love are seen as the very heart of the Christian revelation, the mercy and love that Merton knew so well as he grappled with his own sense of unworthiness and sinfulness. The next chapter reflects on the nature of Christian holiness, comparing some of Merton's insights with those of Pope Francis. Both are seen as pivotal figures in the renewing of the Church and its proclamation to our world, a world that so desperately needs the hope and the joy of the Gospel. This is followed by further reflections on Merton and Pope Francis, this time drawing upon their thinking on evangelical poverty. They are both convinced that, in our time perhaps more than ever, to be living a life of evangelical poverty is a

prerequisite for a faithful following of Christ, as a means of protest against the inequalities of our time and of showing solidarity with the world's poor and destitute.

The fourth section looks at Merton's prophetic writings on racism and social justice. There is a fascinating chapter on 'interest convergence theory' and how Merton used this in his thinking about the intersection of spirituality and racial justice as essential for our response to injustice. Daniel Horan examines in some depth Merton's repeated view that 'racism is a white problem', and he offers insights into what is meant by the phrase as Merton uses it and how this might help us in our own understanding of racism. There is a final chapter on Merton's relationship with the civil rights movement, focused as it often was for him on Martin Luther King Junior and Malcolm X.

The last section's focus is on what resources Thomas Merton offers to us as we engage with the issues of social justice and ethics in our world today, for example as we face an ecological crisis more urgent now than for Merton's own generation and that could bring about the destruction of our planet. Daniel Horan sees Merton as a person of dialogue, as someone who sought to engage all kinds of people in the art of listening, listening to one another, listening to creation, listening to one's own heart. He did this not only through personal encounters but through his numerous networks and extensive correspondence with all kinds of people, not least in his active engagement in interreligious dialogue. And so he asks us to consider what it might mean to truly listen and what difference this could make to our world. The final chapter engages with the 'poetics of non-violence' as seen through the thought of Thomas Merton, Stanley Hauerwas, and John Caputo. All three agree that non-violence is the Christian way. Indeed there can be no other. To live non-violently is the call and the challenge given to each one of us, for only in this way is the Kingdom of God truly made real and present. This chapter engages with postmodern thinking and theology, perhaps a challenge for some of us, but richly rewarding and worth the effort.

*Engaging Thomas Merton: Spirituality, Justice, and Racism* is dedicated to 'my colleagues and friends in the International Thomas Merton Society and the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland' - another good reason for purchasing a copy and recommending it to others. The book is an accessible, celebration of the life, work, and profound witness of Thomas Merton. It is also a challenge to us and for us to engage with Merton's thinking in its varied aspects and multiple concerns. Daniel

Horan makes it very clear that Merton is as relevant today as he ever was as we face the challenges of living authentic Christian lives wherever God has placed us.

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### **Open to the Full Dimension: Thomas Merton, Practical Theology, and Pastoral Practice**

Dominiek Lootens

Foreword by Daniel Schipani

Wipf and Stock, 2022

ISBN 978-1-6667-3506-2 (pbk) xxvii + 115 pages

£21

What is theology for? Perhaps more importantly, *who* is theology for? And why do we do pastoral theology? An advertisement I noticed on a university web page (Winter, 2023) alerted its readers to a job vacancy in a theological seminary. I was reminded of what it said when I started to write this review of Dominiek Lootens's book. I've slightly paraphrased it, but the advertisement was looking for:

a Programme Director to oversee recent developments in the college's provision of reflective pastoral supervision and training. Skills and expertise in chaplaincy work or related fields (e.g. community and social care, lay ministry) are essential, and a background in theology is preferred though not essential. The pastoral supervision training provider is globally significant and so some experience of interfaith-based dialogue is also desirable.

The advertisement might have additionally suggested Lootens's book as 'required reading'. Scanning the publisher's promotional material, the intended readers are those working in pastoral settings, hospital chaplaincy and educational outreach. What makes Lootens's own take on pastoral theology distinct comes out on the back cover. Thomas Merton's name is profiled in significant ways, highlighting the central role his work plays in the book's design and purpose. But it's not a theological investigation in the traditional sense; and nor is it a detailed study of Merton. I want to stress that neither of these observations should be seen as in any way pejorative. Indeed, in terms of what it sets out to do, then