

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

Foreward by Dniel 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

the book has achieved many of its aims.

The myriad quotations acknowledge the author's personal (more than intellectual) indebtedness to Merton's life and writings. Despite the book's allusions to Merton's pastoral theology, the book doesn't make a well-wrought or convincing case for listing Merton as a pastoral theologian. He was a deeply pastoral monk, someone whose compassion, sensitivity, thoughtfulness and generosity animate his monastic vocation. Lootens is aware of this. I suspect, however, that Merton wouldn't rank himself on a pastoral theology book list. Besides, Lootens draws on several other sources, including both pertinent and stimulating material from the 1950s and 1960s, to buttress his discussion of the practicalities of pastoral work. Readers will, nonetheless, find a richly-sourced if occasionally poorly referenced account, showing how Merton might complement professional practices in contemporary pastoral outreach. And Merton is inestimably preferred, following Lootens's evidence, to the corporate models often promoted in the growing business of pastoral care.

The book's six chapters, alert to the 1960s (e.g. Chapter 5, 'Thomas Merton and Septima Clark on the Civil Rights Movement and Adult Education' (76-87)), as much as the present (Chapter 6, 'Thomas Merton and the Education of Social Justice Allies' (88-95)), offer reflections on practical theology rooted in the author's and others' actual experiences. This includes instances of direct pastoral interventions as well as supervisory work (e.g. Chapter 3, 'Thomas Merton and Pastoral Supervision' (29-52)). Lootens has a good track record, already well known and respected in the field. Chapter 1, on multi-faith chaplaincy contexts (1-16), and Chapter 2, on migration and practical theology (17-28) place centre stage the real-life dynamics of contemporary pastoral theology, but understood through the contemplative lens of Merton. It's in these early chapters that he begins to show how Merton can be applied, drawing additional methodological support from work by, amongst others, bell hooks, Margaret Miles and, *ex consequenti*, Martha Nussbaum, whom he acknowledges. I'll return to these critics later in this review.

Thinking more laterally and contextually, the seminary advertisement and Lootens's book tell us something about the augmented shape of theological education. Pastoral theology, inflected in this case by an applied reading of Merton, is now sharing library space with systematic and Biblical theology in a curriculum that is progressively moving away from the familiar trajectories of a traditional theology programme. The

kind of scholastic, largely Roman Catholic doctrinal theology being studied when Merton was writing in the 1950s and early 1960s, and which he often supplements and supplants (alluded to by way of the book's inclusion of the Suenens' correspondence [see *Appendix*]), wasn't best placed to speak to or understand contemporary culture. The Second Vatican Council began to address this gap, and Lootens, himself a Roman Catholic, shows how pastoral theology, ecumenism, chaplaincy studies and interfaith dialogue play an increasingly vital and positive part in teaching and learning.

The book's content, alongside its deployment of Merton as a contemplative lens in the mapping of a new and expanding theological curriculum, means Lootens is at times innovative and prescient. Perhaps the book can't and doesn't ask 'big' questions about what theology is for, or what we can do with theology. Nor is the book necessarily best placed to understand the wider structures involved in migration, racism or poverty. In fact these are huge questions, requiring a more prophetic vision than the book is able to imagine. But the book's subtext is one which does assume the usefulness of theology, and it is Merton more than any of his other sources who helps such considerations.

Following Lootens's logic, reflective practice without prayer, contemplation and meditative dialogue is lacking to the extent that practitioners' own lives remain unchanged. This aspect probably makes the book quite distinct. In Chapter 1 (see 3-7ff), Lootens makes a good case. He uses Merton-inflected arguments to question the managerial and accountancy models often deployed in health and social care settings in Belgium and beyond, taking the lead from Susanna Snyder. Content taken from the retreats Merton gave to women religious (3-4) and to peace makers (88ff), alongside Lootens's reading of Merton's journals, are applied as the book's 'mystical-prophetic' methodology (see also 'Introduction').

By stressing, rightly, the contemplative and the prophetic, Lootens, almost by way of contradiction, reminds readers that Merton wasn't primarily a pastoral worker. The positive offshoot, as noted above, is that the kind of pastoral ministry being foregrounded offers an alternative to managerial or corporate discourses. Whilst Lootens does make an interesting case for Merton's monastic-pastoral theology (via the Merton-Cardinal Suenens correspondence), his methodology and approach aren't explained with sufficient clarity. It's to be commended that Merton is 'applied', but the reason and context sometimes remain tenuous.

In his 'Introduction: Reading Thomas Merton' (xvii-xxiv), Lootens

foregrounds his methodology via summaries of his own practice of reading. This is an aspect of the book's approach that's only briefly mentioned and it passes without justification or qualification. It's taken for granted throughout that 'reading' is an uncontentious or innocent activity. Is 'reading' such a neutral pursuit, somehow free of any (un)conscious constraint? I pose these questions for two reasons. Firstly, reading is by no means the uncontroversial or innocent activity it's made out to be, even so-called 'reading for pleasure' (Lootens, 'Introduction'). Reading always has a context, even when, on the surface at least, one is simply reading for pleasure. ('Introduction'). Popular tabloid media encourage reading for pleasure, but are such media free of ideological and political agendas? Secondly, Merton was himself a great reader, but one whose critical sensitivities exposed the powerful ways texts can position readers to endorse one world view as opposed to another. In his later years, Merton is very much aware, following his own reading of Roland Barthes or Michel Foucault perhaps, that texts construct as much as they purport to innocently describe reality. Lootens might address this more probingly in his opening presentation on 'reading Thomas Merton'.

As a result, the book's methodology and epistemology, because taken for granted, are never tested. We sense some of these concerns early in the book, where Lootens names Margaret Miles as his guiding and overarching source. Miles's own 'hermeneutical method', for instance, borrowed as it is from structuralist literary theory, doesn't easily fit with chapters which draw on work by bell hooks or Septima Clark. As a consequence of this precedence given to Miles, readers are also implicated in, and required to affirm, the work of Martha Nussbaum. Later in the book, sources are deployed that potentially run counter to Nussbaum's hugely contested ethical project. Does this mean that in our own reading of the book, we affirm the latter's own judgements on contemporary culture? How does this align with Merton's deployment in the field of pastoral theology?

Perhaps the literary-structuralist hermeneutics that Lootens takes as his principal methodology isn't sufficiently equipped to deal with the wide-ranging dynamics of 'migration', race, social justice and peace. Case work, legal documents, processing, court papers, counselling, housing and benefits, and a whole host of related challenges, complicate any simplistic way of 'being-with' those seeking pastoral support, especially in the context of forced migration or where migrants are perceived ('being read') as illegal. No two governments operate with the same policies; and even within one state, judgements and guidelines are

configured within the ideological apparatus of the law. Thus, the summary of migration in the 'Belgian context' (3-5; 14) as a European 'hot topic', and of how Catholic chaplains can become bridge builders (14) seems to oversimplify the European as well as the global situation. Despite such reservations, Lootens does acknowledge his own positionality in all this, but perhaps the implications need to be probed a little further. The power and force of negative discourse deployed in populist media output often sets the terms of how people read and subsequently 'feel' about migration. How might theology and religious life intervene in critical as well as liberatory ways such that subjects, no longer the object of research, are free to exercise transformative agency? Again, this is a huge question, but Lootens' book invites us more than anything to continue reading Merton in ways that encourage both contemplation and action.

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Enacting Love – How Thomas Merton Died for Peace

John Smelcer

Forward by Dr. Paul Pearson

Naciketas Press, Kirksville, Missouri 63501, 2022

ISBN 978-1-952232-67-1 (pbk) 242 + xiv pages

£12.72

The idea that Merton's death was due to some form of skulduggery has been gaining increasing credence in recent years, contrary to the view of Michael Mott, who in his official biography of Merton, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (1984), concluded that, 'However confused it is, the evidence still speaks overwhelmingly for an accident (567)', and dismissing the grounds for his murder as implausible. It was Matthew Fox, theologian and former Dominican priest, who first started speaking about Merton's possible murder. James W. Douglass, author of *JFK and Unspeakable* (2008), openly aired the idea at the 1997 ITMS conference. And Matthew Fox codified his thoughts in *A Way to God* (2016), claiming that the CIA were the villains of the piece, and concluding: 'Perhaps we will never know whether or not Merton died a martyr at the hands of the American government. But it is very possible he did. I believe he did (142).'