

Book Reviews

Thomas Merton and the New World – God’s Messenger on the Road

Paul R. Dekar

Foreword by Christine M. Bochen

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This book has a spring green cover coordinating with the grass bordering a path. along which walks a monk clad in Cistercian robes, his back to the reader. He walks out of deep shadow into the sun towards a blue almost cloudless sky, thus capturing the title of a messenger sent forth by God towards a new world. This image and choice of the word messenger in the title conjures the closing words of the Mass in Merton’s time: *ita missa est*, ‘Go, you are sent forth’, highlighting that this is a book which speaks directly to Christian vocation. The vocational focus is illuminated by the epigraph to the introduction taken from Micah 6:8: ‘What does the Lord require of you, but to act justly and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God.’ The scene is set for walking alongside Merton with Micah’s signposts of justice, kindness and humility.

What follows is a compendium of Paul R. Dekar’s corpus on Merton, a compilation of already published articles from journals including *The Merton Seasonal*, *The Merton Annual*, *Missiology* and *Weavings*, together with presentations of papers delivered at ITMS conferences or chapters extracted from book length compilations of essays on Merton, spanning the period between 2012 and 2018. The material is gathered beneath the three elements in Micah’s exhortation, with a fourth section entitled ‘Merton’s Embrace of the Other’ and a fifth section of book reviews in which there is some association with Merton.

There is clear inspiration in gathering a multi-faceted presentation of Merton beneath the signposts of justice, kindness, humility and that embrace of the other, in so far as it helps encapsulate the vast parameters of

Merton's thought and locates Merton as a thinker whose words are not simply spoken or written, but lived. A parallel yet unstated focus of the work, however, is an autobiographical account of Dekar's journey with Merton, from his first encounter with the writings of Merton in the 1960s on into the 21st century. As such, the work is equally a story of one person's encounter with Merton and the subsequent shaping of his life as an exploration of Micah's exhortation in the light of Merton's writing. Given readers of *The Merton Journal* all have their parallel stories of encountering and allowing their lives to be shaped by Merton, the work offers an engaging example of one such interaction.

In Section One, exploring the theme of justice, Dekar focuses on the misuse of technology and on racial issues. By linking technology with the loss of paradise in the chapter title, Dekar brings Rachel Carson into his analysis as one who inspired the birth of the environmental movement (9). In a direct echo of *Laudato Si*, the 2015 papal encyclical on 'care for our common home', he highlights Merton's concern that technology, linked to consumerist and militarist interests is incapable of recognising the mysterious links between things. Racial injustice is explored through Merton's correspondence with three African American civil rights activists: August Thompson, a priest, Robert Lawrence Williams, a musician and the novelist James Baldwin. Dekar's suggestion that this area has been ignored in Merton studies fails to acknowledge research presented by Patrick O'Connell which surveys Merton's engagement with civil rights from before he entered Gethsemani, and includes perceptive analysis of Merton's civil rights poetry. This lack of awareness is perhaps symptomatic of the neglect of Merton's poetry relative to his prose works.

In Section Two, the focus on kindness highlights the dichotomy between Merton's sense of at-oneness with the human race and his physical separation within the monastery. Dekar also identifies Merton's awakening to structures which not only marginalised, but caused a genocide of the First Nation Americans within North America.

For the third element in Micah's exhortation, humility, Dekar focuses on the power of silence and contemplative practices in so far as they facilitate a greater intimacy with God through a readiness to listen, and the silencing of the self. Drawing from the etymological roots in the Latin word for soil *humus*, he provides a powerful illustration of what a person 'walking humbly' might look like: they are deeply rooted; they are 'not pie in the sky'; they work beneath the surface; they become entwined in everything around them; they draw from a source of life beyond themselves (53).

Section Four of the work presents a series of dialogue partners to illustrate Merton's 'embrace of the other'. They are familiar companions to

Merton studies, including Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr, Thich Nhat Hanh and Ernesto Cardenal. There is, however, some mystification in gathering this set of thinkers beneath this chapter heading. Whilst it is true that they represent respectively a different Christian tradition, Hinduism, Buddhism and a different nationality in Nicaraguan Cardenal, they were all men of prayer, men who hungered after righteousness and justice, who understood the power of silence and purveyed a creative fidelity to their respective faiths, whilst abiding by their ancient wisdoms. Rather than being other than Merton, they are all kindred spirits. Their welcome of the so-named stranger in their midst is in fact mutual. This is demonstrated through a conversation, which Dekar creatively imagines based on what might have taken place at a planned meeting between Martin Luther King, Thich Nhat Hanh and Thomas Merton in April 1964, but which failed to happen due to the assassination of King. Dekar suggests common ground would be met in a shared emphasis on silent worship alongside active service, in compassion as an antidote to consumerism and militarism, in a shared awareness of the need to counteract the anger and hatred which may well underpin peace activism. Their shared reflections, imagined by Dekar, call instead for fresh ways of doing peace by being peace, practising meditation to acquire the capacity to look, to see and to understand (82).

Section Five oddly offers a sequence of already published book reviews. It is not clear how these reviews merit being reproduced and it generates the sense of a publication which seeks to reproduce everything linked with Merton written by Dekar, not yet in book form. It is this overriding and yet unstated focus that I would suggest provokes a degree of frustration with the book. The overall theme seems to be Dekar's personal journey as an academic and activist with Merton as a companion. Other than the presence of the author, there is a lack of cohesion from the failure to unpack the title of the work, to the tacked-on introductions and addenda to each republished or re-presented article or paper. It is Christine Bochen in the Foreword (ix; xi) who most explicitly and helpfully identifies how the title might hold the articles together. The author refers to the title variously (44; 53), but it is dealt with in an *ad hoc* fashion. Bochen alludes to 'a host of issues', (xi) 'written over a span of time to a variety of audiences' (xiii) hinting at the medley-like character of the material. This lack of cohesion is reinforced by the frequent repetitions encountered without any acknowledgement of the earlier reference. In the context of each individual paper or journal article, the quotations and stories are aptly chosen. In the context of a book publication, however, they can flounder when met more than once. Such repetition includes quoting the same passage in a different section, (4; 70); repeating biographical material such as where Dekar

studied and first encountered Merton's writing, anecdotes about dangerous enterprises he was involved in, previewed by the worried questioning of his wife, related conversations which are powerful when first met: 'we have crossed a river, there is a mountain ahead' (28; 60), but which fall flat when met a second time. Whilst these introduce human interest into an academic and apostolic focus, it feels like there is a lack of consideration for the reader encountering the same content over again.

The book's heavy personal focus is additionally evident in the tendency to speak about an issue of Christian mission by zooming in on the experience and activism of the author. Although there is much to admire in accounts of brave and committed action founded on scripture and on Merton's wisdom, it limits the invitation to a wider field by being tethered repeatedly to the author's experience. Mark Meade in the Afterword refers to how these stories may be inspiring but are equally 'intimidating to those of us who may well do likewise' (137). The work emerges as an archive of papers gathered under specific headings, and heavily underpinned with autobiographical material, useful for trawling on given themes, and for seeing how they impacted on an individual life, but which are not clearly woven together. Further evidence of a book assembled without due care is that proof reading has not helped the author with typos (xxiv; 28; 153) and spelling errors (39; 119).

A stated aim of the book aired in the introduction is to underline why Merton matters. Aptly, Dekar refers to Pope Francis's identifying of Thomas Merton on the occasion of his visit to the United States in 2015 as a model for modern-day America (xvii). It seems unfortunate that Dekar does not refer in the body of his work to the papal encyclical published the same year, *Laudato Si* in so far as it directly echoes the dismay, vision and wisdom of Merton voiced prophetically so many decades earlier. Dekar briefly mentions the value of *Laudato Si* in the book reviews, but once again the comment leads into a personal anecdote of how the author attended a workshop on it and discussed it (124). This narrow spotlight lingers too readily on the author's own experience and fails to channel the material outwards.

Such criticism aside, Dekar's reflections, inspired by a life lived like Merton, as a messenger on the road, show what contemplation in action might look like. In placing an academic and personal engagement with Merton's words alongside Christian activism, Dekar weaves together that mandate of Micah with 21st century advocacy for justice. He powerfully outlines the fruit of this focus in five key principles imperative to the urgent call to care for our common home:

The first principle is that the earth has values for humankind that no scientist can synthesize, no economist can price and no technological distraction can replace. The second principle is interconnection. The third principle is the indivisibility of ecological justice, social justice and peace. The fourth principle is the custodianship of the earth. The fifth principle is resistance. (49)

With masterly echoes of contemporary urgency within secular and ecclesial advocacy for climate action, he emphasises where a messenger on the road might begin in the light of Micah's words: earnest for social and ecological justice, driven by compassion to find connection within difference, recognising human smallness before the created world. As climate advocacy is becoming more widely visible, Dekar signals a further step along the way:

Only when we have mainstreamed nonviolence can we begin to deepen the unfolding of the dream of Merton, truly God's messenger envisioning a new world of justice, peace, integrity of creation and interdependence. (105)

The myriad ways in which Merton interacts with and encounters individuals is a joyful aspect of all criticism on Merton. The value of this work is its narration of one who has walked and continues to walk with Merton. To be made aware of one individual's integrity in not simply reading Merton as a companion to scripture, but finding ways of living the wisdom, the vision and the mandate, is itself a proclamation of Merton's relevance and of that joyous finding of a messenger on the road who can act as a guide.

Elizabeth Rainsford-McMahon — My involvement with Merton began around sixteen years ago, reading *The Seven Storey Mountain* in a rain storm in the foothills of the Pyrenees, unable to put it down. This led into a PhD on Merton's theological genre and an ensuing career teaching in several French universities, where I have sought to introduce Merton through the backdoor of American Studies. I am currently attached to the *Institut Catholique de Paris*, but posts across France have enabled me to visit and rethink Merton's France. My current research explores the France which Merton knew in the light of Pierre Nora's work on *lieux de mémoire* (memory sites). I have appreciated the chance to escape the screen to walk where Merton walked.