

# The Coherence of Epiphanies

Review of

*Seeds*

Edited by Robert Inchausti

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xvii + 167 pages / \$13.95 paperback

Reviewed by **Gray Matthews**

So, you think you've *read* Merton? Having enjoyed Robert Inchausti's wonderful and fresh presentation of Merton as an intellectual in *Thomas Merton's American Prophecy* (1997), I was excited to learn of his second book on Merton, simply titled *Seeds*. My excitement quickly faded, though, when I discovered that this second book would consist largely of quotations from Merton's oeuvre, and not new and original material from Inchausti's own pen. I thought: haven't we already read this? Then I began reading the book, my embarrassment growing with each turned page full of pearls. Inchausti has not merely selected and edited a fine collection of Merton's words, he has handcrafted a beautiful bracelet of precious jewels, each sparkling in its own right, but in this new setting the gems dazzle with spectacular brilliance. The book is resplendent.

The book may be read (worn) any time of the day, for it works in a variety of ways for readers. For one, it serves as a good introduction to Merton's thought, covering a range of themes presented in full paragraph-sized reflections, and includes both a concise yet colorful biographical essay by Inchausti and a short annotated bibliography of tapes and books for suggested further reading. Each quotation is followed by a parenthetical reference to the original work and (God bless Robert!) the page number. Thirty-five sources are used to supply the substantive quotations.

A second way in which the book may be read is as a source for meditation; it should be read slowly, reflectively, and would be excellent for retreat purposes. It is technically possible to read this deceptively slim volume quickly, but that would greatly depend on how one defined the act of reading. It is more probable that one will read a page or two at the most, at one sitting, digesting slowly before the next meal hours or days later.

Because the selections are arranged thematically, the book would serve well, too, as either a primary or supplemental text in courses, workshops or seminars on Merton. Four interconnected themes function as guides to Merton's approach to contemplative insight and cultural criticism, dividing the book into four parts: Part I deals with our "Real and False Selves"; Part II examines problems posed by the city, technology and pseudo-events in "The World We Live In"; Part III represents the largest grouping of passages, which are arranged as "Antidotes to Illusion" exemplified by truth, silence and humility, among others; Part IV deals with "Love In Action," particularly nonviolence. Inchausti appears concerned here with Merton's method of thinking, his intellectual hermeneutic, although he is wise not to imply that Merton worked through his reasoning processes like a technician. Grand themes loom large in Merton's mental sky, but Inchausti's categorization is helpful in bringing them down to earth, reminding us that Merton *really was* onto something. There

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is so much still to learn and apply from Merton. Clearly, Merton was a teacher and Inchausti proves Merton is also teachable.

Of course the one-word title, *Seeds*, is a fundamental term in Merton's vocabulary and a touchstone for Merton readers. The cover of the book features a photograph of Merton framed subtly by a smooth version of the canvas binding of Merton's 1949 hardbound *Seeds of Contemplation*. The photo, a favorite of many Merton fans, captures him with his sleeves rolled up, wearing a ball cap, slightly crooked, his arms poised at his sides ready to work, or to be fitted with boxing gloves, or maybe to find out who has the fastest draw in Kentucky. In essence, Merton appears ready to tackle the world, but his facial expression bears the rugged experience of one who has done it before but who now knows the secret of weathered patience.

*Seeds* is published by Shambhala, a popular and prominent press devoted largely to Eastern philosophy and religion, but which also publishes a limited collection of Christian classics, including Merton's own *Thoughts in Solitude*. Those who are familiar with Merton's interest and writings on Eastern thought would not be surprised at the inclusion, but what *is* surprising is that there is no advertising pitch to a new wave readership. I had expected there would be some kind of slanted "hook" in the book to catch new fish, at least a cast thrown on the back cover, but there was none. Merton stood on his own two feet when he was alive and he is presented that way in this book.

The heart of the book lies in the paragraph seeds. Inchausti's rationale as editor strikes me as quite solid in claiming that Merton "thought and composed in paragraphs that modeled his own reflective thought processes: single ideas growing thematically, lyrically, and dialectically out of themselves, making unexpected connections, and then emerging into surprising new epiphanies. If the rhetoric of Merton's longer works can sometimes be formidable, his paragraphs are always accessible, poignant, and revelatory" (xvi).

Reading this book slowly over a period of weeks has made it a new favorite of mine. Not only do I have greater esteem for the true art of editing, I have gained a deeper appreciation for the coherence in and of Merton's vast statements. Most of the quotations will be familiar to students of Merton, but the perceptive juxtaposition of statements, thematically, reveals Inchausti's gift for discernment. Merton is often characterized, and rightly so, as a person of paradox; he runs when you chase him. He sought no followers and remains difficult to pin down, package and label. This does not mean, though, that he lacked coherence. Inchausti highlights this coherence by stringing insight after insight together. There are no ramblings, no incidentals, no tangents, no filler, no superfluous content in *Seeds*. The book relays the undiluted purity of Merton's thought, and the epiphanies recorded here are too profound to read in succession without affecting the reader. Ironically, this collection underlines the vitality of seemingly extraneous material in the larger context of Merton's published works, particularly in regard to his private and public journals: one needs the frequent aside, like a bench, to catch one's breath. *Seeds*, however, is a bright, constant spotlight, and one cannot look into it very long. But like a good spotlight it helps illuminate a wide territory, and helps us focus on things we may have missed using our own flashlights. Reading *Seeds* is reading Merton at the highest wattage.

I cannot find any fault with the book, unless one were to quibble about a beloved passage left out or a specific source not referenced. I heartily recommend purchasing this book, not merely to add to one's shelf of Merton collectibles, but to read it, stunned by its beauty. It glitters with sapphires, rubies and emeralds, each flashing with extraordinary power. These jeweled seeds are planted in rows, to be sure, but to walk in this garden is to be flowered with uncut epiphanies. Everything fits and radiates here.

I thought I had read Merton . . . and then I walked into Inchausti's garden of diamonds.