

Hermit-shaped Mission

Review of
Mission-Shaped Hermit: Thomas Merton, Mission and Spirituality
 By Keith James
 Cambridge, UK: Grove, 2009
 28 pages / £3.50

Reviewed by **Angus F. Stuart**

This slim volume is yet another spin-off of the “Mission-Shaped” movement coming out of the United Kingdom. North American readers may be less familiar with this response to declining church attendance and the rise of secularism in Britain that gave rise to the Church of England’s 2004 report *Mission-Shaped Church: Church Planting and Fresh Expressions of Church in a Changing Context* with a foreword by Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury. Since then “Mission-Shaped” is the new buzz-word and seems to be the adjective for virtually everything coming out of the Church of England, spawning such publications as *Mission-Shaped Parish*, *Mission-Shaped and Rural*, *Mission-Shaped Youth*, *Mission-Shaped Children*, *Mission-Shaped Questions*, even *Mission-Shaped Spirituality* and now *Mission-Shaped Hermit*. It was therefore with some skepticism that I approached this latest offering to see how Merton was to be harnessed in the service of this Anglican-shaped mission movement.

I have to say that I was pleasantly surprised as my grudging disgruntlement at being confronted once more with a Grove Booklet, long since left behind with my theological days and the need for some easy-access essay fodder, gave way to grunts of approbation, nods of agreement and gratifying anticipation of where the author was heading. “Not the last word . . . but often the first” is the bold claim to the genius of Grove Booklets covering topics ranging from biblical studies, ethics, pastoral ministry to worship and youth. This particular booklet is number 108 in the spirituality series, beloved of theological students and seminarians as a quick, no-fuss, no-mess way into a topic, especially on the eve of an assignment deadline. *Mission-Shaped Hermit* certainly lives up to this claim and expectation, covering an astounding breadth of ground in its 28 pages (of which two account for the title and contents pages and a further three for notes, leaving just 23 pages of text).

For those unfamiliar with Merton, especially those who have heard the name and are aware that he is an important figure in the life of the twentieth-century Church (and beyond) but know little more, *Mission-Shaped Hermit* provides a brief overview and introduction. Author Keith James, an

Anglican priest, sketches the bare bones of Merton's life in outline, all of which is familiar to readers of the *Seasonal*, but he does so with a specific focus: "If Thomas Merton were to examine the mission-shaped movement, what would be his reaction?" (3). What indeed. At the end of the booklet there is a helpful page providing new readers of Thomas Merton with some avenues to follow.

In the intervening sections between the introduction and the readers' guide, James draws on themes from Merton's monastic life and tradition, his spirituality and writings, and relates them to the concerns of mission and ministry in the contemporary Church. At the end of each (very short) chapter he poses some intentionally open-ended questions for readers to consider; possibly, James says, these are the most useful part of the booklet. The very first such question certainly caught my attention and provided an anchor that grounded my reading of the remainder of the booklet: "What do you think Merton and monastic spirituality can offer a church shaped for mission?" (6).

It is a good question, clearly a key question for this booklet, and one that engages all readers of Merton who are involved in the life, mission and ministry of the Church (and I suspect that's most of us). How would *you* answer it? (STOP now, look away, and think about it before I tell you what I think!) For my own part, Merton and his monastic spirituality call us to *awareness*, *consciousness* and a sense of *identity*; of being present in the Presence of the Divine whom we seek to serve. It is about knowing who we are (and are becoming), what we are trying to do and why. Merton and, more importantly, the spiritual perspective that he articulates and embodies provide a grounding for life and the action that grows out of this perspective, this way of seeing life, the world and all reality. That's what I think.

It was therefore gratifying for me to see this borne out and corroborated in the pages that follow as James traces the key themes in Merton's life and writing and their significance for the mission and ministry of the Church. He discusses the role of ongoing *conversion* (*conversatio morum*) in the spiritual path of self-discovery, citing Merton's shift in perspective from world-denying to world-affirming, hinging (perhaps somewhat simplistically) on his experience at the corner of Fourth and Walnut. He speaks of the importance of *listening*, of openness and dialogue, and recognizing "Christ," the Presence of God, in others – surely a crucial prerequisite in seeking to reach out to others, and yet one that cannot be assumed. This is related to *love* as the be-all and end-all of the spiritual life, a perspective with which I heartily agree.

In terms of where to begin – where would *you* begin? – James offers *silence* as a counter to "anxiety-driven activity" as a way of deepening prayer and returning to the roots of our being and discovering our true identity. From this comes *contemplation*, defined most simply as "listening in silence" (14), and is related to seeing and significance, vision and understanding, not least *self*-understanding. It is only from this groundedness and rootedness that our *action* (in mission) should come if we are to avoid frenetic activity driven by our own limited agendas. The questions that follow challenge us to seek the balance between activity and waiting, speaking and silence, and how practically we can "slow down, wait and listen to God" (16).

Conversion, *listening*, *love*, *silence*, and *contemplation* are all identified as key components Merton and the traditions of monastic and desert spirituality offer to the contemporary Church and its current preoccupation with mission and (all too frequently) its survival. This is developed further with the consideration of *prophecy* and *detachment*. These too are both about perspective; seeing and understanding. *Prophecy* seeks to identify what is most important beyond the mere survival of the Church in contrast to illusion and contradiction. It is about seeing the presence of God in

and through everything which, I would argue, is about having a profound *awareness* of reality. *Detachment* flows from this, and is about seeing beyond results and success. It is the freedom to live in truth and love “free from clinging to popularity or results for nourishment” (19), secure in the conviction that no good action is wasted.

The final questions posed to the reader are about which of Merton’s “gifts” are most important – for your church, and for you (25). Again, how would you answer? In terms of the Church (any church), Merton and monastic tradition offer a perspective from which to act, a way of seeing the reality of the world in both its beauty and its illusion. As James argues in his conclusion, developing a deeper spirituality is not an alternative to mission but is very much part of it; a week of guided prayer in a parish may indeed contribute immensely to the mission of the Church if it deepens people’s prayer and awareness of God.

The original 2004 Church of England report *Mission-Shaped Church*, and the movement that has flowed from it, has been criticized as resulting instead in a “church-shaped mission.” In *Mission-Shaped Hermit* Keith James offers a valuable corrective, addressing some of the deeper, more fundamental questions of meaning and purpose rather than the specifics of how-to-do-mission and get people into church. Though perhaps his title is also a misnomer – despite his justified fear that Merton would spin in his grave if we tried to build a “Merton-shaped church,” maybe what he’s actually talking about in *Mission-Shaped Hermit* is in fact a hermit-shaped mission!