

Recognizing the Spiritual Richness of the Indian Genius

Review of

Merton & Indigenous Wisdom

Edited by Peter Savastano

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Reviewed by **David Golemboski**

Thomas Merton's posthumously published volume *Ishi Means Man: Essays on Native Americans* opens with a foreword by Dorothy Day, who writes that upon reading the included essays (some of which were published originally in *The Catholic Worker*), she "could only cry out, as another staff member did, 'More, more!'" Over a half-century later, in the new collection titled *Merton & Indigenous Wisdom*, Robert Toth concludes that "Day's hope was not realized." Unfortunately, in the decades since its publication, Toth writes, *Ishi Means Man* "has received very little attention" (91). The publication of this volume, however, marks a great step forward in correcting that neglect. The latest in Fons Vitae's series of collections of material on Merton's relationship to other faith traditions, this book represents a long-overdue dedication of scholarly attention to Merton's work on Native Americans and indigenous spirituality more generally. Under the editorship of Peter Savastano, the book gathers a variety of essays and reflections – some original and some previously published elsewhere – and delivers some genuinely fascinating insights into this area of Merton's work.

Ishi Means Man is one of the two Merton source texts that feature most prominently in the studies in this volume. The other is Merton's lengthy, eclectic poem *The Geography of Lograire* (examined most incisively in a particularly strong essay by Malgorzata Poks, originally published, in *The Merton Annual* in 2012). These texts are the most natural starting points for exploring Merton's relationship to indigenous spirituality, but the authors draw on an impressive array of other Merton works in developing the theme. Merton's "Letter to Pablo Antonio Cuadra Concerning Giants" makes a few appearances, as do Merton's letters to Ernesto Cardenal. Beyond those, the authors have gleaned insights from less well-known bits of correspondence, such as a 1965 letter to Argentinian writer Alejandro Vignati, or an unpublished letter to a young psychologist named Lisa Bieberman about her experience with psychedelic drugs, as well as various of Merton's other poems and essays. The effect is to suggest that Merton's thinking about

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Native Americans and indigenous spirituality was not limited to a handful of essays in *Ishi*, but rather appears scattered throughout his work, particularly in its final decade.

Several of the essays have the goal of showing that Merton's monastic Christian spirituality was friendly to or strongly resonant with themes in indigenous spirituality. An essay by Donald P. St. John (93-141) quotes Merton in his Letter to Cuadra as saying that "We have an enormous debt to repay to the Indians, and we should begin by recognizing the spiritual richness of the Indian genius" (137). St. John's essay canvasses Merton's recognition of that richness on topics such as ecological consciousness, the Ghost Dance movement of the late 1800s, and parallels between the exploitation and oppression of Native and Black Americans. In his essay (183-222), Allan McMillan offers a winding though creative reflection on the significance of suffering as "an agent of mystical moments" (188), drawing Merton into conversation with William Faulkner, St. John of the Cross and the visionary figure Black Elk of the Oglala Sioux.

A shorter essay by William Torres (143-61) contrasts Merton's critical stance toward the use of psychedelic drugs for purposes of generating religious or spiritual experiences with his more affirming take on indigenous practices aimed at stimulating spiritual "visions." Merton viewed the drug use associated with contemporary American figures like Aldous Huxley and Timothy Leary as "organized and large-scale illuminism" (151), or "Mysticism . . . in a characteristic American mode" (158). In contrast, Merton evaluated much more positively the fasts, solitary retreats and other ascetic elements of Native "vision quests." Torres shows that the latter experiences, while also "psychedelic" in nature, were conducted under interpretive frameworks that avoided the temptation to allow one's chemically-produced subjective experience to displace "the inmost reality of the created person and the infinite Reality of God" (151).

Unfortunately, some of the contributing authors advance claims of concordance between Merton's views and others that veer into rather speculative territory. This is a persistent temptation when considering how Merton might have engaged with authors, ideas or events beyond his documented experience, and there is real value in exploring these new areas of potential connection. That said, this book's claims are at their weakest when they appear in the form of past conditionals: "One can see how Merton *might have* been sympathetic to the results of such beliefs" (50, emphasis added), or "Merton *would have* resonated with Eastman's aims" (64, emphasis added). The authors of these quoted phrases even stretch to speculate on Merton's preferences for seating arrangements in liturgical settings: "I suspect Merton would have preferred circles to lines of chairs facing the front" (54). Merton's body of work is vast and varied enough to support endless exploration of his thought without relying on tenuous hypotheses as to what he *might have* done or thought.

One of the more interesting dynamics that plays out among the contributions to this volume concerns how to evaluate Merton's engagement with Native Americans and their spirituality. Two lengthy essays (21-42; 43-81) by Lewis Mehl-Madrona and Barbara Mainguy offer extensive appreciation of Merton's work in this area, accompanied by a critical edge. They criticize Merton for failing to interview or otherwise to seek the perspective of contemporary Native Americans (27), for characterizing Native American cultures as "stone-age" (79), for minimizing the genocide of Native Americans (30), and generally for lapsing into Eurocentric or anti-Indian tropes. They conclude that Merton's engagement with Native Americans "stopped short of truly

embracing the otherness he sought” (23). While one could quibble with the details of each of these points of criticism, the authors’ resistance to hagiography and reflexive affirmation of Merton’s work is welcome.

In her essay on the “ethnopoetics” of *The Geography of Lograire* (223-50), Malgorzata Poks portrays Merton as an ethnographer in the model suggested by James Clifford or Clifford Geertz. Ethnography, she writes, is always a combination of description and interpretation, representation and invention, and it is perhaps useful to view Merton’s writing in this light. While Merton cannot entirely escape certain inherited colonialist prejudices toward “native” peoples, Poks also argues that Merton wrote from a position of “cultural undecidability” (228) (in part thanks to his cosmopolitan upbringing), which provided some critical distance from his own cultural context. Merton wrote from a particular setting and vantage, but his writing on Native American spirituality was unusually capable of recognizing both the spiritual richness of indigenous cultures and the profound failures of white European and American authors to appreciate this richness.

The volume concludes by bringing Merton’s voice to center stage in a new translation, by Marcela Raggio, of Merton’s original Spanish preface to his *Obras Completas*, or “Complete Works,” published for Latin American readers in 1963 (261-66). The essay is a powerful reflection on Merton’s identity as an American – not a *North* American, specifically, but instead a citizen of the western hemisphere, or a person “of the New World,” as Merton puts it (261). He laments that North America is “incomplete,” in no small part because it has largely eliminated its Indian population, and with it their cultural and spiritual vitality. He writes, “It lacks the deep roots of Ancient America, the America of Mexico and of the Andes, where silent and contemplative Asia came ages ago to build its hieratic cities” (263). That ancient and contemplative tradition has been tragically suppressed in North America, and it has been unfortunately neglected in the extensive written appreciation and evaluation of Merton’s thought in the decades since his death. This book, though incomplete and imperfect in certain ways, marks a step toward recovering the significance of indigenous wisdom for Thomas Merton and, may we hope, for all of those who read and follow.