

The Prescient Merton

Review of

Thomas Merton: God's Messenger on the Road toward a New World

By Paul R. Dekar

Foreword by Christine M. Bochen

Afterword by Mark C. Meade

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Reviewed by **Robert Grip**

Thomas Merton died in 1968, so it might be expected that his writing about the issues of his day would begin to lose their edge or at least sound dated in the twenty-first century. Paul Dekar's latest work, *Thomas Merton: God's Messenger on the Road towards a New World*, explains why Merton's observations from more than six decades ago are not only applicable today but were prescient. Dekar, Professor Emeritus of Evangelism and Mission at Memphis Theological Seminary, makes his case in a collection of previously published essays and presentations, organized here according to the prophet Micah's reminder that we should act justly, love mercy and walk humbly. The book concludes with a collection of six of Dekar's reviews (three of which are not concerned with Merton). (Should the book receive a second printing, it would be helpful if a number of typographical and factual errors – such as claiming Thich Nhat Hanh died in October 2020 [88] – were corrected.)

As Christine Bochen points out in her foreword, many of the issues that troubled Merton in the years before his death are the same ones that face the world today. We are still struggling with the temptations of technology, the deadly combination of violence and war and the threats posed by racial injustice and ecological destruction. Yes, as Dekar points out in his Introduction, "Merton still matters" (xviii). Despite living in a world of pay phones and newspapers, and before personal computers, Merton foresaw the danger posed by the current seductive nature of technology, where humans serve the digital world instead of the reverse, a condition Dekar calls an addiction.

As the author correctly observes in the opening section, "Doing Justice" (1-32), Merton described the world in which we currently live:

Merton explained that technology was not in itself opposed to spirituality or to religion. Rather, technology had become a great and dangerous temptation. Merton warned that there can be "a deadening of spirit and of sensibility, a blunting of

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perception, a loss of awareness, a lowering of tone, a general fatigue and lassitude, a proneness to unrest and guilt which we might be less likely to suffer if we simply went out and worked with our hands in the woods or the fields.” Merton invoked the possibility that good means could result in bad ends. As a result, he insisted on the need for “a certain prudence . . . in the use of machines.” (11)

Merton advocated for and took direct action to promote racial justice at a time when the cause was not a popular one among many white Americans who had a patronizing attitude toward other races. (Read Merton’s searing essay “The Black Revolution: Letters to a White Liberal.”) Merton’s position was not political but drew instead on the cries for God’s help found in the Psalms. As Dekar points out, in the mid-1960s, Merton viewed the civil rights legislation passed in the United States as just the first step toward addressing systemic racism. “Fifty years after his death, Merton continues to provide a roadmap for people seeking to realize a Biblical vision that humans live with neither greed, nor hunger, not anything that undermines full inclusivity and mutuality of everyone irrespective of religion or race” (32).

In the second section, “Loving Kindness” (33-49), Dekar contrasts Merton’s *physical* journey from St. Bonaventure College to the Abbey of Gethsemani in 1941 with his *interior* one, a slow transformation to discover his “true self” found through compassion and living in Christ. But Merton had to draw straight with crooked lines to get to that point. As ITMS founder William H. Shannon pointed out, while Merton entered Gethsemani to escape the world, he found that “it is not possible to leave the world in any real sense. . . . There is simply no place else to go. . . . He experienced the glorious destiny that comes simply from being a human person and from being united with, not separated from, the rest” (37). That destiny included, as Merton advised his friend Jim Forest, “free[ing] himself from domination by causes . . . to live into Christ, trusting God” to draw something good from situations we cannot understand (42).

In section three, entitled “Walking Humbly” (51-75), Dekar says Merton recognized humility and silence as foundations for his vocation and for everyone:

Crucially, humans need not wait until the afterlife to enjoy the fruits of life in Christ. In our earthly flesh, we are united with God. Merton calls this deification, the ultimate in human self-realization and transformation. Discovering our true self, we find ourselves mystically one with the God by Whom we are elevated and transformed. (72)

The final section of articles, entitled “Merton’s Embrace of ‘the Other’” (77-118), features three selections that bring together the themes Dekar raised in his previous chapters: an imagined dialogue between Thich Nhat Hanh, Dr. Martin Luther King, Junior and Merton in a retreat that might have taken place if King had not been assassinated in Memphis (82-88); Dekar’s reflection on Merton’s interpretation of Gandhi (89-105); and Merton’s correspondence with one of his former students, Ernesto Cardenal of Nicaragua, whose embrace of liberation theology led to the suspension of his priestly faculties by Pope John Paul II, which was later lifted by Pope Francis (106-18). Once again, Merton’s advice to Cardenal to reach out to Nicaragua’s indigenous population preceded the Catholic Church’s gradual outreach to those often described as “non-Catholics.” Dekar writes:

Merton embraced others. Merton pioneered monastic interfaith dialogue. Merton valued dialogue, difference, and diversity. He thus provided a model for us some sixty years later at a time when many see others – the foreigner, the stranger, one whose life style differs from the mainstream, or the outsider – in less positive a manner. (114)

In this work, Dekar draws on his religious training, his life experience and his comprehensive knowledge of Merton's work to affirm the claim made in the title: Merton really is one of God's messengers on the road towards a new world.