

Prophetic Practice, Practical Prophecy

Review of

*Open to the Full Dimension: Thomas Merton, Practical Theology,
and Pastoral Practice*

By Dominiek Lootens

Foreword by Daniel S. Schipani

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Reviewed by **Gary P. Hall**

It is good to see a book on Merton from within the Practical Theology fold, and we can be grateful to Dominiek Lootens for highlighting dimensions of Merton's pastoral role and the rich resource that he is for practical theologians and pastoral practitioners sensitized to the varieties of faith and worldview among which they live and work. From a perspective cultivated over twenty years as a pastoral supervisor and educator in Belgium and Germany, Lootens sets out to describe to pastoral practitioners how Merton can inform present-day chaplaincy in a multi-faith, technologized healthcare context (chapter 1) and can strengthen and deepen practices of pastoral supervision (chapter 3). He presents us with Susanna Snyder's practical theological work on forced migration (chapter 2), and reflects on the impact of African-American educationalists bell hooks and Septima Clark (chapter 5). The fourth chapter revolves around pastoral and contemplative themes in Maximus the Confessor (c. 580-662), as read by Merton and other scholars. A final chapter on intergroup dialogue takes its bearings from Gordon Oyer's work on the 1964 peacemaker retreat at Gethsemani Abbey.

The book begins with a brief summary of contrasting ways (associative, meditative or academic) in which readers might engage Merton, then at various points Lootens illustrates each of these ways. For instance, he notices where conversation at the aforementioned Gethsemani retreat resonates with present-day concerns amongst community-builders, or where Merton's address at the later Gethsemani retreats with prioresses might prompt a contemplative, prophetic re-framing of chaplaincy. Lootens describes his underlying method (after Margaret Miles and Martha Nussbaum)

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as a “reading for life,” a search for what is most deeply longed for.

The more detailed and structured sections of the book arise from the author’s professional practice. For instance, there is an engaging reflection on Belgian healthcare chaplaincy contexts, and an extended explanation of training in pastoral supervision, with suggestions that Merton can enhance this particular practice if we attend to the dynamic contemplative-prophetic aspects of his work. I like the Merton-inspired description of pastoral supervision as attention, transformation and an exercise in nonviolence. A consistent theme across the chapters is the potentially prophetic dimension of pastoral work.

In terms of structure and coherence, some rigorous editing would enhance this book. It feels unfinished, as though we are at an early stage of tracing connections between interesting and important ideas, literature and experiences. The introductions to chapters and the many titles throughout the book don’t always help, even sometimes adding to a sense of confusion. For instance, none of the three Merton essays ostensibly framing the fifth chapter is either cited or explained beneath their respective subtitles. Likewise, if the second chapter is based, as stated, on *The Asian Journal*, it is unclear how. Aside from extensive quotation (and partial misquotation) of the opening paragraphs of the transcript of Merton’s Calcutta talk, most of the Merton material in this chapter is from other sources. I was sometimes left feeling I had caught part of a conversation, not quite grasping the thread, and very much wanting to engage more fully with the author, if only to seek out more explicit connections between Merton references and pastoral practices.

There is a sense of unevenness which diminishes the work, and more might have been done to consolidate chapters. This is no more apparent than when quotations are repeated in different contexts (such as talk with prioresses about the prophetic task, found on page 12 and again on page 27) without making connections, or an episode is re-introduced as though appearing for the first time. In another example, the second introduction to Leach’s reflective questions (see pages xxiii and 40) could perhaps be a development rather than mere repetition of the first, by letting it introduce worked examples of their application in relation to Merton and life.

My personal preference would be for more sustained engagement with fewer themes and, in places, more explicit demonstration of how Merton informs practical theological reflection. Other readers may appreciate the kaleidoscopic variety here. There are plenty of interesting verbal snapshots and quotations to entice practical theologians and practitioners who are unfamiliar with Merton into deeper engagement with the prophetic pastor and educator that he was.