

Posthumous Prophet in the Post-Christian Era

Review of
*Thomas Merton and the Individual Witness:
 Kingdom Making in a Post-Christian, Post-Truth World*

By David E. Orberon
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Reviewed by **Michael Plekon**

David Orberon previously published *Thomas Merton – Evil and Why We Suffer: From Purified Soul Theodicy to Zen* (Cascade, 2018) and *Created Freedom under the Sign of the Cross: A Catholic Public Theology for the United States* (Cascade, 2022). The present volume follows up on those earlier explorations. Orberon has been concerned to look at the present situation of society and culture in the light of Christian faith. Merton offers him a particular vision and literature of protest as well as response to our time of division, suspicion, fear, hatred and searching. His effort in sketching out a Catholic public theology takes leads from other notable voices such as Shawn M. Copeland, Karl Rahner, Amartya Sen and David DeCosse.

Orberon aims to listen to Merton, as the subtitle suggests, in a post-Christian, post-truth world. The first third of the book is his nimble, succinct and discerning overview of what those descriptors mean. In territory I covered in my last book, *Community as Church, Church as Community* (Cascade, 2021), he looks at the decline in belonging to communities of faith and their congregations, namely the increasing number of religious “nones” and “dones,” up to almost 40% of the population, and higher, the younger one goes in age brackets. He also looks at the emergence and continued presence of megachurches, which essentially jettison most of the traditions of Christianity in favor of contemporary music and communication styles. These often hold on to extremely rigid views of morality and culture, thus contributing to the deeper division pushed by political and cultural voices today.

It is necessary to venture beyond religious organizations and their membership and he looks to the landscape of the media, political discourse, to see there a troubling resistance, actually rejection of science and expertise and the emergence of “alternative facts” and truth of one’s own fashioning as a manifestation of freedom from liberal educational institutions and of course, the “deep state.”

It is a bold move to then put Thomas Merton forward in the face of this world that he himself did not live long enough to encounter. To his credit, Merton did take on the antecedents of our present situation as he rediscovered the world after his “epiphany” in downtown Louisville and

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thereafter. And Orberson goes right to the essentials of Merton's thinking as he wrote and took on the embedded racism and militarism and triumphalism, not only of American politics and culture but also of the faith communities. Orberson hits all the crucial Merton positions. He poses Merton's challenge to not retreat from but engage with the world, given Christ's preaching of the kingdom of God coming among us. The so-called "Benedict option" is no option at all following Merton's lead. Merton's personal need for finding his way "home" becomes a call for us to rediscover community, the community of our congregations and then, necessarily the community of the town or city in which we live, as well as the national and global dimensions of community. There is historical complicity on the part of faith traditions and communities in what is today manifesting itself horribly as racism, antisemitism, misogyny, hatred toward the "other," the immigrant, the refugee, those from "other" faiths like Islam and Judaism among others.

Gordon Oyer's study of the retreat of peacemakers at Gethsemani under Merton's leadership showed the latter's commitment both to peacemakers and to protest. Orberson stresses this as a key contribution Merton makes to us and our witness today. I would add that Merton and Dan Berrigan made eucharistic celebration and prayer necessary components of that gathering and the activism of those attending. Standing against much in the world means standing for the vision of the kingdom, and only constant grounding in prayer makes this possible. One can also think here of Richard Rohr's writings and the work of his Center for Action and Contemplation. It is also important that Merton urged a truly ecumenical approach to both contemplation and action, his own writings and commitment to the traditions of Buddhism, Hinduism and Sufism bearing evidence, these alongside his fundamental Christian grounding.

We should be grateful to David Orberson for this fine, small yet rich volume, as well as the other two mentioned. There is much virtue in his spare yet valuable and clear presentation. This volume shows Merton's relevance for witness in our time and makes the essentials of Merton's thinking most accessible. I think this text would be very useful for retreats and for adult education sessions. The essential Merton shines forth in Orberson's efforts here.