

Readers will find this sixth volume of Merton's journals a veritable contrast to earlier journals. Some will love it whilst others will not like the Merton who comes across in its pages. Whatever our reaction, it remains a part of the whole Merton and a part of the paradoxical figure that readers have grown to expect from him.

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#### Notes and References

1. Monica Furlong. *Merton: A Biography*. (London: Collins, 1980.) p.297.
2. Thomas Merton. *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life*. (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996.) p.187.
3. John Howard Griffin. *Follow the Ecstasy: Thomas Merton, the Hermitage Years, 1965-1968*. (Fort Worth, Texas: JHG Editions/Latitudes Press, 1983.) pp. 103/4.
4. Michael Mott. *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*. (London: Sheldon Press, 1984.) p.438.

Robert Inchausti: *Thomas Merton's American Prophecy*, New York, State University of New York Press, 1998, ISBN: 0791 436 365, £15.50

'Jack Kerouac's monastic older brother'. This is how English professor Robert Inchausti describes Merton in the Introduction to his new book. And I think it neatly sums up what Inchausti seeks to do. The book is described (not unfairly) on the cover as 'a fresh approach to Thomas Merton, situating him as an "apostle" and "prophet" in American intellectual history'. Merton is presented, writes Inchausti in his Introduction, 'not as the spokesman for any particular group, cause, or idea, but rather as the quintessential American outsider who defined himself in opposition to the world, then discovered a way back into dialogue with that world and compassion for it.' (4)

The book traces Merton's life and intellectual/spiritual development from his birth in France to his tragic death in Bangkok. That in itself is nothing new, other writers have done the same. The

distinctive contribution offered by Inchausti is his attempt to situate Merton within a context of American intellectual history and literature. *The Seven Storey Mountain*, for example, is contrasted with broadly contemporary works by Ralph Ellison, J. D. Salinger, Philip Roth, and James Baldwin, which demonstrate a shift to secular values. By contrast, observes Inchausti, Merton 'offered an exciting new possibility: inspired, fervent, *nonconformity*.' (46)

What to me is most fascinating (and most engaging) in this book is the way in which Inchausti juxtaposes Merton with various figures from American intellectual history. At one point Merton is contrasted with Reinhold Niebuhr, described as 'the single most influential religious intellectual in postwar America'. The contrast is illuminating, Merton the monastic 'marginal man' and Niebuhr the 'activist public intellectual'

Merton, remember, spent over a third of his day in prayer and silence, while Niebuhr attended conferences, met with public officials, published rejoinders to public policy statements, and made himself heard in the corridors of power. Merton, on the other hand, retired from the world. He played down the public acclaim, the business of an 'important man', for the duties of a monk to teach, to serve, to work, to pray, and to stay close to the poor.' (52)

The contrast here may be slightly overplayed, but the point is well made. Merton belongs in that strand of American 'outsider' intellectuals represented in the last century by Thoreau, and in our own by figures such as Jack Kerouac and Gary Snyder. Indeed, Inchausti suggests that Merton's concern (expressed in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*) to prepare in himself 'the reunion of divided Christians', places him 'closer in spirit' to figures such as Kerouac and Snyder than to 'the mainstream theologians of his day' (129). Of course, this is not to make a judgment on Merton theologically, but rather to identify more precisely his place in the intellectual history of America. Understood in those terms, I believe that Inchausti's judgment is correct

Towards the end of the book there is a chapter entitled 'Postmodern Merton?' I am not sure if this particular part of the book worked for me, but part of the problem with postmodernism is that there seems to be no clear agreement as to what it actually is and what its distinctive features are. What Inchausti seems to be concerned with

here is not so much postmodernism but post-structuralism, and the two are not necessarily the same! In his Introduction, Inchausti clearly states that Merton 'was, and is, the embodied antithesis of the postmodern.' (5) Again, it all depends what you mean by 'postmodern'. Merton may not be a post-structuralist, but on one reading of the term at least, he is certainly an early example of a postmodern thinker: look at his integration of the personal and the political; his contextually rooted writing, his reappropriation of the contemplative tradition as a valid and meaningful symbolic system. Further discussion of postmodernism can be found in Charlene Spretnak's excellent book *States of Grace: The Recovery of Meaning in the Postmodern Age* (Harper, 1992). Spretnak distinguishes between 'Constructive Postmodernism' (of which I would claim Merton can be seen as an early example) and 'Deconstructive Postmodernism' (which is what Inchausti rightly sets Merton against) My own book (*Dark Night Spirituality: Contemplation and the New Paradigm*, SPCK, 1995) presents Merton (and others) as examples of a new theological 'paradigm' which is closely identified with one understanding of the term postmodernism. See also Catherina Stenqvist's paper in the 1998 Oakham Conference anthology due to be published shortly.

I think Inchausti is correct when he suggests in his final chapter that what makes Merton remarkable is not his originality. It is, rather, his authenticity, or as Inchausti himself puts it, his 'candor' (3) In the end, Merton's place was not on the public stage of history with such figures as Niebuhr, but rather 'largely clandestine', standing in a 'third position of integrity' – between left and right, culture and counterculture, an apostle and prophet to America and beyond.

In the same way, what makes Inchausti's book so readable and so important is not any new information which he may give about Merton (there is none), but his interpretation of the man and his place in the twentieth century. Perhaps it is only now, thirty years after his death, that we can properly locate Thomas Merton in his place in history. Robert Inchausti has made a valuable start in enabling us to do that

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