

Thomas Merton Social Critic

James Thomas Baker

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Reviewed by Keith James

This is a book, first published in 1971, which simply seeks to do what it says on the tin and examines the outward facing themes in Merton's work—his social thinking. It has its roots in two visits Baker paid to see Merton in 1968 and in Baker's doctoral dissertation, *Thomas Merton: the Spiritual and Social Philosophy of Union*, which Merton read and corrected just before his death—corrections, which the author states are included in the final piece. Merton judged the dissertation to be a fair reflection of his mind and so the reader is assured that the contents of the book bear a hallmark of authenticity in representing Merton.

It begins with a short piece of biography to help set the scene, provide context and give the reader a feel for the man who became a monk and a prophet. Baker then moves on to outline the change in Merton's thinking and writing; from calling 'for Christians to renounce the world's values, abandon man's society, and choose lives of stern and silent devotion to God' in the 1940s and early 1950s to work that began in late 1950s which was 'filled with expressions of intelligent concern for the world, books that seemed to understand and sympathize with man's problems...a social commentator of great skill and imagination.' Subsequent chapters cover

Merton's belief in the power of contemplation to ground and inspire social engagement; his assessment of the Cold War and the struggle between 'Communist' and 'Free World' powers whom Merton likened to the Old Testament giants Gog and Magog; Merton's belief that nuclear war was a pressing ethical and theological question that demanded protest and action; the American racial struggle of the 1960s and Merton's perception that this had its roots in the deep seated violence at the heart of American culture; non-violent resistance and the inspiration Merton drew from the life and example of Gandhi; dialogue and understanding between Catholic Christianity and Protestant traditions as well as other faiths—particularly Merton's relationship with Eastern spiritualities such as Zen and Taoism.

Baker also explores a number of reasons behind Merton's movement towards social engagement, which include his ability to question himself and examine his conscience; a change of Abbot after Dom Frederic Dunne's austere regime—'Merton once explained to me that for the first few years of his monastic life the rules were so strict that the monks had little time for social issues, spending all their time on worship and trying to remain healthy.' The election of the Catholic, John F Kennedy as President and the reign of Pope John XXIII are also given as factors which played a part in the movement of Merton and other Catholics from world refusal to world engagement. Baker attributes the greatest factor influencing Merton's change of heart to Merton himself, 'an honest man who was always responsive to a new idea that

might increase his awareness and understanding of life, a man who was therefore willing to change his mind when the evidence indicated he should.'

Any potential reader needs to be aware that this is a reissue and not a re-working or revision. When it was first published this was an early and concise guide to an important part of Merton's thought. More material by and about Merton has emerged which is pertinent to this area of study since 1972 which is obviously not included. The language definitely belongs to the 1970s and is not inclusive. Baker's constant use of 'man' to refer to both humanity and the male and his references to the struggle between 'the Negro and the White Man' do begin to wear after a while.

Baker seeks to explain Merton's thinking, which is often referenced to the original works. There are though very few direct quotations included in the text. I believe it would have been helpful to have heard more of Merton's voice, for part of the attraction of Merton is not just *what* he says but *how* he says it. Merton's humour, joy, despair, humanity, insight, grace, and style are best conveyed by reference to the original rather than second hand. Providing an accurate assessment of Merton's thinking—condensing his voluminous writing—is useful but something is lost if we fail to give enough space to the man himself.

The seasoned Merton reader in 2010 may not feel that there is much here that is new or striking. I am however grateful for a number of insights tucked away amongst much that felt familiar, which included what Baker calls a 'growing legend' which I had not come across before, of a man paying a visit to Merton

at Gethsemani and pouring out his troubles. Merton sits and waits for the man to finish his long tale of woe. 'He responded to the man's problems with a one word solution: live.'

This book is an early and thorough guide to Merton's relationship with the wider world beyond his monastery. It would be a helpful place to begin a journey to understand this part of Merton's life and legacy. There is more to be said however, and fortunately for us, it continues to be said and written. If this book serves to inspire the reader to go on and read more about Merton, as well as Merton himself, then it would have served a valuable purpose.

Keith James works as a Vicar in Bewdley, Worcestershire. He is the author of *Mission-shaped Hermit: Thomas Merton, Mission and Spirituality* (Grove Books 2009).