

# Book Reviews

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## Thomas Merton, *Selected Essays*

Patrick O'Connell (editor)

Orbis Books,

Maryknoll, New York, 2013

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£32.99

One of the great delights of reading Thomas Merton is the sheer quantity of publications available: journals, books, poetry, articles, and letters. One of his novices described the sound of Merton at his typewriter as a 'demented woodpecker'. However his prodigious creativity

and the sheer quantity of his output can also be a problem. What to read and where to find it?

A few years ago Patricia Burton from the Merton Institute for Contemplative Living compiled a helpful reading list and noted 95 books by Merton, and in addition 21 books of selections arranged by other editors. There are also a vast number of books about Merton. This volume edited by Patrick O'Connell offers readers selections from Merton's essays. Merton wrote approximately 250 essays over the twenty-seven years he was at the monas-

tery of Gethsemani. The output increased in the last ten years of his life, when, as is noted in the introduction, Merton published an average of 18 articles per year; in 1967 the year before he died it numbered 33.

In this compendium O'Connell has selected 33 from the 250 and arranged them chronologically. In his helpful introduction he explains the process of choosing what to include and how he has divided Merton's career as an essayist into two approximately equal periods, 1947-58 and 1958-68. The essays belonging to the first period are more characteristically focused on various aspects of the contemplative life and often appeared in small Catholic magazines.

Those in the second period reveal Merton's developing understanding that contemplation could encompass all of life and 'a more expansive recognition of its compatibility with artistic creativity' (xiii). This marked a move outwards beyond the monastic walls to a wider readership, and the essays in this second period were published (despite the various forms of censorship in the Cistercian order) in both religiously orientated periodicals (the more progressive and often lay-edited) but also in secular publications. Some of the essays have also appeared as chapters in some of his best-selling books.

This compendium aims to offer a perspective on the broad range of Merton's writing and the editor has

included representative essays covering solitude, culture, monastic history and renewal, literary figures, other religious traditions and key social issues including the environment and race relations. There is 'Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude' found next to 'Theology of Creativity' and 'From Pilgrimage to Crusade' placed alongside 'Religion and Race in the United States'. O'Connell has given the reader a cross-section, but also the sense of an underlying unity of vision—the 'sapiential or sophianic perspective—an intuitive participatory awareness of the "hidden wholeness" of all reality' (xvii).

Each essay is prefaced by the editor placing the essay in context. This includes useful information on when and where it was published and some explanatory details. This reviewer found it fascinating how O'Connell has traced the development of the essays with the additions and changes according to different publications. For example the essay 'Christian Culture Needs Oriental Wisdom' was first crafted with a different title as a review for *Jubilee* but instead was published in 1962 in *Chinese Culture Quarterly* then altered for *Catholic World* then reprinted in *A Thomas Merton Reader* while an earlier version was included in *Mystics and Zen Masters* under the title 'Love and Tao'.

For this reviewer the selection contained some surprises including the very first essay (completed in 1949) entitled 'The White Pebble'

written by the young and fervent Merton about his conversion and his understanding of 'the supernatural destinies of the elect ... hidden in the hands of God' (p.3). It is worth contrasting this with the final essay from 1968 which is the more well-known 'Final Integration: Towards a "Monastic Therapy"'. In this paper the mature Merton reflects on the Christian mystery of paschal transformation and the necessary psychological and spiritual work undertaken. He draws on Jungian thinking and Sufism noting contemporary cultural issues including the Christian tendency to become aligned with the 'capitalist Western establishment' (p. 462). For Merton, the path for final integration for the individual and for the community lies beyond the restrictions of any culture—including Christian culture.

There are general criticisms that have been made both of so-called fabricated books of selections of Merton's writings, and of the whole industry of Merton studies which shows no sign of slowing down. However, even as we approach the centenary of Merton's birth he still inspires great interest and attracts many spiritual seekers. A volume such as this offers both the new reader and the old hand much of interest and much that is thought-provoking.

Fiona Gardner

*A shorter version of this review will be published in Modern Believing.*

### **Thinking Through Thomas Merton: Contemplation for Contemporary Times**

Robert Inchausti

State University of New York Press  
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ISBN 9781438449463

vii + 172 pages

£13.30

With his 1998 work, *Thomas Merton's American Prophecy*, Robert Inchausti portrayed Merton against the backdrop of American intellectual history, with special attention to the relationship between Merton's work and the postmodern trends which had impacted theological discourse, particularly during the 1990s. This latest offering from Inchausti continues in a similar vein whilst expanding the horizons and assessing Merton's contribution to intellectual and religious history in relation to more global theological trends.

Whereas the earlier work covered a lot of biographical ground, Inchausti's new publication maps for the reader the range of biographical, critical and primary material available to the reader of 'the already explicated Merton'. The two books complement one another effectively. After half a century of scrutiny, memoir and evaluation, Merton's public presence continues to grow and evolve, and Inchausti's reassessment is a welcome overview not only of Merton's accomplishment, but also of how his work has been interpreted and evaluated dur-