

offer something of a heuristic for communities, of one sort or another, interested in appropriating monastic practices and spirituality into their modern lives. The centerpiece is the building of communities of authentic love, not simply the “‘infantile’ and ‘narcissistic’ approaches to love characteristic of popular culture” (187), but an *agapic* love resembling that of the evangelical life.

Among the important highlights of this book are the two appendices Dekar includes. These are transcriptions of Merton’s conferences on subjects relating to technology: “The Christian in a Technological World” (June 5, 1966) (205-13) and “Marxism and Technology” (June 26, 1966) (214-23). Dekar has provided Merton scholars and enthusiasts with helpful and previously unpublished primary material on the theme at hand. Additionally, Dekar’s lengthy bibliography and lists of source material offer readers a valuable resource. All in all, this book is presented in an accessible style that points its readers to several useful paths along which the modern applicability of Merton’s wisdom will be become clear. It will surely be a standard text in the personal and professional libraries of Merton scholarship for decades to come.

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AGUILAR, Mario I., *Thomas Merton: Contemplation and Political Action* (London: SPCK, 2011), pp. ix + 150. ISBN 978-0-281-06058-0 (paper) \$29.99.

In this short book, Mario Aguilar presents a concise biography of Thomas Merton’s life as a contemplative monk who was also engaged with the pressing political and moral issues of his day. He traces Merton’s life through a series of six phases which begin with Merton’s role as instructor of novices at Gethsemani and end with Merton’s travels to Asia at the end of his life. Aguilar then adds a brief concluding chapter on the relevance of Merton for today. As such, Aguilar presents a helpful summary of Merton’s life, but he does not delve deeply into Merton’s contemplative theology. This book is a documentation of Merton’s theology, but it is not an exploration. Perhaps a better title would have been, *Thomas Merton: The Life of a Contemplative Political Activist*. This observation, however, is not an overall condemnation of Aguilar’s work. Merton scholars have produced numerous texts on Merton’s theology, and extensive biographies also exist. For those looking for a brief introduction into Merton, this book would serve as a good starting point from which more extensive study of Merton could be launched.

To this reader, the most intriguing starting point for further inves-

tigation is Aguilar's emphasis on Merton's activity as a writer. Two of Aguilar's six phases describe Merton as a writer in their titles, and Merton's letter-writing receives attention throughout the book. In fact, Aguilar focuses on Merton's letters more than the latter's books, articles and addresses. This is in accordance with Merton's description of himself: "It is possible to doubt whether I have become a monk (a doubt I have to live with), but it is not possible to doubt that I am a writer, that I was born one and will most likely die as one."¹ For Aguilar, this is the key for understanding the well-noted tension in Merton's life between his desire to live as a hermit and his concerns about the social-political realities of his time.

For Aguilar, writing, even though it is a solitary activity, is "a public statement of self" (33). As such, despite Merton's desire to lead the life of a hermit, his identity as a writer necessarily engaged others and "challenge[d] other members of society's perception of self, society and God" (33). By putting pen to paper, Merton could not help but engage the world. If Merton was not a writer in the very core of his being, his challenge to the injustices of his day would have been more symbolic than anything else, which is not to diminish such a contribution. As John F. Kavanaugh indicates, "religious have the opportunity to bear unambiguous witness to *faith*, founded in the God who invites."² In other words, by rejecting the world's promotion of truncated relationships based on self-interest, men and women religious demonstrate the life based on the love desired by God for human beings. Hermits, then, would stand as symbols to Christians that love of God should stand at the center of their lives. Through his writing, Merton moved beyond being a reminder of the importance of God to someone who is actively engaged in the world.

Likewise, Aguilar's treatment of Merton as a writer sets Merton apart from the view that the spiritual life "fuels" political engagement. Evelyn Underhill, for instance, argues that mystics cannot help but become agents of goodness after intimately encountering God.³ From this perspective, Christians are so moved by coming to know God that they become involved in the world in a manner that promotes communities based on love rather than selfishness. As with Kavanaugh's explanation

1. Thomas Merton, "First and Last Thoughts," in *A Thomas Merton Reader*, ed. Thomas P. McDonnell (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1962) x; rev. ed. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Image, 1974) 17.

2. John F. Kavanaugh, *Following Christ in a Consumer Society: The Spirituality of Cultural Resistance*, 25th Anniversary ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006) 170.

3. Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: The Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1999) 84.

of the connection between the spiritual life and justice, Merton resists Underhill's understanding. Although he engaged issues such as civil rights and the Vietnam War in his writing, he did not participate in the demonstrations of his time.

I am of the opinion that because Merton does not fit neatly into either category, scholars have mainly noted the tension in Merton's life between his socio-political advocacy and monastic life without explaining its source or its inner dynamics. As such, Aguilar stands to contribute significantly to Merton studies. However, Aguilar does not follow up adequately on his insight about Merton's life as a writer. I believe that his contribution would have been greater if he had explored the nature of the act of writing in greater detail. Though I do not disagree with anything Aguilar writes about Merton as a writer or how that activity provided a means for Merton the mystic to also be Merton the activist, I question whether the two pages (32-33) on the nature of writing is adequate.

In particular, I would like to have seen more investigation of Merton's writing as a conversation with the wider world. For Aguilar, writing is a solitary experience which is directed at the public sphere. However, he does not devote much time to Merton's audience(s). How might this have affected his writing and thus his challenge to society's conceptions of self, society and God? Moreover, public writing is not just communication from the author to audience. It is a conversation. If Aguilar's contention about the challenges inherent in the act of writing is correct, were not Merton's conceptions of self, society and God similarly challenged by his literary conversation partners? Merton underwent considerable development over the course of his life, and his conversations more than likely played a part. Perhaps an interdisciplinary study of Merton that incorporated literary theory could pick up on Aguilar's promising start.

In conclusion, Aguilar's book can serve as a starting point for two lines of further investigation. First, it is a brief and accessible introduction to the life of Thomas Merton. A reader unfamiliar with Merton could use Aguilar's book as a stepping-stone to more in-depth studies of this important spiritual figure. Secondly, I believe that Aguilar's emphasis on Merton as a writer holds great promise for investigating the tension in Merton's life between his eremitic desires and socio-political activism. With further attention paid to the conversational nature of writing for the public sphere, I believe this to hold great potential for further advances in Merton studies.

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