

INCHAUSTI, Robert. *Thinking through Thomas Merton: Contemplation for Contemporary Times* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014), pp. vii + 172. ISBN 978-1-4384-4946-3 (paper) \$21.95.

In *Thinking through Thomas Merton: Contemplation for Contemporary Times*, Robert Inchausti offers both a broad synthesis of Merton's engagement with the world in which he lived and a penetrating analysis of the content and direction of his contribution to contemporary dialogues. Specifically, Inchausti addresses questions regarding the theological significance of Merton's legacy and the place of his contributions in the context of contemporary thought. The "thinking through" of the title is thus both "a thinking through of the significance of what Merton accomplished and a look at contemporary thought through the lens of those accomplishments" (7). The former relates to the breadth of Inchausti's synthesis, and the latter to the depth of his analysis. Inchausti continues Merton's dialogue with the contemporary world both by considering Merton's perspectives from the perspective of contemporary thought and by interpreting/critiquing contemporary thought from Merton's perspective.

The dialogue is organized around five chapters which build on one another, each focusing on a particular aspect of Merton's thinking, and his life and work, in relation to the contemporary world in which he lived. The first concerns what Merton saw his life to be about, and concerns his call to sainthood and the discovery and demands of the "true self." For Merton, this was through monasticism and the cultivation of a contemplative life. The second takes Merton's contemplative perspective as a radical alternative to and critique of contemporary thought. The third explores Merton's poetry and anti-poetry as expressions of his contemplative experience. Chapter four considers Merton's monastic lifestyle as the substance of his response to and dialogue with the world. In chapter five, in what he calls "Merton's most dangerous idea," Inchausti explores Merton's commitment to nonviolence as the ultimate outworking of his contemplative perspective because of its radical non-dualism. In addition to the five chapters there is an introduction and a concluding chapter, "Refiguring the Faith," which seeks to give "an overview of Catholicism in light of Merton's witness" (8). At the end of the book, an appendix gives one of the most succinct but comprehensive overviews of Merton scholarship I have come across – the books mentioned provide an ideal reading list for an introduction and a thoroughgoing journey into and through Merton's life and thought.

The picture that emerges of Merton is of a thoroughly modern (or postmodern) person who takes a radically critical stance in relation to

the world and the times in which he lived. Yet his embrace of Catholic Christianity is not simply a rejection of the world and a retreat into the monastery (though he may have been tempted to view it as such initially), or into an outdated world-rejecting outlook, but rather gave him a new position, a new perspective, from which and with which to engage the world in debate and dialogue. The heart of this new perspective is a contemplative vision and the embrace of a monastic-contemplative lifestyle which itself, more than his words, expressed and embodied his response to the world. This together with his intellectual awareness combined to give him a uniquely prophetic position from which to speak. There were many points in the book where I felt a deep resonance with my own perspectives and understanding, and I am still trying to work out whether this is because I have read so much of Merton and been influenced by him, or if this resonance is the reason I have read so much Merton! I suspect it is a bit of both: finding resonance in Merton with my own thinking has no doubt led me into reading more of Merton, and this has undoubtedly influenced and developed my own thinking. So for me, *Thinking through Thomas Merton* has helped make explicit how Merton has influenced me and why he is important to me: *Inchausti* opens up important aspects of Merton's life and work – the true and false self, contemplation, monasticism, poetry/anti-poetry, nonviolence – unpacks them and shows how they relate to each other. In particular, I found great value in what he has to say about how the Bible must be read devotionally for it to make sense and that biblical interpretation is an “imaginative act of finding new meanings in old forms” (3). This demands a personal existential engagement that involves interaction, exchange, dialogue, transformation – in other words, a contemplative approach. Another resonance for me was how God is more of an experience than a concept (the ground of being rather than an object of faith) in the chapter on “Contemplation as Critique.” Here Merton is drawing on an “apophatic faith premised on the unknowable, unnameable transcendental presence of the divine” (36). The invitation here is into the mystery of life itself (being itself), which cannot be denied but must be experienced, and so renders redundant sterile debates about the existence or non-existence of a deity.

In chapter five, *Inchausti* contrasts Merton's nonviolence with the neo-paganism of Robert Kaplan and with Reinhold Niebuhr's realist ethics, drawing on the non-dualism of his contemplative vision prompting comparisons with Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. Nonviolence is thus not an expedient political tactic but rather a way of life, stemming from one's contemplative vision, where self-transformation and ethical achievement outweigh attaining particular goals or leading to specific

results. The significance of this is huge, both in terms of Merton's own spiritual journey and personal development, and in terms of linking his inner life of contemplation with action and dialogue in the world. Inchausti traces and demonstrates clearly how the two are linked, how one leads to the other, and how the quality of what is seen in the world is indicative of what is not seen in the heart.

Thinking through Thomas Merton is not an easy read. Indeed I found it a challenging read (which may of course say more about me than about the book); the argument can be dense at times and Inchausti clearly has a high opinion and high expectations regarding the knowledge and philosophical understanding of his readers. This particularly applies to the concluding chapter, which is one of the shorter chapters and yet one of the most ambitious – “Refiguring the Faith” – “an overview of Catholicism in the light of Merton's witness” (7). That said, a careful reading (and possibly re-readings) and a willingness to follow up the leads and references offered will pay dividends in terms of deepening our understanding of Merton and his continuing significance for the world and times in which we live, and indeed also our own perspectives on the world, our lives and who we are and are becoming. Although challenging, this is one of the most satisfying and stimulating surveys and appraisals of Merton's life and work that I have come across. I warmly recommend it.

Angus Stuart

HIGGINS, Michael W. *Thomas Merton: Faithful Visionary* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014), pp. xiv + 122. ISBN 978-0-8146-3706-7 (paper) \$12.95.

In the collection of reflections in honor of Thomas Merton's centenary, *We Are Already One: Thomas Merton's Message of Hope*, there is an engaging reflection by Michael Higgins entitled, “Thomas Merton and Me.” Here we may discover the trajectory that brought the book *Thomas Merton: Faithful Visionary* to publication. Higgins intimates that “my interest in Thomas Merton is quite multi-layered: personal, spiritual, intellectual and professional.” His first encounter with Merton in the 1960s was by way of the book by Naomi Burton (Stone), *More Than Sentinels*,¹ which he said “introduced to me a character whose presence in the book was determinative. That character was Thomas Merton. I came to Merton indirectly and by means of a literary genre that would have abiding interest for me: the memoir/conversion story/spiritual autobiography.”²

1. Naomi Burton, *More than Sentinels* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964).

2. Gray Henry and Jonathan Montaldo, eds., *We Are Already One: Thomas Merton's*