

Ephrem Arcement, OSB, *In the School of Prophets: The Formation of Thomas Merton's Prophetic Spirituality* (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2015), pp. xxv + 218. ISBN 978-0-87907-265-0 (paper) \$24.95.

In this book, Ephrem Arcement, OSB sets about the task of identifying the texts and thinkers that helped Thomas Merton give expression to his uniquely prophetic understanding of monasticism and spirituality in general after his experience on the street corner in Louisville. For the most part, I believe that Arcement succeeds in this endeavor, but at times this book elaborates upon occasions when Merton recognizes his newly found appreciation of prophetic spirituality in the work of others rather than examining how these thinkers helped him to develop his own thoughts on the matter.

To my mind, Arcement's best chapters cover Merton's reading of Blake, existentialism, especially Kierkegaard, and the fiction of Pasternak, Camus and Faulkner. Merton's affection for Blake has been well documented elsewhere, and Arcement avoids the temptation to provide his reader with a comprehensive treatment of the matter that would derail his overall project. Rather, Arcement focuses on Merton's identification of Blake as a seer, a person capable of seeing what is hidden from others (see 6). When coupled with creative imagination, the seer is able not only to recognize the shortcomings of the present, but also to envision a transformed reality that is more consonant with the gospel's proclamation of a redeemed world (see 11-13). The monk, then, is called to be an imaginative seer, one who sees a world in desperate need of redemption and creatively works to embody Christ in the world.

In this spirit, according to Arcement, Merton read the works of Pasternak, Camus and Faulkner. For Merton, these authors embodied what it meant to be an imaginative seer. In Pasternak, Merton saw someone who testified to the dehumanizing effects of Marxism in Russia despite the physical dangers in which doing so would place him (see 77). Camus called out the absurdity of living in such a way that denies the human demand to find meaning and coherence (see 86-87). For instance, how can people at the same time affirm such ideas as the value of authentic human existence and the importance of acting in accord with cultural norms that seem arbitrary at best? How can people claim that human persons are worthy of love, but tolerate the mass destruction of human life of World Wars I and II? Camus, according to Merton, did not promote such absurdity, but instead identified it to his readers and encouraged them to actively resist it through the examples of his characters. In Faulkner, finally, Merton sees a myth writer who symbolically conveys truths and

wisdom that point to a more life-affirming way of living (see 105). All three writers meet the description of imaginative seers – individuals who not only recognize where human societies are lacking, but also imagine the rectification of these shortcomings.

The third area of strength for Arcement's book is his treatment of Merton's encounter with existentialism. Merton's understanding of existentialism, Arcement claims, consists of recognizing that a human life determined by external claims regarding happiness and meaning is lacking because people lose themselves in a "public mind" rather than discerning values that arise from within (116). If people lose themselves in such a way, they are faced with a terrifying void that leads to despair and a sense of futility regarding one's life. For Merton, freedom is the way out of this existential angst. By willingly recognizing and entering the void, human persons become able to affirm truths and values not on the authority of others or social norms, but by a personal encounter with God. Thus, the Christian is liberated from the public mind and emerges into a life marked by the willingness to allow God to act through the individual to make a difference in the world.

With the identification of these three influences on Merton, Arcement is able to provide a description of Merton's prophetic spirituality. The prophet is one whose life testifies to the presence of Christ in a world that stands so desperately in need of the Kingdom of God (see xvii-xx). By learning to see (Blake), the prophet recognizes where the world falls short of the Kingdom. By using their imagination (Pasternak, Camus and Faulkner), prophets envision a world transformed by the love of God. By affirming their freedom (existentialists), they choose to make a difference.

The identification of this pattern, which I shorten in my mind to recognition, imagination and action, is the strength of Arcement's work. I personally found it a valuable contribution to my attempts at understanding Merton's notion of prophetic spirituality, and I recommend it for anyone interested in how Merton's thoughts developed after the Louisville experience. Beyond this contribution, Arcement also includes a couple of chapters on Merton's reading of other authors in whose writings Merton found confirmation of his thoughts on prophets and spirituality, such as Latin American poets and the nature of poetry in general. These sections, however, are less geared towards explaining how certain authors influenced Merton and more towards indicating how poetry can serve a prophetic function and both arise out of and contribute to spiritual experiences. Arcement's work here is interesting insofar as it clarifies what Merton thought about poetry, but it doesn't quite seem to be on the same page as the rest of the book which focuses on texts that affected Merton's

thinking rather than texts that agreed with Merton's developing thought. This dissonance, however, does not diminish Arcement's work. Instead, it adds another layer that people interested in Merton might find appealing.

Ian Bell

DEAR, John, *Thomas Merton, Peacemaker: Meditations on Merton, Peacemaking, and the Spiritual Life* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015), pp. xv + 191. ISBN 978-1-62698-107-2 (paper) \$20.00.

Thomas Merton's assertion that "The God of peace is never glorified by human violence," penned over sixty years ago in *No Man Is an Island*,<sup>1</sup> expresses a core assumption woven throughout this collection of twenty-seven meditations. The author, peace activist Fr. John Dear, also offers a corollary that equally anchors his reflections: "The God of peace is always glorified by human nonviolence" (xi). Indeed, Dear's meditations repeatedly name God as "the God of peace" and nonviolence as humanity's calling.

Dear includes Merton among a host of prophetic advocates who formed his own peacemaking vocation, one whose "writings and example have been a steady, daily source of strength, hope, and light, right up to today" (x). In tribute to this influence, Dear composed these "musings and meditations based on Merton's life and writings . . . [as] simple, free-flowing commentaries" (xiv) on a life of peace advocacy. They illuminate, therefore, how Merton's work has helped motivate and inspire one of today's most passionate and vocal spokespersons for ending war and the militarization of our world.

Since Dear presumes readers are already familiar with Merton (xiii), this is not primarily a resource to explore specifics about Merton, although he does summarize aspects of Merton's life and abundantly quotes Merton throughout. Rather, Dear mainly intends this volume to inspire and edify the reader's pilgrimage of "active nonviolence" and discovery of "the underlying communion that already exists among us" (xii). He focuses his meditations around such questions as, "What is the connection between the spiritual life of peace and nonviolence, and the social, economic, and political realities of war and violence?" and "How can we move out of the culture of war and violence and step deeper into the spiritual life of nonviolence?" For one thing, Dear responds, "We try to cultivate peace within us, that we might radiate peace around us" (xii), and his meditations explore how Thomas Merton can help us accomplish that.

Dear wrote these reflections in two blocks, about half penned during

---

1. Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1955) 197.