Fully Monastic, Fully Modern

Review of
Thomas Merton and the Monastic Vision
By Lawrence S. Cunningham
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Reviewed by **William M. Thompson**

In a manner appropriate to the guidelines of the Eerdmans Library of Religious Biography series, Lawrence Cunningham provides an interpretive biography of Merton in an economy of space, impressively based upon all of Merton's published and unpublished writings, with a keen attunement to a sense of historical and cultural context. While the series allows no footnotes, that is more than atoned for by the bibliographical essay of the book's concluding, eighth chapter. Cunningham is himself a theologian and *literatus*, and that serves him well with his fellow *literatus* Merton, whose literary allusions can make enormous demands on even the most well read readers. Those who know Merton well will find here an up-to-date overview, along with perhaps a few challenges in interpretation. Cunningham clearly has an affection for his subject, but he is no hagiographer. Those of us who "grew up" with Merton, but perhaps have been away for a while, will enjoy revisiting this old friend, and are likely to rediscover why Merton was and still can be so compelling. The author's generous but not overused citations from Merton aid greatly to this effect. Readers hardly knowing Merton might just find here a most attractive guide of entry. Along with some of Merton's own works, as a teacher I would be inclined to place this book high on my list of recommendations to a "Merton-novice."

Cunningham cites a witticism from Dom André Louf by way of introducing his guiding theme: "What is a monk? A monk is someone who every day asks: 'What is a monk?'" Cunningham's book is written in the belief that "if one does not understand Merton as a monk, one does not understand him at all" (16-17). Cunningham shows how, plausibly – even literally – Merton daily asked himself, "What is a monk?" The words "ask," "himself," and "monk," were intertwined and multi-layered. One gains the impression, not too surprisingly for a *literatus* like Merton, that there is an intensive "event quality" to his life. We are all in movement, but he seems especially attuned to the flux of it all. "Asking" keeps complexifying in its layers of probing, and so the "self" of Merton is not so much a static fact as a disrupting movement – an "event." And so the "event quality" of monasticism as a "conversion of morals" achieves a rather glaring transparency in this monk. Cunningham exhibits a down-to-earth understanding of this quality of Merton's itinerary, working particularly from the journals. Like many of us, Cunningham is attracted to this ever-questioning Merton. Many of his

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questions seem to be our questions, but he seems able to ask them so much better than we do. He is so real to us. But one can almost overhear Cunningham say, "Thank God Merton was a monk, in a monastery, at first with an abbot who rather literally interpreted the vow of stability!" In other words, the more intense the questioner, the greater the need for supportive continuity in one's life. We will never quite know, but one wonders whether Merton didn't somehow realize this himself. He was always looking for his "home," perhaps symbolized by his struggle over the hermitage. Somewhere, I hope I am accurately recalling, while apparently walking somewhat gloomily on the monastic grounds, Merton tells us how a fellow monk asked him why he was so cheerless, trying to encourage him to exhibit more joy. Merton could think of no particular reason for his lack of happiness and opined that at times the monk will simply suffer a kind of homesickness for God. Such gloominess is not so bad. But it brings with it a certain restlessness, and Merton had lots of that.

"*Incipit exire qui incipit amare*" ("The person who begins to love begins to go out"), wrote Augustine in his commentary on Psalm 64:2. Loving is a kind of going out (*exire*) experience. The words related to the Latin *exire*, like "exit," "exile," or "going out" in the sense of "stretching oneself," might provide us with a helpful way to think about Merton as presented by Cunningham. What unites them all is that they are forms of love. The book's prologue rehearses his premonastic life. The facts are well known and told in brief manner, for Cunningham's focus is Merton's monastic life. He appreciates the rootlessness of Merton's youth, and occasionally refers to it, when it seems relevant, in a common-sense way. Cunningham makes no pretense of being a psychologist.

"The Making of a Monk" (ch. 1) brings the reader more or less up to *The Sign of Jonas* (1953). It is an excellent study of the daily life of a monk at Gethsemani in the 40s and 50s, as Merton would have experienced it, with some attention to the larger Trappist historical background. Cunningham sets the pattern which he follows throughout of interweaving context (Gethsemani, and the larger ecclesial/social) with a summary and interpretation of Merton's writings at the time. Merton largely thought of the monastic vocation as one of "exiting" the sinful world (symbolized by the World War). The monk is an exile in this more straightforward sense. What one might forget, though, is how "busy" the monastic life was. Merton quickly began to complain about not really being free for contemplation, what with nearly every hour of the day being tightly controlled. It reminded me of my days in the minor seminary! The exile from the world was beginning to feel a bit like an exile in the monastery. This was likely reinforced by the fact (which I only learned from this book) that Merton's fellow monks did not know of his considerable literary success from his bestsellers. Apparently many outside the monastery had a sense of exile too, which accounts for the enormous popularity of his early books.

Exire largely takes on the character of "stretching" (going out) with "The Conversion of a Monk" (ch. 2), which recounts Merton's gradual opening up – to non-Catholics (especially Eastern Orthodoxy), to non-Christians, to the growing counter-culture and various *literati*, and to the world in general. The corner of Fourth and Walnut epiphany ("I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people") crystallizes this other layer of the monk in formation. The larger Catholic and American culture was undergoing a similar stretching, and Cunningham frequently returns to this paradox (so biblical) of monastic exile and interconnectedness with one's culture. "Towards Mount Olivet" (ch. 3), bringing us up to Vatican II, reveals a Merton growing in an ability to articulate the connection between solitude and interaction with the world. The essay "A Philosophy of Solitude" was crucial in this regard, but Cunningham also notes a January 2, 1966 letter in

which Merton gives us a rare glimpse into his own style of prayer (very apophatic), as well as one from 1962 which speaks of gazing at a God who is not a static essence but the Lord of history. Here the apophatic (gazing wordlessly) and the kataphatic (the God of history and people), solitude and otherness, meet.

As Merton grows more "connected," so he experiences more insistently the attraction to Mount Olivet (the hermitage), all of this occurring up through the Vatican II years. In August of 1965 Gethsemani's monastic council relieves Merton of his duties as novice master and gives him permission to retire to the hermitage. His *exire* becomes an "exile" again, but in a deeper way. Cunningham recounts the process leading up to this permission in chapter 4, "Taking Up the Hermit Life," especially with the analysis of *Contemplative Prayer*, with its theme of contemplation as breaking through illusions, indicating the new meaning of exile. The marginal position of the hermit (exile) is an opportunity to cut through falsity. The greater purity of heart is a deepened form of love, and so somewhat dizzyingly Merton the hermit and Merton the correspondent and ecclesial-social critic grow in direct proportion to one another apparently. "Solitude and Love" (ch. 5) chiefly recounts the tumultuous years of 1965-66. The monk is a "bystander" (in exile still), but "guilty" too (somehow sharing in the world and responsible for it too). Cunningham takes us through the labyrinth of Merton's falling in love with "M" in 1966. (Merton used this initial for her, to preserve her anonymity and not hurt her any more than he already had.) Merton did not try to hide this from his journals, remaining true to his vision of the monk as authentic, cutting through the illusions. That must start with himself apparently. "The Final Years: 1967-1968" (ch. 6) takes us to the end of Merton's life, dwelling on some of his experiments with new literary genres (Cunningham does not find these too compelling) as well as his growing encounter with the Far East. Cunningham stresses Merton's use of the word "aesthetic" in the famous encounter with the Buddha sculptures at Ceylon's Polonnaruwa. Was Merton drawing a traditional distinction between the aesthetic and the mystical, and would not many theologians today not draw such a contrast? Cunningham seems to place himself among these. Cunningham recounts in an earlier chapter how Merton's christology is largely the cosmic Logos christology of Paul and the Fathers. If we follow up on this, it would seem that Merton knew that somehow the cosmic Christ was present in those Buddhas; at the same time, he knew there was something distinct about Jesus too. Perhaps his use of the word "aesthetic" was a way of pointing to this as well.

"Summing Up a Life" (ch. 7) courageously risks an interpretation of the attraction of Merton. This is courageous, if only because Cunningham has done such a fine job of displaying the complex, multi-layered phenomenon that Merton was. Different people are attracted to these different dimensions, but underlying them all, Cunningham finds a sort of meta-attraction. He expresses this in slightly different ways. Merton was not a theologian in the "school" sense, but in the sapiential sense. He was simply a very good monk, and therein is the key. He strove for authenticity, for truth in that sense, as the sometimes painful loquacity and transparency of his journals makes clear. Although this went along with another of those fascinating Merton paradoxes: we noted above Cunningham's observation that Merton was surprisingly reticent about his own deepest life of prayer. So he could be both prolix and pursed. That sounds to me like he was real. Intense, exaggerated, hyperbolic, angry, sinful, lonely, these and more. But his was the gift of the fire watch: he knew how to observe the human condition (the "human search," Cunningham writes) and still more, how to say it. In Cunningham's words, "Apart from those who enjoy a moment of romantic frisson at the thought

of monasteries and monks in their close-cropped hair and cowled garments, one must say that Merton's gift was to convey the essential gifts and charisms of the monastic life to a larger world that found nurture in them" (190). Merton somehow learned how to strip accidents from the essential. Here is where monk and all the rest of us meet, either now or in the "angelic life" of heaven. I believe something like this is what Cunningham wants to tell us through his guiding theme of the interconnection between Merton's writing and his monastic vocation. To this end Cunningham fittingly uses the three features of the monk that Merton had appended to his Calcutta presentation as a way of crystallizing Merton's life: a certain form of detachment, working through to foundations, concentrating on the deepening of consciousness.

This book reflects and somewhat sums up the gist of the many Merton studies that have appeared, as well as a near-lifetime of reading Merton on Cunningham's part. In the bibliographical essay, the author more than hints at his own evaluation of many of the Merton studies that have appeared, and one can sense which books have influenced him. This essay also recalls (and comments on) Merton's own evaluation(s) of his writings, something occasionally noted throughout the book as well. Cunningham, as indicated, keeps his eye trained on the monastic context as Merton would have experienced it, and that will be one of this book's most important contributions. Most of the studies I have read do not ignore this rather glaring dimension of Merton, but this book seems to hold the monastic note longer than most I have studied. While monasticism was formative of Merton, Merton was formative of monasticism too, and Cunningham shows how he was a major voice in the reshaping of this ancient calling.

This study is an interpretive biography in the sense that the hermeneutical focus is the monastic and larger ecclesial/social situating of Merton's *itinerarium mentis in Deum*, joined with excellently digested expositions of the contents of the major works and some occasional critique/evaluation. It is not an intellectual biography in the sense of a sustained philosophical and theological probing of the thought of Merton, but I gather that that is not the purpose of this series. Still, Cunningham lays a solid foundation for such a further intellectual engagement, and even prepares the way in a deeper sense by bringing out so well what kind of *episteme* would be involved in such an endeavor, namely, the ancient meaning of theology as *sapientia* learned through the discipline of virtuous and committed living. Evaluating Merton cannot take place on the level of propositions only or mainly; he forces us to dig down deeper to the existential sources of authenticity, prior to any supposed split between theory and practice. No neutral, spectator approach to truth will work, if Merton be right. Like the monk, one must enter into the Jonaslike "belly of a paradox."

Cunningham's work greatly discloses two other features of Merton, and hints at a third, each of which will be important dimensions of any further intellectual engagement with Merton in our day. First, Merton was in many ways a thoroughly "modern" man. While he always remained critical of the dark side of modernity (in differing ways before, during, and after *The Seven Storey Mountain*), still he cherished modernity's pluralism, civil rights, peace activism, multiculturalism, ecumenism, literary creativity, and more. Cunningham exhibits this feature of Merton well (with particular praise, it seems to me, for the work of William Shannon), reminding us that Merton was a thoroughly Vatican II person, even if he never attended that council. Cunningham even thinks that in a meaningful way Merton helped make that Council happen, playing a role like Romano Guardini or Hans Urs von Balthasar, neither of whom also was present at the council. This is, I think, the Merton who greatly attracts the generations of readers who grew up with him. He helped them (us) understand how they

(we) could be modern and yet Christian and even Roman Catholic too. It is a Merton still very much needed in an era all too liable to forget these "modern" struggles. Secondly, Cunningham most appealingly and carefully reveals a Merton thoroughly monastic, soaked in the millennial traditions of monastic contemplation, as we have noted more than once. As he participated in this, he found it opening out onto the multi-layered, never fully excavated mysteries of the faith. As monk, Merton aimed for "a disintegration of the social and cultural self, the product of merely human history, and the reintegration of that self in Christ," as he put it in his essay on "final integration" (in my view, one of his most important essays). This disintegration-reintegration interplay seems to have been the deep source of his ability to enter into modernity without selling his soul to it. The dimension of Merton which Cunningham hints at is the one who seems to share much in common with our contemporary postmodernity – the Merton of the mosaic poem experiments, the paintings, the Zen Buddhist koans and Taoist paradoxes, the identification with nature and oral cultures, the fragmented, always-evolving self. The very phrase "final integration" would be inconceivable in the more radical currents of postmodernity, even as an eschatological reality (as Merton meant it). Finality is too totalistic, finished. Somehow, though, Merton was able to hold these three dimensions together, or rather, something held these dimensions together in and through him. But only in the belly of a paradox, it seems. I suspect that probing this a bit more fully will be one of the tasks of this generation of Merton students.