

Community or Collectivity?

Review of

Returning to Reality: Thomas Merton's Wisdom for a Technological World

By Phillip M. Thompson.

Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012

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Reviewed by **Paul R. Dekar**

To explore “Merton’s wisdom for a technological world,” Phillip M. Thompson frames this study through a polarity – collectivity versus community. The former paradigm prioritizes material progress and prosperity, promotes science, is obsessed with productivity, favors reason over spirituality, and generates mindless technologies that dull human imagination and manipulate people. The latter “spiritual vision” prioritizes moral growth and the dignity of every person, promotes a humanizing conception of work, supports spiritual and rational forms of knowledge, produces technologies that sharpen the intellect, and integrates body, mind and soul (17).

Through writing, mentoring and friends’ visits, Merton became a spiritual director for Abbey of Gethsemani monks and for communities of resistance. Especially in the last ten years of his life, Merton worried about the impact of technology in three areas that Thompson explores at length: avoiding the nuclear apocalypse, reforming the information age and choosing to be human or transhuman. Thompson believes Merton remains pertinent for “superficial and distracted consumers of instant messages and images” (ix). Stressing that Merton did not eschew technology, Thompson highlights Merton’s call for balance and prescience regarding the “distorted desire for cloning and prolonging life . . . examples of a materialism that radically manipulates creation” (71).

Responding to this book, I recall reading Merton in the early 1960s when I studied at the University of California, Berkeley. I resonated with Merton’s critique of a society obsessed with “the technological furies of size, volume, quantity, speed, number, price, power and acceleration” (*Raids on the Unspeakable* 70). I joined protests and wore badges with slogans such as “you can’t hug a child with nuclear arms,” “the meek are getting ready” and “we cannot change unless we survive but we will not survive unless we change.” Merton’s wisdom paralleled insights of a contemporary, Mario Savio of the Free Speech Movement. At a December 3, 1964 rally, the latter affirmed, “There is a time when the operation of the machine becomes so odious, makes you so sick at heart, that you can’t take part; you can’t even passively take part, and you’ve got to put your bodies upon the gears and upon the wheels, upon the levers, upon all the apparatus and you’ve got to indicate to the

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people who run it, to the people who own it, that unless you're free, the machine will be prevented from working at all!" (see www.fsm-a.org/stacks/mario/mario_speech.html).

Consider insights of cartoonists. *Blondie* has appeared in newspapers since the 1930s. In the first frame of a comic strip in the *Hamilton Spectator* on January 15, 2013, Dagwood's boss, Julius Caesar Dithers, asks his wife Cora, "What's all this Facebook nonsense with people posting pics of their feet?" She replies, "Oh, it's to show they're lounging on vacation." In the second frame, she says, "See? They snap foot photos on lazy, relaxing backgrounds like beaches or pools . . . or in some cases their desks" (frame three shows Dagwood Bumstead, smart phone in his hand, photographing his feet that are on his workplace desk). *Between Friends* is a more recent comic strip. In the *Hamilton Spectator* on January 16, 2013, the first frame depicts a homemaker struggling to find a source of intellectual fulfillment. She taps on her computer: "[tap tap tappity tap tap tappity . . .]." She thinks, "I am bored with Facebook minutiae." The second frame shows her posting her input. The third frame shows her friends' responses: "like like like like like like like . . ." In the final frame, Kimberly observes, "There's something seriously wrong with our culture."

I suspect Thompson, and Merton, would concur. Combining analysis and jeremiad, this book deserves wide readership. Thompson would likely celebrate the action of a friend whose emails announce: "Normally I keep Monday as a 'hermitage' day, and as part of this I am offline from Sunday evening until Tuesday morning." I have followed suit, refusing to become software.