

The Ever-Radical Merton

Review of

Thinking through Thomas Merton: Contemplation for Contemporary Times

By Robert Inchausti

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Reviewed by **David Golemboski**

In his introduction to *Thinking through Thomas Merton*, Robert Inchausti suggests that the identity of Thomas Merton remains in-the-making. To be sure, Merton the person lived and died, and much effort has gone into understanding this man and his work. But Inchausti's book is concerned with "not just who Merton was, but *who he is still in the process of becoming*." Inchausti wants to "reintroduce the reader to . . . 'the ever-radical Merton' whose work has yet to be – and perhaps never will be – fully understood" (7). This volume approaches Merton in this unfolding sense by placing his life and work into consideration alongside important thinkers and intellectual currents of the past couple centuries. Throughout the book, Inchausti engages interlocutors as diverse as nineteenth-century philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, comparative theologian Raimon Panikkar and contemporary neo-conservative political pundit Robert Kaplan, to name a few. Inchausti writes that his task is "to place Merton's thought within the context of contemporary thought" (7). As fodder for this contextualizing effort, Inchausti draws on an impressive array of Merton's writings, including journal entries, letters, essays and monographs spanning the course of Merton's life.

Each chapter of the book offers an original interpretive argument about Merton's life, works and legacy. The first suggests that Merton's life is best considered as a Kierkegaardian "experiment" in sainthood – not an arrogant assumption of piety, but rather an earnest pursuit of full and authentic Christian existence. The second chapter argues that Merton found in the contemplative life a way of striking a critical posture toward the problems of modernity and post-modernity. In the third chapter, Inchausti casts Merton's poetry as a "multicultural form of natural theology" (72) by which Merton bypassed onto-theological fixation on metaphysics in order to articulate the unmediated experience of Christian faith and contemplation. The fourth chapter contrasts Merton's understanding of contemplation as a kenotic encounter with the Divine against the obsession with subjective experience that pervades many contemporary spiritual outlooks. In the fifth and final substantive chapter, Inchausti explores Merton's hope in nonviolence as an alternative to the stance of Machiavellian political realism, which accepts conflict and war as inevitable (if tragic) elements of social and political life.

These five chapters could be read individually as freestanding essays, but some important recurring themes cut across them and tie the book together as a unified whole. For instance, Inchausti

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emphasizes repeatedly that one of Merton's major and distinctive contributions to twentieth-century theology and spirituality was the re-establishment of what Inchausti calls a "devotional approach to both the Bible and to Christ, in stark contrast to the historic, critical, and literal approaches dominating contemporary theology" (51-52). Inchausti argues that this approach to spirituality can avoid, if not resolve, some of the epistemological challenges that have troubled theology in the post-Enlightenment age. Additionally, each chapter emphasizes in its own way the critical edge of Merton's contemplative vocation, not merely as expressed in his writings but also as embedded inherently in the monastic life itself. That Merton's life as a whole represents a critique of Western modernity is a theme Inchausti explored in his earlier book, *Thomas Merton's American Prophecy*. Here, he writes that Merton's "most important contribution to the thought of his time may be his *marriage of contemplative and intellectual awareness into a single prophetic point of view*" (20).

In one particularly interesting passage that demonstrates well the book's aim of placing Merton into dialogue with prominent contemporary thinkers, Inchausti engages in a comparison of Merton's understanding of contemplation with some views on prayer expressed by the French philosopher of deconstruction Jacques Derrida. Derrida says that a central element of authentic prayer is uncertainty as to the addressee of the prayer. "If I knew," Derrida writes, "if I were simply expecting an answer, that would be the end of the prayer" (46-47). Inchausti notes a degree of resonance between Derrida's stance and that of the apophatic tradition in Christian spirituality, but also draws a contrast. Derrida's "objectless meditation" remains ultimately a solipsistic intellectual exercise, whereas active contemplation involves an "ontological leap" toward the divine. Inchausti writes, "The monk begins with the realization of one's nothingness and helplessness in the presence of God; the philosopher considers the boundaries of his own interior life and the limits of discourse" (48).

This engagement of Merton and Derrida in conversation nicely counterposes two superficially friendly but fundamentally incompatible understandings of prayer to interesting and illuminating effect. Unfortunately, the book contains few other thorough and satisfying comparisons of this sort. Much of the text skips quickly from one allusion, quotation or juxtaposition to the next, infrequently pausing for more than a paragraph to elevate its provocations to the level of analysis. Inchausti regularly offers intriguing and controversial suggestions – for example, that the talk Merton delivered just before he died, entitled "Monasticism and Marxism," indicated that he was "already thinking about liberation theology" (31), or that Merton's understanding of nonviolence is meaningfully paralleled by Joseph Brodsky's claim that "the surest defense against Evil is extreme individualism" (110) – but leaves them quickly behind. The result is that much of the book feels scattered in its treatment of both these various contemporary thinkers and Merton himself.

The title of the book indicates that it is an effort in "thinking through" Thomas Merton. This phrasing is apt, insofar as Merton figures in much of the book as a lens, rather than a direct object of inquiry. Much as one might *look through* a window, this book *thinks through* Merton to the philosophical, theological and socio-political questions about which he wrote. At times, this method can cause a reader to wonder if the ideas captured in the text are more properly Inchausti's than Merton's. For example, Inchausti writes at one point that although Merton died before the advent of the internet, "I'd like to think he would have seen it as I do" (129) – a telling phrase that ranks just behind "pay no attention to that man behind the curtain" as an instance of unwitting self-revelation. To be sure, Merton is ever-present in the text, and Inchausti does not stray far from topics that are

clearly germane to a study of Merton. But the book is heavier on bold claims than on the careful exegesis or analysis that could aid in supporting them.

In spite of these weaknesses, the book clearly succeeds in a number of important respects. It creatively, if often only suggestively, situates some of Merton's work in relation to important intellectual currents of his day (and beyond). It is also a welcome step in the direction of more regular consideration of Merton as a serious intellectual player in twentieth-century theology and philosophy. And although the book raises as many questions as it answers, this is a virtue in its own way, insofar as it reminds one of the many avenues of inquiry that remain unexplored at a level of depth in Merton scholarship. The relationship of Merton's work to post-modern philosophy, for example, strikes this reader as particularly ripe for further analysis.

The book closes with an appendix that helpfully overviews important "milestones" in the study of Thomas Merton, including expository and interpretive scholarship as well as other writing inspired by Merton's work. It is not obvious that *Thinking through Thomas Merton* will itself join the category of milestones – its contribution is too broad and speculative. But it succeeds in highlighting salient consonances and raising important questions, and it suggests some trajectories that will no doubt provide fertile ground for the construction of milestones down the road.