Fidelity and Discontent

Review of
Divine Discontent: The Prophetic Voice of Thomas Merton
By John Moses
Foreword by Rowan Williams
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Reviewed by **Ryan Scruggs**

In *Divine Discontent: The Prophetic Voice of Thomas Merton*, John Moses, Dean Emeritus of St Paul's Cathedral in London, offers readers a sound introduction to the life and thought of Thomas Merton. Allow me to unpack each of these descriptors. First, Moses manages to stake out a niche by writing a book that is at once a biographical and conceptual study. There are already excellent biographies available on Thomas Merton, and there is a steady stream of new monographs devoted to various aspects of his thought. Yet chapters two through six manage to offer a unique perspective by providing brief biographical sketches as seen through the particular lenses of his various vocations: Trappist monk, writer, contemplative, social critic and ecumenist. The structure is helpful in highlighting the now well-established areas of Merton's influence while holding together the person and his ideas. Of course, in only 211 pages such an approach can only be an introduction. Those who have read extensively in Merton will find at many points they are left desiring greater detail and analysis. Yet this is hardly a criticism: a book cannot be all things to all people, and this book is a solid entry into the world of Thomas Merton. Finally, the book is sound because Moses brings to the table extensive research and reliable judgment. In particular, we encounter the person of Merton through his journals and letters, which make up at least a third of the book's numerous endnotes.

A little more should be said concerning Moses's judgment. In his Foreword Rowan Williams commends Moses for taking "Merton's fallible humanity very much as his starting point" (xi). This indeed Moses does, yet with a spirit of good will that seeks to see Merton for who he really was – no more and no less. It is a good thing for both admirers and scholars that Merton be portrayed warts and all; to be frank, he is of little use for the rest of us in angelic form (even saints, it need not be said, require the grace of God). Let me offer a few examples. In a three-page overview of Merton's relationship with "M," Moses acknowledges the possibility that Merton grew through the encounter but he also offers a rather sobering (and I think justifiable) criticism: "It is not merely that he was twice 'M''s age, that he was a priest, a religious and a hermit. It is far more that he was aware from the outset of her vulnerability" (46). Along with significant praise Moses does not shy away from pointing out Merton's "limitations as a writer" (85), or his "tendency to over-simplify, to dramatize" as a social critic (132). And while he relies so significantly on Merton's journals Moses

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also recognizes that "Merton knew at an early stage that his journals would eventually be published" (64), and he acknowledges the difficulty this presents in penetrating to the true Merton (see 163). Moreover, in the same context Moses is willing to pose the uncomfortable question of why someone "chooses a life of withdrawal, silence and solitude . . . then writes so compulsively and extensively *about himself*" (65). The one small hesitation I have here is that at times Moses poses unanswered questions (like the one above) that can be interpreted as accusations; and while the questions do seem pertinent, without some sort of informed response I question their value in revealing anything of substance. Most of the time, however, I found myself heartily agreeing with what seemed to me a balanced construal of a given life-situation or idea in Merton.

If there is a note of discord it is with respect to the title and theme of the book: *Divine Discontent*. To begin with, it feels more like an addendum than a continuous theme. Apart from a few key sentences, the first six chapters are really simply an excellent introduction to the life and thought of Thomas Merton, and a significant part of me thinks the book should have been marketed as such. Moreover, after reading the book I am still not entirely sure what Moses means by this phrase. (A brief online search informs me that Ralph Waldo Emerson coined the phrase, but Moses does not indicate whether he wants to borrow from his meaning.) Merton's human discontents are easy enough to grasp: the challenge of monastic stability, the busyness and artificiality of community life, unfulfilled desire for solitude, feeling stifled by the censors of the Cistercian Order and frustrated by his abbot, James Fox, whom Moses describes as the "main focus of [Merton's] discontents" (32). To explain the transition from human discontents to divine discontent Moses quotes Merton: "This way of wisdom is no dream, no temptation and no evasion. . . . It is not an escape from contradiction and confusion for it finds unity and clarity by plunging into the very midst of contradiction, by the acceptance of emptiness and suffering" (73). Here, precisely in the midst of these "contradictions and confusions," Moses proposes, are the "foundations of Christian hope which are the events of Good Friday and Easter Day, the mysteries of death and resurrection" (73).

Chapter seven, entitled "A Study in Divine Discontent," develops this claim by proposing a "theological reading" of Merton's life in which God is revealed in "perfectly ordinary and seemingly trivial" events (172). Curiously, Moses strives here for something like a Chalcedonian logic, but without explicitly mentioning Christ. While rejecting the pantheistic option – that "the two words *divine* and *human* are interchangeable" – he is unwilling to locate and particularize the unity of divinity and humanity. Yet apart from this christological understanding, to say of Merton that "in finding his true self he had found God" (172) is misleading, for the true self is always in *Christ*. Moses goes on to suggest that these discontents represent the desert tradition in Merton's life; and while "The desert is . . . the place of the cross," it is also "supremely the place of transfiguration, which is participation in the life of God" (174). By this Moses means that it was precisely "in the midst of uncertainty and nothingness, that Merton could find an awareness of the presence of God" (175). Merton "had discovered that the desert – *when it is accepted as a desert* – can become a paradise" (175).

There is promise in this analysis, but in the end I found it more frustrating than illuminating. I suppose my problem with the phrase "divine discontent" is that while it has rhetorical flair it lacks conceptual clarity. I think Moses means to argue that the divine is potentially revealed in the midst of human discontents, but the phrase sounds more like Merton might simply be dissatisfied with God (no doubt true at times), or that discontent itself is a privileged road to the divine. It even feels like

Moses himself has a hard time making sense of the phrase, at one time (late in the book) posing the poignant but by now exasperating question, "What do the words mean?" (171). In the midst of this confusion we lose sight of the truly transformative factor in the equation: Merton's fidelity to the person of Christ. What actually strikes me about Merton's situation is not his discontent(s) (human or divine) – I think Moses is right to suggest the possibility that "the discontents that Merton displayed were . . . the all too familiar *human* discontents that might be exhibited by any person at any time" (171). What strikes me is Merton's fidelity to his vocation *in spite* of the many and persistent human discontents. Discontents are the common human denominator; what sets Merton apart – indeed what makes him so intriguing – is his determination to stay the course in the face of such great temptation to (in short) break his vows. No doubt Merton is fallible in his fidelity, but this makes him relatable; but on the whole he is faithful, and this is what makes him a model. Moses touches on all of this, but it seems to me a mistake that discontent rather than fidelity becomes the organizing motif. All this being said, this is a small criticism that in length now seems out of proportion with my overall appreciation.

Chapter one is an infectious look at why Merton continues to fascinate, and moreover why he still matters. And in the final chapter Moses offers an evaluation of Merton's prophetic voice understood through the thought of Abraham Heschel and Walter Brueggemann. I find his primary argument in this chapter – "that *for* [Merton] the dominant and enduring crisis is encapsulated by the idea of *alienation*" (189) – convincing (and sadly a significant reason why Merton's voice will continue to remain vital for many generations to come), though I cannot concur with the lack of nuance in his portrayal of Merton's ecclesiology as universal, inclusive, non-doctrinal and non-institutional (see 208). One counter-example from Merton will have to suffice:

> The heart of true Christian humanism, in its full theological dimension, is to be sought in the revealed doctrine of the Incarnation, man's sonship of God in Christ, and the gift of the Holy Spirit as a principle of divine life and love in man. The Church is the center and focus of this incarnational and redemptive humanism because it is in her that Christ dwells, and the transforming power of the Holy Spirit makes men into sons of God. . . . The whole meaning of Christian teaching is precisely that man is *not* alienated from himself by his new relationship to God, but on the contrary, everything that is God's becomes ours in Christ. (*Love and Living*, 144-45)

In the end Moses left me wanting to return to Merton, to read him again and be moved toward God and the world in and through Christ. This is the sort of book that could profitably be placed alongside a collection of Merton's own words, like the *Essential Writings* edited by Christine M. Bochen, for the purpose of introducing a class or a reading group to the prophetic voice of Thomas Merton.