

A Life-Giving Legacy

Review of

The Unquiet Monk: Thomas Merton's Questing Faith

By Michael W. Higgins

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Reviewed by **William Apel**

Writing in anticipation of the centenary of Thomas Merton's birth (2015), Michael W. Higgins has given us a refreshing and insightful account of the life and thought of the best known, and often controversial, Christian monk of the twentieth century. This brief tome of 126 pages attempts a nearly impossible task: an examination of Merton's "life, his poetry, his commitment to trenchant social criticism, his expansive and embracing religious imagination, his courageous dialogue with Eastern religions and his position as an icon of wholeness for a fractured, alienated postmodern generation" (7-8). All this is done under the rubric of Merton's "questing faith"; and to the best of his ability, Higgins, a distinguished Merton scholar and a talented documentarian of the Canadian Broadcast Company (CBC), accomplishes this most arduous task.

Multiple dimensions of Merton's thought and varied interests are concisely addressed in five chapters (chapters 2-6) of Higgins' book, while his life story is told the opening chapter. A more comprehensive account of Merton's life can be found in Higgins' other recent book *Thomas Merton: Faithful Visionary* (2014). These two books make for good companion pieces and have only a limited amount of duplication. They both have been welcome additions to this reviewer's Merton collection.

One thing which makes *The Unquiet Monk* so refreshing is Higgins' creative use of lengthy quotations from Merton friends and scholars, judiciously distributed throughout the text and providing added depth. Many of these comments, particularly those from close friends of Merton, are taken from CBC programming produced by the author and aired in the late 1970s. Most of this material from Merton friends is printed here for the first time and provides informal and spontaneous remembrances of Merton that we otherwise would not have. Their simple honesty and candor are something often not found in remarks about Merton that have been prepared for publication. Friends of Merton such as Glenn Hinson, John Howard Griffin and Amiya Chakravarty are quoted by Higgins. It is a real joy to hear from these particular voices since they have frequently been overlooked when Merton's friends are quoted. This valuable documentation in itself makes this book a worthwhile acquisition.

Michael Higgins' seasoned and mature approach to the study of Merton is very evident throughout *The Unquiet Monk*. He allows for a variety of interpretations of Merton's life, spirituality and social

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concerns. He makes no claims about having discovered the one “true” Merton. In fact, Higgins suggests five different prisms through which we might view Merton. In the book’s introduction, he invites us to consider Merton as the Erasmian critic, as the Swiftian satirist, as the Camusian rebel, as the Cistercian prophet, and finally as the Blakean Visionary. In Higgins’ estimation, the colorful refractions of the light as viewed through these prisms help us gain an appreciation for the “complex and multivalent genius” of Merton (7).

Chapter one (4-38), as noted earlier, presents us with a biographical sketch of Merton’s life story. Its contours are well designed and the content is solid and provocative. Indeed, “solid” and “provocative” are two good words that might be used to describe Higgins’ work. His knowledge of Merton is vast; his assertions about Merton make for lively reading.

Chapter two, entitled “Window, Tower and Circle: The Poetic Merton” (39-66) is perhaps Higgins’ finest chapter. The author’s grasp of Merton’s poetic sensibilities is second to none. For those who are somewhat “flatfooted” when it comes to poetry, Higgins skillfully opens up a whole new world. Thus, for the poetic novice, this chapter serves as an excellent primer for the poetry of Thomas Merton. Those more advanced in the study of Merton’s poetry can benefit from Higgins’ analytical work. His exegesis of selected pieces taken from a variety of Merton poems will challenge even the most expert of Merton scholars and lovers of his poetry. At one point in chapter two, Higgins compares Merton the poet with Merton journal-writer. He goes so far as to say that “Merton . . . remained primarily the poet, not the diarist” (49). Some, including this reviewer, may not be in complete agreement with this assertion. Merton’s journals, it can be responsibly argued, are at least as significant as his poetry. Some of Merton’s most memorable writings come from his journals as they are used to form books like *The Seven Storey Mountain*, *The Sign of Jonas* and the posthumously published *Asian Journal*. Merton spent many hours perfecting his autobiographical writing style and journals (which Higgins does also cover in chapter two). In addition, Merton’s letter-writing, which almost becomes an art form, could likewise rival his poetic endeavors. Without question, Merton was a gifted poet, as Higgins’ demonstrates so clearly, but the valor and beauty of his poetic expression is transformed by Merton into other literary forms through which he also thrilled and excelled.

In the third chapter, “Solitary Critic” (67-86), Higgins moves from Merton’s “questing faith” as a poet to ponder the creative tension in Merton’s life between solitude and involvement in the world. Higgins reminds us that “from the seclusion of a quite unmodern institution, Merton addressed himself to the modern issues of the day” (85). This gave Merton a rather unique perspective from which to view the violence and brutalities of his era, and Higgins helps us to see just how unique that perspective was for a contemplative Trappist monk.

The fourth chapter explores “Merton’s Religious Imagination” (87-103). Here, for Higgins, the matter of contemplation is seen as a dynamic part of Merton’s “imaginative heart.” According to Higgins, Merton “saw the contemplative as more than a sedentary recluse absorbed in his own interiority. Rather, he saw the contemplative as a seeker, a quester, yearning for wholeness, for purity, for depth of meaning” (89). In other words, the “questing faith” of Merton continues its questing.

Finally, the fifth and sixth chapters can be understood as both the climax and summary of the Higgins’ thesis concerning the relentless nature of Merton’s “questing faith.” That searching, questing, is nowhere more acute than in the monk of Gethsemani as “Pilgrim to the East” (chapter five [104-22]). In order to frame this discussion in a most personal way, Higgins wisely turns to a

CBC interview with Merton's dear friend, and companion for part of his Asian journey, the Hindu scholar Amiya Chakravarty. This close friend has a distinct memory of Merton as the pilgrim to the East. Chakravarty recalls in one of Higgins' CBC interviews,

one day in Calcutta I found him standing in front of our hotel and he simply said, "I'm looking at everything." And he meant just that: an immense and ceaseless procession of cars, rickshaws, beggars, as well as the daily office crowd moved along the streets; the clouds and kites in the sky strayed into his own seeing and feeling universe. But everything for him, even those things that were hurtful and wrong, were a part of some growing fulfillment. . . . That morning I saw his patience and his oneness with life in a teeming city. (105)

This sense of "patience" and "oneness" conveyed by Chakravarty is precisely what Higgins wants us to understand about Merton's "questing faith." We are so fortunate that Higgins permits this lengthy quotation from Chakravarty to go on uninterrupted. Its full impact is felt by the reader. Higgins will have his say, but only after whoever is being quoted is given full voice. Only then does Higgins enter the dialogue. He will go one step further than Chakravarty. Or perhaps better said, he puts his observation into Christian words – albeit into words that might make some Christians uncomfortable. Agreeing with the Christian theologian Herbert Richardson, Higgins posits that Merton found Christ in Asia (111) – not that Merton had not met Christ many times before in many different ways. The difference this time was that Merton had met Christ beyond the church and beyond Christianity – again, not that there had not been intimations of this earlier in Merton's life. But here was Christ experienced in a new way. Could this have been the Christ of the General Dance? Unfortunately, we will never know. Death cut all this short. Perhaps, it is a Resurrection reality?

The sixth and final chapter is less than two pages long. It identifies Merton and his "questing faith," as an "Icon of Wholeness" (123-24) for our times – a life-giving legacy. In sum, the unquiet monk continues to speak to us in his words and in his silences. Michael Higgins ends with another passage from Amiya Chakravarty. This too is where this review ends. While standing at Merton's gravesite, Chakravarty encountered his friend one last time: "I felt once more the utter tenderness, the infinitude of a life lived with courage and an encompassing wholeness – these are my devoted memories of Thomas Merton, whose redemptive holiness is a light to all of us who knew him and will continue to shine in the hearts of people who will know him as the ages pass" (124).