

Prophetic Models for a Prophetic Ministry

Review of
*In the School of Prophets:
 The Formation of Thomas Merton's Prophetic Spirituality*
 By Ephrem Arcement, OSB
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Reviewed by **Pauline A. Viviano**

Thomas Merton continues to fascinate, not simply because of the depth and timeliness of his thought, but because his thought evolved over time and that evolution can be traced in the many books, essays, journals and letters that he left us. In his new book *In the School of Prophets*, Ephrem Arcement presents in considerable breadth and depth a significant aspect of Merton's thought: Merton's understanding of prophecy, how it evolved over time, and how it led him to develop a prophetic spirituality. Evident throughout this study is Arcement's considerable command of the Merton corpus.

Arcement weaves his way through Merton's reflections on writers (Boris Pasternak, Albert Camus, William Faulkner), philosophers (Søren Kierkegaard, Karl Jaspers, Gabriel Marcel), poets (William Blake, Latin American poets, specifically Pablo Antonio Cuadra, Alfonso Cortés and César Vallejo), and activists (Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King), highlighting the insights Merton drew from these sources. He notes that Merton's thought was also influenced by his engagement with social theorists (Herbert Marcuse, Jacques Ellul) and religious thinkers (Abraham Heschel, Louis Massignon and many others). Merton maintains that these thinkers and poets saw and spoke the truth as did the biblical prophets. Their use of poetic language to criticize and heal also brings them in line with the biblical prophets.

From Merton's study of the history of monasticism, Arcement shows how Merton drew insights from St. Bernard of Clairvaux, the reform of Carmelite Spirituality, nineteenth-century Russian monasticism and Thich Nhat Hanh to shape his prophetic spirituality. By tracing Merton's early interest in the biblical prophetic tradition, especially as embodied by Elijah, Jonah and John the Baptist, Arcement gives us a clear picture of the origin of Merton's prophetic spirituality. In looking at Merton's reflections upon the vocation of the monk and his recommendations on the renewal of religious life in light of Vatican II, Arcement shows the development and meaning of Merton's prophetic spirituality, a spirituality that offers both a negative/critical, and more importantly, a positive response to the troubled world of his time. As biblical prophets testified to God at work in

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ancient Israel, the monk is to testify to Christ alive in this world. As biblical prophets met God in silence and then spoke God's word, so the monk is to find God in a silence that fosters communication and communion. An enduring faith is necessary for the transformation of self and community; this transformation forms the basis for a prophetic witness to God. Though Merton addresses his words of reform to monks and religious, they can be applied to all who adopt a prophetic spirituality.

Merton's prophetic spirituality grows out of his engagement with what he was reading, but it also draws upon his own experience as a monk. Merton withdrew from the world to focus on his relationship to God centered in contemplative prayer, but it was his contemplative experiences that led him back to engagement with the world. He exemplified one who loved God and realized that loving God means embracing the world that God so loved (Jn. 3:16). As the prophets of the Hebrew Bible raised a critical voice, so too Merton sees the importance of raising a critical voice today. As the prophets of old were grounded in an experience of God, so too does the voice of today's prophets need to be grounded in the experience of God. In the hope of reconciling the world to God, the prophets of old spoke the truth in spite of the persecution they endured; so too do those who adopt a prophetic spirituality speak the truth in the face of persecution for the sake of the salvation of this world. Gandhi's active nonviolence and his identification with the poor and oppressed gave Merton a way to live prophetically, resisting the injustices, racism and wars of his age.

Those familiar with Merton's thought will recognize his critique of the world with its superficial values, dehumanizing injustices, its consumerism and materialism, its godlessness and its self-destructive tendencies as expressed in war, racism and dishonesty in business and politics. It is the prophet who sees clearly the "sickness" of the age and speaks the truth, but he or she does so in order to promote liberation from illusion and enable oneself and others to live a more authentic and meaningful life. One recognizes characteristic Merton thought in Merton's insistence that those who live by a prophetic spirituality have to have a radical commitment to authenticity. They have discovered their true self and speak, not out of hatred, but out of love for this world. In his prophetic spirituality Merton speaks of the necessity of both solitude and action. Solitude is necessary to discover the true self and to find God; action is necessary to give expression to one's union with God in the love of neighbor.

These few words do not do justice to Arcement's treatment of Merton's prophetic spirituality. There is much more in the book than I have recounted here. The thoroughness with which Arcement treats his subject reflects well the richness of Merton's thought. The reader should savor this book, taking time to reflect on and mull over each word. Arcement's summaries at the end of each chapter and at the end of the book give the reader helpful overviews of the main points covered in each section of the book and in the book as a whole.

In the course of reading this book one cannot help but be taken with the timeliness of Merton's prophetic spirituality. Merton's astute critique of Western culture is even more relevant today than it was when given decades ago. Merton's understanding of how the love of God and neighbor can bring us to a more peaceful and loving world is all the more important in light of the daily barrage of horrific headlines recounting the violence and corruption of contemporary society.