

Merton Our Contemporary

Review of

Thomas Merton for Our Time

By Daniel P. Horan, OFM (12 lectures on 4 CDs)

Rockville, MD: Now You Know Media, 2017

(www.NowYouKnowMedia.com)

\$119.95 (list); \$35.95 (sale) CD

\$119.95 (list); \$29.95 (sale) MP3

Reviewed by **Cassidy Hall**

If it were possible to encapsulate the significance of Thomas Merton for modern-day life in a series of twelve lectures, this series accomplishes that goal, providing a fantastic gathering of information for Merton novices and connoisseurs alike. For every sliver of knowledge a listener may already know, there are dozens of new insights and concepts waiting to be added. Within these twelve half-hour lectures, Fr. Daniel Horan deep-dives into arguably some of the most meaningful pieces of Merton's work: his writings on social justice, war and peace, identity, violence, racism and other topics of interest applicable to our time, a half-century after his untimely death.

Fr. Horan boldly discusses Merton's work in a variety of pertinent areas, even considering the ways in which Merton had yet to apply more inclusive language, with his constant use of both gender exclusivity (typically using "men" and "man") and dated language when discussing black men and women (his frequent use of "negro"). While such language was standard in Merton's time, the issue is often unaddressed in considering his work. Fr. Horan's willingness to discuss these matters is meaningful and necessary in order to continually point us all to the systemic roots of these kinds of issues within our own lives and society at large.

Many of us are examining Merton's work on these contemporary topics, finding his thoughts in *Faith and Violence*, *Raids on the Unspeakable*, *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*, *Cold War Letters*, *Seeds of Destruction*, *New Seeds of Contemplation* and elsewhere to be both eerily and comfortingly relevant. As we're reading the news we are able to find precisely what Merton thought, said or challenged his readers to consider on topics like nuclear war, peace and protest, inclusivity, racism and a number of other areas requiring our urgent responses. Often, I dare to presume how Merton's thoughts may have evolved on things he didn't so specifically speak to – topics like LGBTQ rights, xenophobia and a number of other issues pertaining to equality. When we look at the bulk of his work, we can consider for ourselves where he may have landed on these and other issues. However,

Cassidy Hall is an author, filmmaker, podcaster and photographer, and holds a MA degree in counseling. Her writing has been published in *The Convivium Journal* and has been featured on *The Huffington Post* and *Patheos*, as well as on her website (www.cassidyhall.com). In 2012, while working as a counselor, she went on pilgrimage to all seventeen Cistercian monasteries in the United States and interviewed monks and nuns about silence, solitude and contemplative life. Born and raised in Iowa, she now lives in Los Angeles where she worked on the production team of the documentary feature film *In Pursuit of Silence*. She is currently secretary of the International Thomas Merton Society and recently joined the editorial staff of the Wilbur Award-Winning Blog, "Sick Pilgrim." She is also co-host of the weekly podcast, "Encountering Silence."

as Fr. Horan so gently reminds us, we can examine what we ourselves think, how we love, how we offer peace, and ultimately how we end the war within. At the end of the day, it is not Thomas Merton's mind I dream within or alongside. I do not wake up pouring intensely researched and lived-out Catholic thought into the world, nor would I want to, as that is not my vocation. As Merton and Fr. Horan point out time and time again, our true identity, our true vocation, only appears when we strip ourselves of the falsities of our lives. Getting to that sacred center of our being cannot happen when I cling to the mind of someone else while desperately looking for my answers. More than that, I might add, I cannot reach my true identity when I provoke the mystery to provide an answer. "In other words," Fr. Horan reminds us in lecture 4, "so much energy is spent trying to be rather than just living into whoever it is God created us to be. This life of a stranger that Merton is narrating is seeking to return to that primordial wisdom, mysterious and paradoxical though it seems."

These marvelous lectures are threaded together in a way that is scholarly, intuitive and stimulating. The structure is balanced nicely with Merton's own words, the beautiful nuggets of gold coming from a variety of brilliantly quoted minds, as well as Fr. Horan's own potent insights. In lecture 1, "Thomas Merton: Foundations of a Life and Work," Fr. Horan provides an overview of key topics and themes in Merton's work that he will further explore in more detail in subsequent lectures. He sets the stage by telling us: "Merton became restless with the sense that Christianity had something to say to the world around us. At a time with increased violence, at a time with social unrest, at a time of injustice that was being challenged, at a time of war, Merton said faith means something. He was concerned now with all women and men recognizing an original sense of unity, something they shared in common." In the lecture that follows, "From Solitude to Solidarity," Fr. Horan notes the work of Christine Bochen when she recognized contemplation, social justice and a vision of unity as the three dimensions of Christianity that awakened in Merton's life. He points to the ways in which solitude deepened Merton's sense of solidarity and how exactly that evolved.

Lecture 3, "A 'Stranger' Nobody Knows," draws on the insights found in an essay by Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury. While this lecture begins to brush along the edges of Merton's teaching pertaining to the true self, which many of us are already familiar with, Fr. Horan has a way of expanding our grasp of these concepts with new language and new perspectives. Perhaps this lecture is best epitomized by the profound exchange between two great teachers, a call-and-response of sorts that takes place in the infinite mystery, for as we know, Merton and Williams never had the chance to meet. Merton writes in *The Sign of Jonas*: "I have to be a person that nobody knows. They can have Thomas Merton. He's dead. Father Louis – he's half-dead too" (*Sign of Jonas* 253). Williams responds: "Truth can only be spoken by a man nobody knows, because only in the unknown person is there no obstruction to reality: the ego of self-oriented desire and manifold qualities, seeking to dominate and organize the world, is absent." Fr. Horan himself comments: "For Merton then, being an unoriginal man means that he's not setting the pace but rather allowing the situation and the relationship to set the experience."

Though I've read nearly all of the books and essays Fr. Horan mentions in these lectures, the new lenses he puts to these works had me creating stacks of books on my coffee table. In lecture 4 and its sequel, "Speaking about the Unspeakable: Parts 1 and 2," *Raids on the Unspeakable*, the collection of essays in which Merton addresses the 1960s head-on, if you will, is the central focus. The majority of Merton's work is steeped in thoughts on the true self and the false self as this pertains to our unique God-given identity. This topic rolls over from the previous lecture as Fr. Horan takes a deeper look into the way *Raids on the Unspeakable* uniquely speaks to this central issue. In Merton's words from

Raids: “Now if we take our vulnerable shell to be our true identity, if we think our mask is our true face, we will protect it with fabrications even at the cost of violating our own truth. This seems to be the collective endeavor of society” (15). In the second of these lectures, Fr. Horan quotes the opening words from Merton’s “Letter to an Innocent Bystander,” with its note of humility and common ground: “If I dare, in these few words, to ask you some direct and personal questions, it is because I address them as much to myself as to you. It is because I am still able to hope that a civil exchange of ideas can take place between two persons – that we have not yet reached the stage where we are all hermetically sealed, each one in the collective arrogance and despair of his own herd” (*Raids* 53). Fr. Horan goes on to compare and contrast this essay with Merton’s book, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, both appearing in 1966. What I found particularly interesting about this lecture was Fr. Horan’s ability to both attack and point to the history of the Catholic Church as it pertained to thoughts on justice and war at the time, including popes and their various statements on justice, and how these may have both influenced and pushed Merton to be creating more provocative writing at that time.

Lecture 6, “War and Violence,” reviews Merton’s shift in views as it pertains to war and points to the concept that in a sense Merton’s whole life itself was framed by war, from his entrance into the abbey immediately after the attack on Pearl Harbor, to his brother’s death in the crash of his military plane into the North Sea, to his own death in war-torn Southeast Asia and beyond. “It’s important,” Fr. Horan maintains, “to understand in general how Merton’s views on war and violence have, in some ways, remained the same throughout his lifetime but also developed over time.” Merton came to the fullest sense of urgency about war and violence in the 1960s. In 1961, Merton contributed his first essay to *The Catholic Worker*, “The Root of War Is Fear,” which later appeared in his revised version of *Seeds of Contemplation* (1949), retitled *New Seeds of Contemplation* (1961). What’s especially heartening about this lecture is the fact, once again, that Fr. Horan points directly to today’s relevance of the words within these pieces. He considers various views on modern wars in the context of Merton’s thoughts as well as more contemporary considerations like drone warfare. He explores war as a pervasive societal addiction and how Merton made it clear that the only winner in war is war itself.

“Pacifism or Christian non-violence is a deliberate stance in the world,” Fr. Horan announces in lecture 7, “Nonviolence vs. Pacifism.” This lecture explicitly raises the question whether or not Merton was a pacifist. This is investigated by way of his friendship and response to peace activist Jim Forest, as well as his published writings on these topics. Forest had written a letter to Merton seeking his advice as someone committed to pacifism, but constantly frustrated. Merton responded in February 1966, addressing these concerns saying, “do not depend on the hope of results. You may have to face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless and even achieve no result at all, if not perhaps results opposite to what you expect. As you get used to this idea you start more and more to concentrate not on the results but on the value, the rightness, the truth of the work itself. . . . You struggle less and less for an idea and more and more for specific people. . . . In the end, it is the reality of personal relationships that saves everything” (*Hidden Ground of Love* 294). The beauty of this lecture rests in the way that Fr. Horan reminds us such a discussion is not about pinning someone down to a label or a box, but instead a time to examine our own lives. He reminds us that internal unity and healing is what leads to external unity and healing. And, in true Franciscan form, he nudges us towards the crux of our identity in Christ – to be peacemakers, reconcilers and lovers – as St. Francis so wisely preached and practiced.

“Merton insists that Christian non-violence is in fact a form of resistance and is anything but passive,” Fr. Horan says in lecture 8, “Fear at the Heart of Violence.” While continuing to draw on

Merton's essay "The Root of War Is Fear," this lecture particularly examines the long-banned book *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*. Fr. Horan reminds the listener that though fear is the root of all war, fear, too, is the enemy of Christian discipleship. As Merton wrote: "instead of loving what you think is peace, love other (people) and love God above all. And instead of hating the people you think are warmakers, hate the appetites and the disorder in your own soul, which are the causes of war. If you love peace, then hate injustice, hate tyranny, hate greed – but hate these things *in yourself*, not in another" (*New Seeds of Contemplation* 122).

Lecture 9 focuses on "Awareness of Race and Racism." Fr. Horan talks about how Merton's awareness about issues pertaining to race and racism developed over his lifetime, as well as discussing Merton's gender exclusivity in his language as well as the dated way in which he discussed black men and women. Though these kinds of things were common in Merton's era, Fr. Horan makes a fine point that it doesn't mean they ought to be overlooked. This lecture continues by discussing both white privilege and male privilege, with some beautiful insights like the following from Peggy MacIntosh: "I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was 'meant' to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, assurances, tools, maps, guides, codebooks, passports, visas, clothes, compass, emergency gear, and blank checks." Lecture 10, "The American Culture of Racism," builds on the foundation established in the previous lecture. With relationships being at the core of society, the American culture of racism is as destructive as it is pervasive. Fr. Horan offers insights from Fr. Bryan Massingale, James Baldwin and others in a way that points to both problems and solutions within our society. "Merton sees racial prejudice in the United States, that is this culture of racism, in part arising from the collective unwillingness to address its own history in straightforward and honest manners." Once again, Fr. Horan impresses me with his deep-seated awareness of these kinds of roots. He discusses an array of viewpoints from Native American history and from African-American history and even considers the current issue of mass incarceration. In lecture 11, "Civil Rights and White Privilege," Fr. Horan draws on Merton's "Letters to a White Liberal" of 1963, a kind of response to Martin Luther King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," to summarize Merton's insights on these issues: "To not act against racism is in effect to support it. To become aware of the reality of structural injustice and racism and not move to change it, to change your perspective or outlook, is to in fact move into a place of 'badness.'" Fr. Horan reminds us that time and time again racism must be continually identified. The societal claim that enough has been done on this issue, juxtaposed with continued persisting and pervasive existence of racism, only points to unfinished work. To profess a stance that is not racist certainly does not diminish or eliminate the existence of racism but may only make a particular person feel better – it is purely of the ego.

The final lecture 12, the gorgeously poetic "Life, Liturgy and the Pursuit of Justice," was a really delightful way to tie the series together. Fr. Horan explores Merton's 1965 collection *Seasons of Celebration: Meditations on the Cycle of Liturgical Feasts*. The way in which this reflection brings the lectures together reminds me of the centerpiece that Merton maintained an allegiance to throughout his life: relationship – his relationship with humanity, with his God, with the world. Considering this alongside Merton's writings and Fr. Horan's excavation upon his work, it's evident that though Merton's vision of unity was not fully seen in his lifetime, the awareness and the challenge of his work does have a chance to continue in our own.