

## An Integrated Vision

Review of

*Thomas Merton: Contemplation and Political Action*

By Mario I. Aguilar

London: SPCK, 2011

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Reviewed by **Paul R. Dekar**

*Thomas Merton: Contemplation and Political Action* introduces Thomas Merton as a follower of Jesus and a model for welcoming strangers, caring for creation and embracing diversity. In part through connections with Ernesto Cardenal of Nicaragua and Nicanor Parra of Chile, by studies of Buddhism and during meetings with celebrated teachers D. T. Suzuki and the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, Merton sought to integrate contemplation and action. Open to the discovery of spiritual life outside the confines of his tradition, Merton befriended many, loved the lost and embraced diversity.

As background for his writing this book, Aguilar mentions having made a retreat at the Cistercian monastery in Santiago, Chile, a relatively new monastery that Merton had hoped to help establish. While this was not to be, Merton stated in a lecture on June 19, 1966 that the brothers going to Chile needed to know something about Marxism: “Most of the smartest people you will meet in South America will be Marxists. And they are not just guys with bombs in their pockets.” Merton went on to discuss democracy and totalitarianism, alienation and depersonalization, concerns to which he returned during his last public talk in Bangkok on December 10, 1968.

More than any mid-twentieth-century spiritual writer in English, Merton successfully mediated a possible tension in the journeys inward (contemplation) and outward (action). He “showed the timeless possibilities of a complementary life of contemplation and politics vis-à-vis the role of other world religions within contemporary politics and in particular the religions of Asia” (3), about which he wrote *Gandhi on Non-Violence* (1965), *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (1965), *Mystics and Zen Masters* (1967), *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (1968) and the posthumously published *Asian Journal* (1973).

Author of *The History and Politics of Latin American Theology* (London: SCM, 2007), Mario Aguilar occupies a chair in divinity at the University of St. Andrew’s in Scotland.

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He is also a postulant of the oblates of the Camaldolese hermits of California. Aguilar has found a soul mate and fellow pilgrim in Thomas Merton. Without breaking new ground, he highlights Merton's deep search for the enlightened self. *Thomas Merton: Contemplation and Political Action* offers a timely entry into concerns of Merton during the last decade of his life. Even as Merton reached out to friends, readers, members of diverse contemplative communities, visitors and correspondents, this book could stimulate a generation of undergraduate students or members of new Christian communities to seek to embrace both contemplation and action.