

his tireless efforts to deepen his own understanding so he could find new language to express shared meanings with his dialogue partners.

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DEKAR, Paul R., *Thomas Merton: God's Messenger on the Road towards a New World* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2021), pp. xxxii, 152. ISBN: 978-1-5326-7083-1 (paper) \$24.00.

“The world is not okay” (131). This stark statement near the conclusion of Paul Dekar’s book *Thomas Merton: God’s Messenger on the Road towards a New World* states plainly what many of us feel as we witness the ongoing war in Ukraine, the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, heightened political polarization and the specter of the climate crisis. We, like Merton, are faced with a number of complex global challenges, but perhaps most challenging is the call to Christian hope in a world beset with suffering. Dekar’s conclusion reflects the tenor of his book, in that he does not shy away from recognizing the challenges confronting us, but he is skilled in bringing together spiritual and contemplative resources to energize our efforts to meet these challenges. His partner in this task is Thomas Merton, although his book helpfully weaves in the wisdom of a number of other figures, from Gandhi and Thich Nhat Hanh to Ernesto Cardenal and August Thompson. Further, he draws on the scholarship of a plethora of Merton scholars – the footnotes serve as a rich set of recommendations for further reading.

Oriented around the prophetic call in Micah to “act justly and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God” (6:8), Dekar’s first three sections illustrate how Merton’s life serves as a witness to this prophetic call and further, how his example can be instructive for us as we contend with contemporary challenges. The first, “Doing Justice” (1-32), focuses first on Merton’s perspective on technology and second on his correspondence with three Black civil rights activists. The second, “Loving Kindness” (33-49), tracks Merton’s experience of the “wilderness of compassion” (37) and his connection to indigenous spirituality. The third, “Walking Humbly” (51-75), focuses on the power of silence in peace activism and contemplation and the concept of divinization in Merton’s writings. While some chapters tread familiar ground for avid readers of Merton, Dekar’s descriptions of his own initial encounters with Merton’s writing and his connections of his own experiences of retreat, contemplation and activism to Merton’s wisdom help enliven the content as it takes on new expression in the author’s own experiences.

In the fourth section (77-116), Dekar turns to Merton’s habit of

“embrace[ing] ‘the Other’” (80). In three chapters, he shows how Merton was ahead of his time in recognizing how social structures have cultivated divides that blind us to the unity of all people. In explorations of Merton and Ernesto Cardenal, Thich Nhat Hanh, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Gandhi, the author discusses how Merton’s travels and written correspondence display an enduring commitment to embracing the other. He develops his understanding of Merton’s “theology of embrace” (xiii) with an extended exploration of Merton’s correspondence with Ernesto Cardenal. Dekar laments the failures of Christians to live out the love ethic of the Gospels, but sees Merton in dialogue with Cardenal as a powerful witness that calls all of us to “practice dialogue and embrace and to reject confrontation, hateful speech, or violence” (115). As Dekar notes, this appeal seems especially necessary in our current context, as hateful rhetoric and violent action proliferates, often justified with distorted versions of Christianity.

The final, fifth section (117-29), offers a collection of book reviews of works on Merton from the past decade. Each one takes themes surfaced in Dekar’s reflections further, whether it be interreligious dialogue, technology, prophecy or care for creation. These succinct reports give the reader many compelling volumes to turn to next.

The through-line in many of the author’s reflections is the connection of political and social challenges to the spiritual. In his discussion of Merton’s views on racism and civil rights, Dekar highlights how Merton “saw racism as a profound spiritual crisis” (31). In a book review, Merton recognized the truth in Black writers’ diagnosis of the affliction of racism that beset white people in the United States: “The white man has lost his power to hear any inner voice other than that of his own demon who urges him to preserve the *status quo* at any price, however desperate, however iniquitous and however cruel” (26). Merton’s recognition of the depth of violence in American culture led him to believe that civil rights legislation was only the first step needed in a larger project of spiritual conversion for white people. He emphasized the need to “eradicate this basic violence and injustice from white society” (28) – work that remains urgent and unfinished today.

In his discussion of Merton and Gandhian principles of nonviolence, Dekar emphasizes the need to “mainstream nonviolence” to “deepen the unfolding of the dream of Merton” (105). This book itself contributes to this task, as the material the author gathers and his reflections on it help us to more clearly see what Merton had in mind as he envisioned a “new world of justice, peace, integrity of creation, and interdependence” (105). Dekar’s concluding call to action sets the task before us: “Do justice. Be

compassionate. Walk humbly with God. Live the truth. Embrace divinity in yourself, and in others” (133). Our world is not okay, but Dekar invites us to dream alongside Merton of a better world – and together they inspire us to work toward its transformation.

Emma McDonald

COLLINS, Patrick W., *A Focus on Truth: Thomas Merton's Uncensored Mind*, Foreword by Jonathan Montaldo (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2021), pp. xvi, 197. ISBN 978-0-8146-8849-6 (paper) \$19.95.

Patrick W. Collins has written a splendid book founded on the premise that an “uncensored view of the life and thoughts of Thomas Merton can be found by plumbing his correspondence with family, friends, and colleagues over the years” (xv). He reminds the reader: “Five volumes of his personal and professional correspondence have been published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux” (xv). Collins has also chosen well key themes with which this correspondence deals, even while cautioning the reader that “Merton’s views as expressed in the correspondence are not, of course, fully worked-out theses about any particular subjects” (xv). These themes are truth and conscience, spirituality, liturgical renewal, church authority, ecumenism, priesthood, being a hermit, interreligious dialogue, monastic renewal and the church. Further, Collins sets the letters associated with the themes under consideration in the context of Merton’s life, those matters and issues he is experiencing and corresponding about.

The first theme covered in the book is truth and conscience (1-14). Collins says: “Truth for him was not just knowledge in the head. It was love in the heart. Therefore, he especially sought to know and experience what he later called his True Self – the God-Self within each person” (1). Merton writes in a letter to Abdul Aziz: “Personally, in matters where dogmatic beliefs differ, I think that controversy is of little value because it takes us away from the spiritual realities into the realm of words and ideas” (4).

Second is spirituality (15-51). Merton explains in a letter to Etta Gullick: “what I object to about ‘the Spiritual Life’ is the fact that it is a part, a section. . . . Our ‘life in the Spirit’ is all-embracing, or should be” (18). Collins asserts: “Thomas Merton’s principal metaphor for the spiritual life is that of journey. For him, spirituality is simply a journey from the false self toward the True Self” (20-21). He continues: “Merton consistently taught that spirituality involves realizing in one’s consciousness that God is ever-present in the depth of the soul” (23). As Merton writes to John Harris, “The Being of all and my own Being is a vast