

a whole lot of writing until after he [i.e. Merton] died. A person has to die before you inherit something of that spirit which moves them” (25) – a fitting characterization of the “inheritance” accessible to readers of this book.

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ORBBERSON, David E., *Thomas Merton and the Individual Witness: Kingdom Making in a Post-Christian, Post-Truth World* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2022), ix + 128 pp. ISBN: 978-1-5326-7648-2 (paper) \$21.00.

At the outset of a key chapter of *Thomas Merton and the Individual Witness*, theologian and author David Orberson considers some competing courses of action that Christians might adopt in response to the distinctive conditions of our time. Those conditions include a marked decline in formal religious affiliation, technological developments that have radically reshaped communication and access to information, and the rise of a kind of epistemological populism that takes shape in anti-intellectualism and skepticism of expertise. Orberson’s diagnosis of these conditions is succinct and incisive, though not wholly original: other writers in theology, philosophy or political science have noticed these trends and wrestled with various strategies of response.

The first such response that Orberson considers is the “Benedict Option” touted by commentator Rod Dreher.¹ Dreher’s proposal was a brief phenomenon in the popular press, as he argued that Christians should admit that they have lost the “culture wars” and, rather than accommodate themselves to a corrupt secular world, they should retreat into self-contained communities of Christian virtue, in which the faith could be sustained in hopes of outlasting the prevailing secular trends. On the other polar extreme of the spectrum, Orberson forwards the approach advocated by the priest and former leader of the Italian “Communion and Liberation” movement Julián Carrón.² Carrón calls for active and enthusiastic Christian engagement with the world.

Though he does not come out and say it directly, it is clear that Orberson sees Thomas Merton’s sympathies lying much more with Carrón’s attitude of engagement than with Dreher’s defeatist withdrawal. Merton, he writes, “is abundantly clear that Christians should not reflexively reject and turn away from secular culture. Instead, we should look for the good

1. Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Era* (New York: Sentinel, 2017).

2. Julián Carrón, *Disarming Beauty: Essays on Faith, Truth, and Freedom* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017).

in it, for those things that are valuable to Christ” (76). In a world that is increasingly “post-Christian” and distressingly “post-truth,” this kind of faithful engagement is no easy task. Yet Orberon argues that Thomas Merton is the right guide for Christians who would wish to attempt it.

The first two chapters of the book lay out Orberon’s diagnosis of the current state of affairs: post-Christian and post-Truth. The third chapter aims to show why Merton is a “compelling and relevant model for Christians today” (41). The chapter largely consists of a biographical overview of the monk and writer for those who are unfamiliar or might need some refreshing on his story. That biography is engaging and well-crafted; however, it runs over 20 pages in length, and (by design) does not cover much new ground. A reader might wish that Orberon had compressed the biography even further, and instead moved along more quickly to the last two chapters of the book, which contain the original work of Orberon’s analysis.

In those two chapters (titled “Merton and the Individual Witness,” parts I and II), Orberon explores various elements of Merton’s life and work that might provide guidance to a Christian navigating the challenges of the contemporary landscape. These guideposts include specific recommendations such as “we should seek out a faith community of like-minded believers” (85) as well as exhortations to work for racial justice, to engage in nonviolent action for peace and to seek opportunities for dialogue with people of different faiths or perspectives. These are aptly summarized by an early section heading in the fourth chapter: “Engage with the World” (74). Though Merton was, of course, a monk in the Benedictine tradition, he would not have embraced the “Benedict Option.”

It reflects positively on this book that it left me wanting more. The book is relatively brief, and the chapters that develop Orberon’s constructive engagement with Merton touch on a wide range of topics. These discussions are often interesting and thought-provoking, but just as my intrigue has been piqued, the text moves on. Undoubtedly, this reflects the aims of the book: it is not intended as a definitive scholarly treatise, but rather an accessible book for a wide readership. Nevertheless, there are a couple of fundamental questions raised by the text, which might have been fruitful to explore at some greater depth.

First, Orberon’s framing notion of the “individual witness”: Orberon draws the phrase (see 4, 73) from Merton’s essay “The Christian in the Diaspora,” published in *Seeds of Destruction*: as the institutional Church diminishes in power and influence, Merton writes, “the purity of individual witness will take precedence over everything else.”³ The

3. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964) 198.

phrase is evocative because it suggests both an *action* (to witness) as well as a *person*: the one who witnesses. It provokes me to wonder: is the witness to which Merton calls us best conceptualized as an *individual* undertaking? Merton was, of course, an individual in every sense of the word: a hermit, an independent thinker and iconoclast in church and society. Yet, Orberon himself stresses the importance of community for Merton. While Merton was tempted to leave the Abbey of Gethsemani and perhaps even the Trappist order, he ultimately stuck with it. “Merton never chose to go it alone,” Orberon writes (85). What, then, is the relationship between the “individual witness” and the shared life of faith and mission that can only be realized in community? Can an individual’s singular effort at witnessing to the gospel pose an effective counter to the post-Christian, post-truth currents of the present day? Or, must a sufficient response adopt a communal, collective lens, beyond the solitary efforts of the individual?

Second, I am left with some uncertainty about the role of religious faith in the response that Orberon points us toward. Perhaps I am being obtuse: Merton was, after all, a vowed religious monk, who cannot be understood apart from his faith. In the early chapters of the book, Orberon focuses on the decline of formal religiosity and the evolution of much American Christianity into a watery form of “moralistic therapeutic deism” (28). This suggests that Orberon hopes for some form of theological corrective to this drift. Nevertheless, Orberon’s most direct treatments of Merton’s religiosity emphasize either its role as a source of attachment to community or his openness to dialogue with non-Christians. How much, then, of the necessary response to the conditions of contemporary life depend on the specifics of the Christian faith? Notably, Orberon deals relatively little with the fact of growing religious *pluralism* in the United States: as the nation grows less religious, it also grows more religiously diverse. Orberon is clearly writing to a Christian audience – the final page of the book insists that “Individual Christians, now more than ever, must put their faith into action” (120) – but the fading dominance of Christianity in American culture and politics casts some uncertainty on the sufficiency of a response to contemporary conditions that works from within the bounds of one faith tradition alone.

I raise these issues not as criticisms of Orberon’s thoughtful and engaging book, but rather as an indication of the deep waters this book stirs up. Orberon has taken on some of the major issues of our time, and has effectively presented Merton as a valuable resource for both understanding those issues and responding to them. That the book leaves us

with some important unresolved questions is less a shortcoming of the book itself than a reminder of the scale of the task ahead of us.

David Golemboski

LOOTENS, Dominiek, *Open to the Full Dimension: Thomas Merton, Practical Theology, & Pastoral Practice* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2022), pp. xxvii, 115. ISBN 978-1-6667-9174-7 (paper) \$23.00.

Catholic practical theologian Dominiek Lootens, a Merton Society member currently working in Germany, introduces Thomas Merton into the formation of practical theologians in their various professional contexts, such as healthcare, interfaith dialogue, adult education, etc. The Merton whom Lootens introduces is the contemplative-prophetic, which effectively becomes a foundational theme throughout the book. Lootens not only declares this to be the foundational theme. He chooses a wondrous array of Merton texts to weave the theme throughout the chapters. By doing this, Lootens sets up Merton to be spiritual guide and director in the formation and development process. For example, this is explicit in the chapter, “Thomas Merton and Pastoral Supervision” (29-52). Lootens begins by introducing the reader to a text on pastoral supervision by Jane Leach and Michael Paterson, who describe pastoral supervision as “attention and transformation” (30-31). Appropriately, Lootens links this with Merton’s focus on contemplation and action, i.e. the contemplative-prophetic foundation of the book. Attention and transformation are both process and result of the contemplative life and work, which characterize the Merton so well known to many. Lootens employs this Mertonian contemplative-prophetic foundation to engage specific and various work contexts.

Through seven chapters Lootens borrows from his own experience guiding the reader to watch Merton (through texts) engage practical theologians in their work contexts. For example, we see Merton dealing with Catholic chaplaincy in multi-faith encounters, migration, civil rights, social justice, adult education, our natural world, peace and even more. Merton is a wonderful conversation partner in all of these contexts because he has thought deeply and written extensively about every one of these areas. Even better, as Lootens ably demonstrates, Merton’s foundational contemplative-prophetic perspective serves to spice the conversation with a flavor that was usually missing in the contemplative practitioner’s original education and training. Once again, Merton is relevant on into the twenty-first century

Hence, if for no other reason, Lootens’ book is worthy to read simply to see how he uses Merton as a “conversation partner” in a creative,