

many references to Barth and wisdom.

In these many essays Williams reminds us that for Merton to function well as a monk, in a very real sense he had to refuse “the *role* of ‘monk’ or ‘artist’” (37). Then it begins to be possible to just be.

Perhaps the most insightful piece here is “‘The Only Real City’: Monasticism and Social Vision” (55-68), given as an address in 2004. Williams does an extended analysis of some related entries from *Turning Toward the World*<sup>5</sup> to demonstrate Merton’s engagement with questions about responsibilities of the monk-writer within a world he triangulated upon by reading Hannah Arendt’s *The Human Condition*.<sup>6</sup> Here Williams’ point is that it is so easy for the monk (or any believer, or professional Christian writer) to forget about what language can do: “the difficulties Merton faces are very like those analysed so unforgettably by Bonhoeffer in his prison letters; the words of faith are too well-known to believers for their meaning to be knowable” (65). Ultimately, Williams insists Merton knew he (we) had to be wary of language, yet only through language can we see what is real. Our first responsibility is to authenticity (see also 24-25).

This beautiful book will stimulate much good discussion. It is quite important that one of its motifs is examination of Merton’s continuing skepticism about the effectiveness of religious language. It is therefore quite appropriate that the dust cover is a beautiful reproduction of the façade of Canterbury Cathedral “painted by Thomas Merton’s father” and now “housed in the archives of the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University” (back cover). What better way to suggest the immense power of art to communicate the strength of God who must remain a mystery we apprehend in silence?

Victor A. Kramer

DEKAR, Paul R., *Thomas Merton: Twentieth-Century Wisdom for Twenty-First-Century Living* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011), pp. xviii + 242. ISBN 978-1-60608-970-5 (paper) \$29.00.

Although Thomas Merton died decades before the Internet would become a household term, let alone a widespread commodity, before women, men and children would access nearly infinite amounts of information from just about anywhere thanks to “smartphone” technology, and before the

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5. Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years. Journals, vol. 4: 1960-1963*, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996).

6. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

truly overwhelming impact of globalization would finally take its intercultural, trans-temporal and rapid toll, interest in the twentieth-century monk's thought on technology continues to rise today. In recent years conferences have been dedicated to Merton's thought on this theme and continued applicability in this age (e.g., "Contemplation in a Technological Era: Thomas Merton's Insight for the Twenty-First Century" at Bellarmine University in September 2011) and scholarly volumes have been slated for the same purpose (e.g., *The Merton Annual 24*, based largely on the Bellarmine conference). Paul Dekar's *Thomas Merton: Twentieth-Century Wisdom for Twenty-First-Century Living* is among the recent contributions to the field of Merton studies that take seriously consideration of Merton's thought for a technologically advanced (and saturated) world.

Dekar, emeritus professor of evangelism and mission at Memphis Theological Seminary, has written extensively in recent years on the so-called "new monasticism" movement that has become somewhat popular within certain Protestant and Catholic circles. Largely focused in urban areas and centered on concerns of social justice and engaged spirituality, key figures like Shane Claiborne and Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove have led the way in this correlative effort to retrieve the wisdom and model of Christian monastic living of ages past for contemporary appropriation in entirely new social settings. Rather than following the millennia-old structures of traditional monastic communities, which sequester the lives of its members in a stable cloister, the "new monastics" desire to live in the world (more akin to the Catholic mendicant orders – Franciscans, Dominicans, Augustinians, etc.), while also engaging in the spiritual exercises of the ancient monastic traditions (common prayer, liturgical worship, etc.).

One can see why Merton would be a logical resource in this effort. Never before has a member of a traditional monastic community so widely and publicly engaged with and influenced the popular culture. Merton's writings have been and continue to be read by millions of Christians and non-Christians alike, and his spirituality, worldview and social concern were all deeply shaped by his own religious vocation and spiritual practices. Dekar recognizes this opportunity for engagement and inspiration, centering his book on precisely this possibility. What Dekar sets out to answer is the question that Paul Pearson, author of the volume's foreword, succinctly presents at the opening of the book: "Merton's choice [to stay in the monastery in the 1960s] begs the question for his readers of whether it is possible for a voice from the monastic enclosure to speak to us here in the new millennium? Can Merton's voice still speak to us?" (x).

The book opens with a presentation of Dekar's own social location

and his experience teaching seminary students about monastic traditions (mostly Christian, but also some Buddhist). The captivation and interest that these contemporary, technophile students express about the practices and traditions of monastic living led Dekar to explore in a deeper way the possibility of a more sustained incorporation of these insights into his own life. The project here is one of a deeply personal tenor, expressed as such at the end of his introductory chapter: “Having experienced Merton’s writings as a source of growth for myself and for many others, I now write for all persons seeking to enrich their lives, to find their place in the world, and to experience community” (9). In the chapter that follows, Dekar presents a necessarily brief biographical overview of Merton’s life. It is, as one might imagine given the limitations of the space and the simple introductory character of the chapter, unavoidably idiosyncratic. Nevertheless (a few minor factual particularities aside) it is a sufficient overview for the uninitiated reader of Merton.

The major body of the book, which begins with chapter three and continues through the final chapter of the text, can be divided into two sections: Merton’s thought and writing and Dekar’s application of Merton’s thought for twenty-first-century use. Chapters three through seven are Dekar’s reading and presentation of Merton’s thought on several themes: the monastic vocation (chapter three), the simplification of life (chapter four), technology (chapter five), environmental stewardship (chapter six) and violence (chapter seven). Structured in such a way as to ostensibly present the material as objectively as possible, Dekar adds a concluding section titled “Reflections” at the end of each of these chapters. This is not to suggest that Dekar always succeeds in avoiding editorializing in earlier sections of each chapter, but the effort to demarcate these two dimensions of content in a way analogous to some biblical commentaries that offer exegesis and then interpretation is a welcome convention.

Other authors have examined Merton’s thought on the monastic vocation, simplicity and nonviolence previously, which leads me to suggest that the most valuable chapters by way of relatively new contributions to Merton scholarship are the two on technology and ecology. Although two recent monographs have also focused on these two themes (Phillip Thompson’s *Returning to Reality: Thomas Merton’s Wisdom for a Technological World*<sup>1</sup> and Monica Weis’s *The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton*<sup>2</sup>), Dekar’s chapters are worthy of close reading.

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1. Phillip M. Thompson, *Returning to Reality: Thomas Merton’s Wisdom for a Technological World* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012).

2. Monica Weis, SSJ, *The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011).

In his chapter on technology, Dekar explains that “Merton approached technology as inherently neutral” (96), that, as a tool, the manifold developments in technology could serve humanity for purposes of good or ill. However, the noticeable majority of the chapter is geared toward the myriad ways that Merton’s insight might be used to caution against technological advancements or, perhaps more accurately, how his thought warns against obsession with the latest technological advances as ends in themselves. It is difficult to read Dekar’s organization of some of Merton’s thoughts on technology into “Three Baskets of Concern: Destruction, Distortion, and Distraction” (97-109) without getting the sense that the Trappist monk was a technological iconoclast or at least an embracer of ludditism. True, Merton struggled with technological innovations and the automaticity of modern life, but did so in a way both more nuanced and more abstract than Dekar’s presentation can sometimes suggest. Much of Dekar’s reflections are insightful and inspiring, but regarding the suggestion that Merton “anticipates the new monastic movement” (113), which appears at the end of the technology chapter, I remain incredulous.

The chapter on ecology, titled “Thomas Merton on Care of Earth” (115-30), both reflects and complements the earlier work of Weis. The two-fold lens through which the reader is invited to consider Merton’s views on creation, first as part of an interrelated created order and second as caretaker, is greatly appreciated. The one reservation I have about this particular chapter is the brevity with which the subject is treated. It would have been nice to see some more primary-source material and secondary scholarship on this often overlooked dimension of Merton’s thought, indeed truly a source of wisdom for living in our age.

Merton was certainly aware of and in communication with members of several new spiritual movements emerging in his day, as Dekar presents toward the end of chapter eight. It is unclear how much the Shakers, those attracted to Taizé, or the hundreds who have committed themselves to lives of prayerful service and solidarity in the communities of Madonna House or the Catholic Worker anticipate or are related to the “new monasticism” of the 2000s already mentioned. Dekar’s grouping of these communities alongside the canonically established tertiary orders of various denominations, such as the Third Order or “Secular” Franciscans, complicates the chapter on twenty-first-century Christian communities. While these are all praiseworthy groups, and communities that could benefit very well from Merton’s insight, there are significant distinctions among them that go unacknowledged.

Chapter nine, “Building Communities of Love” (185-204), is perhaps the most constructive chapter of the book. Here Dekar seeks to

offer something of a heuristic for communities, of one sort or another, interested in appropriating monastic practices and spirituality into their modern lives. The centerpiece is the building of communities of authentic love, not simply the “‘infantile’ and ‘narcissistic’ approaches to love characteristic of popular culture” (187), but an *agapic* love resembling that of the evangelical life.

Among the important highlights of this book are the two appendices Dekar includes. These are transcriptions of Merton’s conferences on subjects relating to technology: “The Christian in a Technological World” (June 5, 1966) (205-13) and “Marxism and Technology” (June 26, 1966) (214-23). Dekar has provided Merton scholars and enthusiasts with helpful and previously unpublished primary material on the theme at hand. Additionally, Dekar’s lengthy bibliography and lists of source material offer readers a valuable resource. All in all, this book is presented in an accessible style that points its readers to several useful paths along which the modern applicability of Merton’s wisdom will be become clear. It will surely be a standard text in the personal and professional libraries of Merton scholarship for decades to come.

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AGUILAR, Mario I., *Thomas Merton: Contemplation and Political Action* (London: SPCK, 2011), pp. ix + 150. ISBN 978-0-281-06058-0 (paper) \$29.99.

In this short book, Mario Aguilar presents a concise biography of Thomas Merton’s life as a contemplative monk who was also engaged with the pressing political and moral issues of his day. He traces Merton’s life through a series of six phases which begin with Merton’s role as instructor of novices at Gethsemani and end with Merton’s travels to Asia at the end of his life. Aguilar then adds a brief concluding chapter on the relevance of Merton for today. As such, Aguilar presents a helpful summary of Merton’s life, but he does not delve deeply into Merton’s contemplative theology. This book is a documentation of Merton’s theology, but it is not an exploration. Perhaps a better title would have been, *Thomas Merton: The Life of a Contemplative Political Activist*. This observation, however, is not an overall condemnation of Aguilar’s work. Merton scholars have produced numerous texts on Merton’s theology, and extensive biographies also exist. For those looking for a brief introduction into Merton, this book would serve as a good starting point from which more extensive study of Merton could be launched.

To this reader, the most intriguing starting point for further inves-