

learn that even people like Merton have eyes that need to adjust when they see light. And that can inform how we go about working for justice today, which seems to be one of Horan's goals.

Even when Horan's aim is not to name Merton's contributions to each contemporary movement's goals, he gives us the material to do so ourselves. Reminding us that Merton was often censored in his writings on racism and war calls to mind the "time, place, and manner" policies being rolled out across universities today, restricting free speech in response to people speaking out for Palestine. Thinking outside the authorities' boundaries can be saintly and holy, we are reminded as people are fired from jobs for speaking about Gaza. And while the dates of Horan's talks preclude addressing issues like Stop Cop City or a fascist re-entering the White House, his chapter on "A Spirituality of Resistance" (151-63) easily lends itself to a contemplative and rooted approach to the kind of work springing up in affinity groups across the country.

Horan claims that Merton had a "Spirituality of the Restless Heart" (132-35). At a time when political and spiritual emergencies seem to flood us and provide no rest, may we learn something of this Mertonian restlessness. It seems passing humor when Horan says that for him "Merton is a hobby that grew out of control" (ix), but as the national rhinoceros is having so much fun<sup>4</sup> I hope we can take a page out of this book and grow in the same direction.

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VINSKI, Edward, *Thomas Merton: The Monk of Civil Rights* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2023), pp. 119. ISBN: 978-1-5275-9022-9 (cloth) \$66.41.

One of the most important figures that I encountered during my doctoral studies in theology was John Henry Newman, the nineteenth-century English convert to Catholicism, brilliant apologist and eventual cardinal, whose influence on subsequent streams of Catholic thought in the modern era is inestimable. Key among Newman's critical contributions for me was his careful analysis of religious epistemology, that is, the "living" process by which most people come to mature faith, or "real assent" in the core mysteries and narratives of religious belonging, and by which believers seek to shape their lives.

People come to faith neither by rational arguments or irrefutable evidence, Newman argued, nor by a blind and sudden "leap," but rather

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4. See Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966) 23.

by the “slow-paced” convergence of impressions and “antecedent probabilities,” all pointing in the same direction. Religious certitude is like a cable made up of many strands, “each feeble, yet together as sufficient as an iron rod.”<sup>1</sup> Faith is a kind of reasoning that in fact goes beyond reason, says Newman, since it makes inferences based upon “holy, devout, and enlightened presumptions,”<sup>2</sup> more than it rests on bluntly verifiable evidence. “The truth of our religion, like the truth of common matters, is to be judged by all the evidence taken together.”<sup>3</sup>

In one of his most compelling images, Newman compares this experiential, intuitive or “sapiential” kind of knowing – what Merton will later call “wisdom-awareness”<sup>4</sup> – to a rock climber feeling her way up the face of a cliff. There is a kind of faith involved in making the next move up the rock, but there is also the accumulated knowledge and confidence that comes from past experience, from the lessons of innumerable teachers, from oft-rehearsed muscle memory, from previous successes and mistakes – in short, from all the “concrete” data, both obvious and unseen, that she has to draw from in that moment.

I thought of Newman repeatedly as I read Edward Vinski’s thoughtful new study, *Thomas Merton: The Monk of Civil Rights*. While there is “something quite noble” in the person “who can accept God without question,” Vinski asserts, this is “not the type of faith destined to take root in Thomas Merton” (15). Rather, like the climber making her way up the shifting rock face, Merton’s faith journey was evolutionary: “he would question, he would doubt, he would struggle, he would re-examine, and he would re-evaluate” (16). What Vinski does very well in this book is to chart a series of pivotal moments, impressions and “antecedent probabilities” that keep pointing Merton, and with him, his fortunate readers, toward the mystery of God, and God discovered in the face of the suffering neighbor. While the multitude of transformative encounters in Merton’s life that Vinski examines did not always “produce immediate action,” each “was a form of grace given to him” (50); and together, we might say, like strands in a cable, they would strengthen Merton’s conviction that God’s

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1. Cited in Avery Dulles, *Newman* (New York: Continuum, 2002) 41 (subsequent references will be cited as “Dulles”). Newman’s inquiry into religious epistemology finds its high point in John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1979) (subsequent references will be cited as “Newman, *Grammar*”).

2. John Henry Newman, *Fifteen Sermons Preached Before the University of Oxford* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1997) 239.

3. Cited in Dulles 41; see also Newman, *Grammar* 270–99.

4. Thomas Merton, *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. Patrick Hart, OCSO (New York: New Directions, 1981) 98–99.

presence in his life was “sufficient as an iron rod.”

One of these pivotal moments is Merton’s experience of his father Owen, now dead for more than a year, coming to him at night, “as vivid and as real and as startling,” he writes in *The Seven Storey Mountain*,<sup>5</sup> “as if he had touched my arm or spoken to me” (15). Another is his conversation as a young man with the Hindu monk Bramachari, who advises Merton to read the religious classics of his own tradition (19; see *SSM* 198). Still another is his intimate dream of a young Jewish girl named “Proverb” and her subsequent “epiphany” in Louisville at the corner of Fourth and Walnut (46-48).<sup>6</sup> Above all, and most poignantly, Vinski highlights early confrontations with the “dichotomy of the races,” hard lessons that overwhelmed Merton in Harlem, thanks to Baroness Catherine de Hueck and the beautiful children of Friendship House (28-34).

Irrespective of their deep source – “Whether [such episodes] were divinely inspired, diabolical, psychological, or natural phenomena, I will leave to the theologians, the psychoanalysts, and the philosophers to discern” (51) – Vinski narrates such experiences as “signposts” of things to come (52), revelatory moments that nudged Merton toward a new way of inhabiting and responding to the world (67). The summit of Merton’s commitment to civil rights the author identifies as his late essays on racial justice, the breakthrough of his *vox prophetica*, influenced above all by his encounter with James Baldwin. To my mind, Vinski’s lucid summary in chapter 5 of Baldwin’s writings, followed by an analysis of Merton’s most focused essays (literally: “experiments”) on the race dichotomy, represent the most compelling threads of the book’s argument. Merton wanted to work out for himself “whether a white man is even capable of grasping the words, let alone believing them,” of the message that African Americans are trying to deliver to their fellow citizens (8, 81, 95).

Ultimately, Vinski seeks to trace the evolution of Merton’s thought on racial justice “as a model of how we might approach the social concerns of our own time” (106). The book’s final chapter offers four critical “lessons of Merton” in the ongoing struggle for civil rights in twenty-first-century society: the call to reflection; the call to listen and understand; the call to work within the white community; and the call to prophetic voice (108-16). These four pastoral strategies, “anchors,” if you will, that

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5. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 111-12 (subsequent references will be cited as “SSM” parenthetically in the text).

6. See Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk’s True Life. Journals, vol. 3: 1952-1960*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 176-77, 182-83.

Merton leaves for us in the rock wall, serve as an eloquent plea to respond prophetically to the signs of our own times.

At times the book's argument, for this reader, tends to obscure rather than illuminate the full picture of Merton as the "White Prophet of Civil Rights" (50). The strength of Vinski's emphasis on Baldwin as a key influence on Merton tends to hide a constellation of other major influences, Catholic and otherwise. To put it directly, Merton was hardly alone among his (white) religious and Catholic contemporaries in calling for "an authentic reciprocity willed by God" (79, 98) across the racial divide. The radical and often costly public witness of other American Catholics during the 1960s – Dorothy Day, Daniel and Philip Berrigan, John Howard Griffin, Rosemary Radford Ruether – mirrored a much broader and, indeed, a revolutionary "turning toward the world" in the ecclesiology and spirituality of the Roman Catholic Church at Vatican II, not to mention anti-colonial and liberationist movements around the world. None of these figures or movements gets a mention in the book.

Vinski is beautifully attuned to Merton's prophetic voice on race when he suggests that a climactic passage in the essay "From Nonviolence to Black Power" – "I for one remain *for* the Negro. I trust him, I recognize the overwhelming justice of his complaint, I confess I have no right whatever to get in his way"<sup>7</sup> – seems "to follow the rhythm and cadences of the Nicene Creed" (86). I love this insight. Yet one could also say that the passage re-inscribes the rhythm and cadences of the church's prophetic turn to the world at Vatican II: "The joys and the hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially those who are poor or afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts."<sup>8</sup>

The point is, Merton's *vox prophetica* was drawing inspiration from other sources than the singular focus on Baldwin might suggest. One would have to acknowledge the vision of Pope John XXIII and the documents of Vatican II, his friendship with Abraham Joshua Heschel, the ecumenical peace conference that Merton hosted at Gethsemani in 1964, and correspondence with fellow Catholics such as Day, Jim Forest, Dan Berrigan, John Howard Griffin and Fr. August Thompson, a Black

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7. Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968) 129 (subsequent references will be cited as "FV" parenthetically in the text).

8. *Gaudium et Spes* no. 1, *Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, 1996) 163.

priest and civil rights leader from Louisiana.<sup>9</sup> This is not to diminish Baldwin's considerable impact on Merton's racial consciousness but to place it in a wider field of vision and development.

More substantively, Vinski's adoption of the royal or collective "we" to refer primarily if not exclusively to white readers doesn't quite capture the scope or tenor of Merton's attempts to articulate a grounding for civil rights in something deeper than strictly "civil" or "moral" frameworks can accommodate. While I agree that the call to work for conversion "within the white community" (111-12) is one of Merton's enduring lessons for white readers. Merton's imagined audience, it seems to me, even in the essays on race, goes well beyond whites. In the essays on Black Power and Malcolm X (see *FV* 121-29, 182-88), for example, he does not hesitate to raise critical questions about the vision and rhetoric of Black leaders who were charting a path quite distinct from that of Martin Luther King, Jr., or James Baldwin for that matter. Arguably the book's predominantly individualistic approach to moral conversion with an overriding emphasis on white readers – and perhaps a certain reluctance to probe the mystical-theological roots of Merton's protest against anti-Black racism – leaves readers of all racial backgrounds without a common basis, in faith, for rejecting the "white myth-dream" (99) that imprisons us all.

It is a difficult challenge to navigate, to be sure, for a white academic writing about racial justice, and calls for not a little courage. But as Merton understood, the "new Kairos" (104) that Vinski rightly urges us toward will have to find its source in an experience and language of God that both acknowledges and transcends the socially constructed strictures from which it seeks to free us.<sup>10</sup> The author draws nearest to the deepest existential roots of Merton's commitment to civil rights when he surfaces the monk's mystical encounters with the God of all creation, and with Christ, in whom we discover a unity that embraces and celebrates our manifold diversity (105). Of Fourth and Walnut, for example, Vinski writes with evident wonder of Merton's realization "that Proverb was not a specific individual. Proverb was in all the people of the world. His love for her was his love for all" (48).

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9. See Gregory K. Hillis, *Man of Dialogue: Thomas Merton's Catholic Vision* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2021) 184-201 (subsequent references will be cited as "Hillis").

10. The correspondence between Merton and Fr. August Thompson is especially moving on this point. "The big thing for Christians is to live the truth that in Christ there is absolutely no distinction between Black and White, but the Adversary has made sure that a very real distinction exists (due to the sins of history). Neither can be ignored. We have to learn the reality of the difference, and emphasize Black and White identities and qualities and rights: and see beyond to the inner unity: that unity is in Christ, not in the affluent society" (Merton to Thompson, April 26, 1968, cited in Hillis 169).

What Newman called “realization” describes something more than intellectual certitude or an ethical mandate; it describes an experience, an encounter, a confrontation, that both adds to a previous storehouse and at once “clicks” or “shifts” our worldview toward real *metanoia*. In mystical or theological terms, as in the Fourth and Walnut experience or Merton’s dream of Proverb, such moments carry an event-like quality of grace, which is to say, the initiative is *on God’s side* of the encounter. God’s loving design for Merton “from before the beginning,” as it were, is God’s loving design for every person, without exception. “*If for me,*” I realize, “*then for all the world.*” To violate the dignity of one – the “secret beauty” (48) and “spark” of the divine which shines in us like the sun<sup>11</sup> – is to violate the dignity of all; indeed, it is to blaspheme against God.

In *Thomas Merton: The Monk of Civil Rights*, Vinski gives us a welcome, sensitive and often fascinating account of Merton’s “slow-paced” growth toward social and racial solidarity, even if the book’s final appeal to the reader’s conscience falls short of fully appreciating or naming the revolutionary and sometimes unsettling grace needed to unleash that *metanoia* in each of us, through and across the stubborn racial divide.

Christopher Pramuk

MEEGAN, William J., *Remembering the Forgotten Merton*, Foreword by Christopher Pramuk (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2023), pp. xv, 137. ISBN 978-1-6667-3053-1 (paper) \$23.00.

William Meegan has successfully blended his scholarly background in psychology with his formidable research skills to offer a welcome look at Thomas Merton’s younger brother, John Paul. With meticulous care, he delves into journals, documents, church registries, ship manifests and unpublished letters/essays to provide documentation about John Paul’s early life, his university failures, determination to join the armed forces, brief marriage and military career. A small book of fourteen chapters, Epilogue and extensive bibliography, Meegan offers readers an important perspective on Tom Merton’s younger brother and their troubled relationship.

The three initial chapters (1-42) ground Meegan’s interpretation of John Paul’s life by providing the genealogy of the Merton family (2-3) and his father Owen’s numerous painting forays (1921-25), when he left young John Paul in the care of the maternal grandparents (31-32). Many of these facts are well-known to readers of Michael Mott’s *The Seven*

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11. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 140-42.