

New Monastics' Handbook

Review of

Thomas Merton: Twentieth-Century Wisdom for Twenty-First-Century Living

By Paul R. Dekar

Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011

260 pages / \$29.00 paper

Reviewed by **Rose Marie Berger**

With this most recent release, Paul Dekar has made a second, very fine, contribution to Cascade Books' New Monastic Library series. His first, *Community of the Transfiguration: Journey of a New Monastic Community* (2008) tells the story of an Australian "new monastic" community, of which Dekar is an associate member, and how that community experiments with ancient spiritual patterns in a world in spiritual and ecological crisis. This second examines Thomas Merton's perspective on themes central to many new monastic communities, such as monastic renewal, simple living, technology, care for the earth, war and peace, and building communities of love that effect God's change in the world.

The first chapter provides an introduction to Dekar's involvement in the new monastic movement and Merton's interest in experimental monastic communities, making the claim that Merton himself "called for a new monasticism" (2), along with an exploration into ways in which traditional monasteries could be accompanied by lay communities. Dekar, who hails from a Canadian Baptist denominational background, explains how he became involved in an ecumenical prayer group that met for silent reflection at a community center that served a poor neighborhood, opening for him a rich Christian contemplative tradition that he hadn't known existed. Soon he was teaching classes at McMaster University in Ontario and later at the Memphis Theological Seminary in Tennessee on Merton and on forms of meditation, and taking students on retreats to the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani in Trappist, Kentucky.

Dekar's second chapter is an introduction to Merton himself for readers who might be unfamiliar with him. Mixing biography, family history and excerpts from Merton's writing, he provides a concise and intimate look Merton, the man. He examines Merton's early family losses and hints at how these may have made the stability of a monastic family and regularity of monastic life very alluring. What was his spiritual journey? What were the central questions Merton asked? How did his relationships with various abbots influence him? What was the trajectory of Merton's quest? For those who teach Merton, Dekar's introduction is an excellent resource to assist those encountering Merton for the first time.

Rose Marie Berger, a Catholic poet and peace activist, is an associate editor at *Sojourners* magazine (www.sojo.net) in Washington, DC. She is the author of *Who Killed Donte Manning? The Story of an American Neighborhood* (Apprentice House Press, 2009). She can be contacted at www.rosemarieberger.com.

Each of the remaining chapters in *Twentieth-Century Wisdom for Twenty-First-Century Living* addresses themes associated with the new monastic movement. For example, when looking at monastic renewal, Dekar draws from his own rich knowledge of Benedictine and Cistercian history as well as Merton's life and writing to skillfully present monastic virtues and disciplines as well as Merton's perspectives on them over time.

In the chapter entitled "Thomas Merton on Simplification of Life," Dekar opens with descriptions of our contemporary confusion between "what is needed for living and what extravagances are" (64). Drawing on an early Merton work entitled *The Spirit of Simplicity*, he quotes Merton's observation that, for early Cistercians, simplicity involved "getting rid of everything that did not help the monk arrive at union with God by the shortest possible way" (69). But it also involved dealing with over-indulgence and even influenced styles of architecture. This early interest of Merton also fed into his later fascination with the Shakers and the spare, holy shape of their furniture and building design.

Dekar's chapters on "Care of Earth" and "The Root of War is Fear" are similarly rich and complex, weaving Merton's views and questions into current events and drawing from a very wide variety of Merton sources, including many that are not widely known. As he ends each chapter with a set of his own reflections, Dekar allows his own autobiographical journey to intersect with Merton's, and in some cases also the reader's, to keep wisdom ever unfolding in contemporary settings. Dekar's writing style is invitational and engaging, which makes this a good book for group study.

Here are also found Merton's reflections on the Shakers, the Bruderhof, Taizé and Catherine de Hueck Doherty's Madonna House, as well as Dekar's perspectives on Rutba House in North Carolina (168), Little Portion Community in Arkansas (165), Lay Spiritans in Canada (163) and more. Additionally, Dekar includes an extraordinary and very practical section on Gandhi and the history and practice of Gandhian nonviolence. The excerpts Dekar includes from Merton's essay, "Blessed Are the Meek: The Christian Roots of Nonviolence" (148) are an invaluable resource on understanding Christian hope as the basis for the Christian practice of peace and nonviolence.

However, the exciting find in Dekar's book are previously unpublished lectures by Merton on technology. These lectures have been available on audio tape, but haven't been transcribed in print before. They make a worthy contribution to a critical current conversation. In a 1997 lecture at Stanford University, anti-civilization theorist and former Catholic John Zerzan said, "Technology claims to be neutral, merely a tool, its value or meaning completely dependent on how it is used. In this way it hides its end by cloaking its means." Zerzan has resurged in popularity among some of the new monastics and other young radical Christians experimenting with intentional community and new ways of living. The excerpts from three previously unpublished Merton lectures on technology show Merton anticipating anarcho-primitivist philosopher Zerzan by more than 30 years. While Zerzan denies outright the claim that technology is neutral, Merton asserts with novices what he considered an overlooked insight from the Second Vatican Council. "Created goods may be perfected by human labor,

technical skill and civic culture for the benefit of all men according to the design of the Creator and the light of His Word,” according to *Lumen Gentium*, the Council’s *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*. “May the goods of this world be more equitably distributed among all men, and may they in their own way be conducive to universal progress in human and Christian freedom.” In other words, products and technologies are neutral tools, but may be perfected if they are used to serve the common good and Christian freedom.

As Dekar displays in his excellent chapter “Thomas Merton, Guide to the Right Use of Technology” (85), Merton pushes home a paradox in his lectures: the monastery is being revolutionized by technology, whether recognized or not, but the material nature of technology is not nearly as threatening to the contemplative life as is “the technological society” (208), the way technology molds thinking, social relationships and the inner life. Merton forces critical questions about “the essences of things” (211), about the value and meaning in technology. “You can save your soul in a technological environment,” said Merton, “but there is no machine for saving your soul” (211).

Merton’s speaking on technology is more middle-of-the-road than his private letters and writings. While publicly he defines technology as a tool whose end use justifies its existence, in his April 1963 journal entry he raises much more serious concerns about “technologism that separates man from the world and makes him a kind of little god in his own right” (118). At a conference in September 2011 on Merton and technology at Bellarmine University, Albert Borgmann described Merton’s perspective on technology in this way: “He was clear about the effects of technology as a cultural force and could see that the effects were both dynamic and stultifying at the same time. It was an energetic and transforming force, but in the end it leaves us with experiences that are ultimately joyless.” When Anne Ford sent Merton a copy of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* shortly after it was published, he began to put together the consistent pattern of thinking that ran through developing the atom bomb, indiscriminate use of DDT, and various other technological “remedies” that are “expressions of the sickness itself” (120), as he put it.

By focusing the insights of these previously unpublished lectures, Dekar has made a wonderful contribution of Merton wisdom to a very real contemporary issue. “The Christian in a Technological World” (205) resurrects early writings by Karl Marx on the purpose of the machine, as well as looking at monastic experiments in the 1960s that were bringing more technology into monastic life. Merton’s lecture titled “Marxism and Technology” is an amazingly prescient look at the role of computers in society and the process of depersonalization. Merton begins to probe the questions about who owns the means of technological production and what it means when those owners have no Biblical values. “For industry,” says Merton, “it doesn’t matter if it is safe, what matter is to sell it . . . and make some money out of it” (217). To industry, Merton says, morality “is regarded as sentimental” (217).

As we witness the current Occupy Wall Street movement and the Move Your Money campaigns in the United States, we see a popular uprising against unregulated and unjust financial institutions. Taking a serious look at early Marx provides a hidden and valuable lens

for critiquing the excesses of unregulated market capitalism. John Zerzan reminds us that if we think technology is all about I-phone apps then we have seriously misjudged its use: “The movement of capital is the computer’s basic function.” Merton would agree. Thank you to Paul Dekar for such perfect timing.