

Scouts on the Spiritual Frontier

Review of

The Seeker and the Monk: Everyday Conversations with Thomas Merton

By Sophronia Scott

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Reviewed by **Christopher Pramuk**

In a 1967 essay for Time-Life Books, published posthumously as *Opening the Bible*, Merton advises the Christian reader of the Bible not to “cling too complacently to his status and apparent privilege, as if the Bible were *his* book exclusively and as if *he* knew all about it.” The Bible, he insists, “is everybody’s book,” and the unbeliever is “as capable as anyone else of finding new aspects of it which the believer would do well to take seriously.” As evidence for the revelatory impact of the Bible even on the nonbeliever, Merton points to *The Gospel of Saint Matthew*, a controversial 1964 film by the Italian filmmaker Pasolini, an avowed atheist who hired not professional actors but ordinary people – “most of them poor and some of them Communists” – to make a low-budget film “somewhere out in the rocks of a very poor part of Italy.” The value of the film, says Merton – he had seen it in October of 1966, while in Louisville for medical tests – “lay in its extraordinary sincerity and authenticity.” Not only was the Christ of Pasolini (“dark . . . demanding . . . unyielding”) far more faithful to the Gospel than the “indulgent Jesus of late nineteenth century Church art.” Merton praises the *process* by which Pasolini and his troupe of untrained actors “had all personally *discovered* the Gospel of Matthew in making the film.”

Here is Merton’s take-home point: Pasolini and his untrained actors could not have attained such a convincing interpretation of the Gospel had they “been used to, perhaps tired of, a routine and trifling exposure to the Bible. It was new to them, and in their reading of Matthew, their interpretation of it, they had to take up a definite position in regard to its message.” It was precisely their risk in taking “a definite stand in regard to who Christ was” and the power of his message in relation to their own times that rendered their interpretation “*highly credible*,” and all the more impressive “because it tended to by-pass theology and accept Christ and the disciples in all their human reality – as portrayed in the eminently human literary work which is the Gospel of Matthew.” This fact alone, concludes Merton, ought to empower believers to “recover some of the sense of urgency, freshness and renewal which is essential if we are to continue with the same kind of self-discovery” when we dare to open the Bible. Far from reaffirming our well-worn categories of understanding, personal involvement with the Bible is dangerous, “because it lays one open to unforeseen conclusions. That

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is why we prefer if possible to remain uninvolved” (*Opening the Bible* 28-33).

The same dynamic, it seems to me, can play out in study of Merton’s own life and writings. Whether trained or untrained, long-familiar with or new to his story, it is possible to engage Merton complacently, reductively, superficially, as from a comfortable distance; or we can dare to accompany him as fellow travelers, each of us implicated in the difficult but beautiful questions he is asking: how ought we to live in light of our own tumultuous times? how to listen for the voice of God in the hidden recesses of conscience, in the promises and perils of political activism, in the rush of falling in love, in the looming silences of nature?

Sophronia Scott’s new book, *The Seeker and the Monk: Everyday Conversations with Thomas Merton*, chooses the latter path, and the result is a breath of fresh air. Like Pasolini encountering the New Testament for the first time, Scott engages the much-trod terrain of Merton’s life and writings with “urgency, freshness and renewal,” refusing to hold him, herself, or our suffering world, at arm’s length. Largely bypassing subjects that still occupy, for good reason, serious scholars of Merton – his contributions to Catholic theology, monastic renewal, interfaith dialogue, the peace movement – Scott takes Merton down from the pedestal and speaks to him, with him, and from him, as “a kindred spirit, perhaps even a friend” (7). By “from him” I mean that she writes from within the same climate of “ordered thinking and loving prayer” (13) that she discovers in Merton’s writings, especially his journals and letters. “I want to talk about the possibility of transcendence, the very taste and feel of it, and its reverberating certainty of God all around us” (11). Haunted by God, “a scout on the spiritual frontier” (14), Scott discovers in Merton a shared desire, through the craft of writing, to “affect people in a positive way” (47).

Across eleven highly readable chapters, covering themes as diverse as consumerism and race, *acedia* and work, prayer and social activism, falling in love, parenthood, and death, Scott’s voice alternates between conversing directly with the reader – employing “I” and the collective “we,” as is typical of much spiritual writing – and then speaking directly with Merton, “this monk who follows me around,” addressing him as “Thomas” in short soliloquies throughout the book. Writing of Merton’s love affair with M., for example, she says, “I wish Thomas and M. had had someone on their side to talk to, if only to explore fully the possibility of a marriage” (156). To Merton, she says, “that you could come away from an experience in which you’d been immature, giddy, perhaps even kind of crazy, to discuss and not deny the glory of love and how it connects us to God . . . [And] to write bravely of the reality of love and its power? That’s everything. And you did it” (157). It is a risk that might not pay off in the hands of a lesser writer, or one whose art is less imbued with the habit of discernment that binds her voice with Merton’s. Scott trusts her communion with Merton across the veil, and thus she can, and does, for this reader, speak authentically to him as to a spiritual friend, as *anam cara*, “the soul friend of which poet and philosopher John O’Donohue wrote” (155).

The Seeker and the Monk also brings fresh insight because Scott does not hesitate to question Merton from her embodied experience as an African-American woman, “Not Catholic but Episcopalian, with Baptist notes from my childhood” (2). Reading Merton’s writings on race, at once critically and generously, she concludes that Merton “knows my frustrations with holding out hope for my country’s racial consciousness despite the delusions that abound” (11). Acknowledging that she is not, by disposition, an activist, Scott takes consolation from Merton’s witness on racial justice in their shared vocations as writers.

Is this my way of rebelling, Thomas? It seems so small and meaningless. Perhaps we are in the same position – feeling as though we have no way to exert significant influence on a pressing issue. But we can respond with what we do best: write. We put words out into the world, scatter them like seeds in the great hope that they can become something more – something not destructive. You would tell me just write – just write, and make sure it’s good. (150)

With commentary on the murder of George Floyd, the COVID pandemic, the massacre at Sandy Hook – her son, a student at the school, survived the shooting, his best friend did not – and even comparing Merton to the unforgettable Hermione Granger of Harry Potter fame, Scott’s writing is contemplative, playful, and at times, as noted above, refreshingly critical – a quality that Merton himself would undoubtedly appreciate. *The Seeker and the Monk* brings Merton into welcome dialogue with non-Catholic, Episcopal and African-American voices, living and dead: Eldridge Cleaver, Willie James Jennings, James Baldwin, Scott herself, and many more. Scott writes with sensitivity around Merton’s childhood, the loss of his parents, and her own parenting journey in today’s racially fraught environment. As a parent myself in a multi-racial family, as a fellow writer and pilgrim in faith, I found Scott’s journey with Merton wonderfully resonant. How to balance my own yearning for solitude with a more public commitment to scatter my words and actions like seeds “in the great hope that they can become something more”? One could say that this is the creative tension at the very heart of Christian life today.

Every two years, the International Thomas Merton Society recognizes a new “work on Merton and his concerns that has brought provocative insight and fresh direction to Merton studies.” Affectionally known as the “Louie,” this year’s Merton Award was given to Sophronia Scott for *The Seeker and the Monk: Everyday Conversations with Thomas Merton*. For my part, I am grateful to Scott for the gift of her vocation, for “just writing,” and I join my colleagues in celebrating a new work which is indeed good, very good.