

Monastic Spirituality for Everyone

Review of

Thomas Merton:

An Introduction to His Life, Teachings, and Practices

By Jon M. Sweeney

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Reviewed by **Wayne E. Simsic**

“If you’ve read anything previously about this unique twentieth-century religious figure [Thomas Merton], you’ve probably heard that he was important for bringing the spiritual practices and wisdom teachings of the monastery to people on the outside of the monastery walls” (xxvi-xxvii). This comment from the Introduction to Jon M. Sweeney’s latest book, *Thomas Merton: An Introduction to His Life, Teachings, and Practices*, sets the tone for the entire volume. Sweeney himself, at the tender age of nineteen, read *The Seven Storey Mountain* in three days and visited Merton’s monastery several times in the process of determining whether he should become a monk. Eventually, he decided to be a “monk in the world” (xxvii), a pilgrim on the contemplative path.

In his presentation of Merton, Sweeney introduces us to a monk who is truly companionable. He focuses on Merton’s life, spiritual practices and teaching in such a personal and authentic way that we cannot help reflecting on our own journey toward wholeness. Sweeney sees the drama of Merton’s life not as a series of factual events to study but as a resource for spiritual growth. Because the book so generously reflects the author’s enthusiasm for Merton’s ability to inspire and transform our lives, it is not hard to appreciate it as a “labor of love” for the author.

Sweeney has written and edited more than forty books and is also editor-in-chief and publisher of Paraclete Press. His publications focus on Meister Eckhart, Francis of Assisi and the Desert Christians, among others. His interest in Cistercian and Benedictine monks comes to the fore in his book *Cloister Talks: Learning from My Friends the Monks* (2009), in which he explores the relationship between the cloister and the world and shares the wisdom he received from these communal brothers. Readers will find the same openness and insight into monastic life, teaching and practice in Sweeney’s depiction of Merton.

For the most part, the chapters in this recent book follow a chronological order, with the exception of the first one which describes the final events of Merton’s life leading to his presentation at an east-west monastic conference in Thailand and to his death. This approach effectively introduces readers to Merton’s lifelong search for freedom, a freedom that would ultimately involve a change

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in consciousness; in other words, a freedom that did not rely on external structures like political power which can collapse without notice, but rather a freedom that is interior, rooted in one's own inner truth.

Sweeney then begins his story of Merton's life by painting a picture of a lonely young man, wounded by the untimely death of both parents, and wandering in search of a vocation. His restlessness continues through college though he receives guidance from friends as well as professors like Mark Van Doren and Daniel Walsh. Sweeney effectively portrays Merton as an immature young man, an intellectual with a desire to write, who comes to an impasse because his soul has lost all its fervor. Friends, jazz, movies, socializing are no longer enough. How does he respond to this inner conflict? Merton turns to the Franciscans and finds his way blocked; then he focuses on the Abbey of Gethsemani. After two retreats and a notice from the draft board, he decides to enter the monastic life. Sweeney engages readers by helping them imagine how Merton must have felt leaving a life of relative comfort and diversion to enter the stark, medieval-like monastic environment of the Abbey of Gethsemani.

Chapter three introduces us to "*the four walls of my new freedom*" (19) that Merton finds in the monastery. The unbridled freedom of his youth has given way to a growing inner life and the influence of community rule. At this point in the story Sweeney takes the opportunity to introduce us to life in the monastery for a young monk: following a schedule; praying in the choir; working in the fields; observing strict silence. He also describes the tension that Merton felt between the fame he garnered with his wildly successful autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, and his growth as a true contemplative who valued solitude and silence and was beginning to appreciate what inner freedom entailed. To complicate matters, Merton's fame drew several hundred men to the monastery hoping to follow in Merton's footsteps. Is it any wonder, Sweeney asks, that Merton would shy away from community to explore a hermit's life?

One of the great strengths of Sweeney's depiction of Merton is his willingness to explore the monk's imperfections and struggles. He does not play down Merton's humanness but rather considers it essential: "We who love Merton and learn from him must accept how he often contradicts himself. This realization can be frustrating at times, and helpful in others. He sometimes comes across almost fickle. Truth is, he was constantly 'working out' his understanding on paper; he left for us to see, and we go looking for it" (46-47). Readers get the sense that they are encountering a real person, a monk whom we can identify with because he lived in a "furnace of ambivalence" (49). Merton loved silence and solitude but he also loved people and developed significant relationships throughout his life. He valued community but at the same time pursued the vocation of a hermit. Sweeney offers us a nuanced description of Merton's relationship with "M," a student nurse in Louisville. He sees the relationship as integral to the monk's search for a love and to his spiritual growth. Merton may have lost control and broke his vows but he found his way back to his vocation and this, writes Sweeney, is what ongoing conversion entails.

In the chapter "Moving toward Wholeness" (64-70), Sweeney contrasts the freedom that Merton was searching for when he first entered the monastery with the freedom he found at the corner of Fourth and Walnut which was "*like waking from a dream of separateness*" (64). This freedom was truly a change of consciousness, an experience of the fundamental oneness of all human beings and all creation in God. It tapped a hidden wellspring in Merton which overflowed in every direction: for example, his interest in religions of the East, social injustice, ecological concerns and the depths of

his own contemplative path. Sweeney points to Merton's numerous friendships with poets, writers and activists, his collection of Cold War Letters that expressed his interest in the peace movement, and his correspondence with Dorothy Day and activist Daniel Berrigan, SJ as some of the many examples of his burgeoning spirituality.

The book comes to a close by returning to Bangkok and the final half-year of Fr. Louis' life. Sweeney outlines Merton's three-month pilgrimage that will lead to his death in Thailand. *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* documents Merton's deepening solitude and desire for final unity during this journey. We love Merton, writes Sweeney, because of his openness and willingness to share his journey with us through his poetry, his journals and letters and his autobiography. His life was at times chaotic but we see ourselves mirrored in him and even discover our own vocation as monks – in other words, as “anyone who seeks God, is being found by God, and is willing to give themselves to the search for what is true, beautiful, lasting, and loving in this world of ours” (110). In his last years Merton tasted true freedom; he was willing to live the questions, not rely on structures, and let the problems of self and the world become one with the will of God. This stance was reaffirmed by his study of the Chinese philosopher Chuang Tzu, who, like John of the Cross, was willing to let go of the search for right answers and live within mystery.

Sweeney points out that Merton, with all his flaws and weaknesses, would never be considered a saint but nevertheless, through his example, we learn how to be contemplatives in the midst of a troubling world. Sweeney succeeds in depicting Merton's spiritual path as one of ongoing conversion. He also makes a strong case for understanding Merton through his identity as a writer: “It is through his writing that he became himself and met the world. I do not know for certain if he met God through his pen – but I believe he did” (93). We may appreciate Merton as pilgrim and monk but it is through his writing that he mapped out his vocation. He worked out his life on the page and wrote to know himself better and to learn to live within the creative tensions that cropped up in his life. When he first entered the monastery and his writing was reinforced by the abbot, it opened the door to his conversion; it allowed him to wrestle with the new freedom he encountered. Sweeney reminds us that Merton once wrote: “*It is possible to doubt whether I have become a monk . . . but it is not possible to doubt that I am a writer; that I was born one and will most probably die as one*” (95).

Through his insightful and inspirational portrayal, Sweeney shows us how truly relevant Merton is for us today. He depicts Merton as a gifted and charismatic monk who openly shared his vocation with us, “reaching into the monastic life of prayer and pulling its fruits and practices out for all to use. And doing so without losing any of the majesty and mystery!” (71). Merton addressed spiritual and social concerns in a way that is honest and truthful, and in language that is accessible to us because his voice surfaces from the truth of his being. The richness and the poignancy of Sweeney's book is best summarized in this invitation to follow Merton's example and become contemplatives ourselves, particularly in the turmoil of our modern world. As Sweeney reminds us, in the end, “a monk can be anyone who seeks God, is being found by God, and is willing to give themselves to the search for what is true, beautiful, lasting and loving in this world of ours” (110).