

Growing towards Racial Justice Advocacy

Review of

Thomas Merton, The Monk of Civil Rights

By Edward Vinski

Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2023

viii + 119 pages / \$101.95 cloth

Reviewed by **Anne Pearson**

British journalist and author Reni Eddo-Lodge opens her 2017 book *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People about Race* by saying, "I'm no longer engaging with white people on the topic of race. . . . I can no longer engage with the gulf of an emotional disconnect that white people display when a person of colour articulates their experience" (ix). In his book *Thomas Merton, The Monk of Civil Rights*, Edward Vinski outlines the ways in which Merton's experiences across his lifetime allowed him to move beyond this emotional disconnect to become an important voice writing on racial justice from within the cloistered walls of the Abbey of Gethsemani.

Vinski divides his exploration into seven chapters. In them, he traces Merton's early life and education, showing the impact of these years on Merton's views on race prior to his vocation at the Abbey of Gethsemani. He then details Merton's turning back to the world following his experience at the corner of Fourth and Walnut in Louisville's shopping district before diving into a summary of Merton's "Letters to a White Liberal" and his later writings on race. Finally, he concludes with a brief chapter outlining some of the lessons which Merton's life and writings provide to us.

Throughout these sections, Vinski highlights several major tensions within Merton's life and demonstrates their impact on his racial justice writings. For example, he writes that following his trips to Harlem, Merton felt he might be able to care for others "by living in Harlem and serving the people there. But somehow, he felt that such work, noble and useful though it may be, would not sufficiently fulfil his calling. With the Trappists, he could renounce the world and its preoccupations while having the ability to focus more on a contemplative, rather than an active, spiritual life" (1-2). Even once Merton had decided to enter the abbey, "his understanding of his vocation and what it meant in terms of his responsibility to the wider world would be a struggle for him throughout his life" (16). This back-and-forth shift towards and away from the world was one of the core struggles of Merton's life, and Vinski's focus on his time in Harlem showcases its impact on Merton's thoughts on racial justice.

By connecting Merton's dilemma surrounding his vocation to his writings on race, Vinski portrays the monk in a human light and demonstrates that he did not come into the world without the

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emotional disconnect of which Reni Eddo-Lodge speaks; rather, he was shaped by his experiences and correspondences, the accumulation of which enabled him to write so accurately on race. Vinski successfully highlights this point by outlining the ways in which Merton's encounters listening to jazz while at Columbia, visiting Cuba, working with the Baroness Catherine de Hueck at Friendship House, and having his epiphany at the corner of Fourth and Walnut opened his eyes to the world around him, allowing him to become a prophetic voice to other white individuals.

Unfortunately, when moving beyond this biographical perspective to analyze Merton's writings on race, errors in editing and a limited use of direct quotations from Merton make it difficult at times to differentiate between Merton's thoughts and those of Vinski. This results in the feeling that the author is more present than his subject, or at least that it can be hard to tell where his opinions end and Merton's begin. In addition, the book does not follow the clearest path towards its analysis, wandering into the weeds to analyze "the possibility of a latent sexual content" in Merton's Proverb dreams (47) or Merton's feelings on the patronizing attitudes of the British middle class (12). Vinski himself acknowledges this pattern, stating that "as I attempt to examine Merton's thoughts about racial inequality in the United States, there will be much that seems beyond and unrelated to that particular topic" (5).

These musings take up space within the text which could have been more effectively used to analyze other topics, including Merton's ongoing relevance in 2024. Vinski recognizes, "in terms of racial justice, the world we inhabit is quite similar to the one he left in 1968, and although he has been dead for more than a half century, he continues to have a message that we would do well to heed" (116). However, the book does not take the time to dig into present-day examples of this truth which would have shown exactly how relevant Merton's "Letters to a White Liberal" and other racial justice writings have continued to be. In fact, had Vinski explored this aspect more thoroughly, he would have been able to demonstrate that Merton's writings explain exactly why they have maintained their relevance by highlighting the hindering impact of white liberal involvement in the movement for justice and equality.

Similarly, Vinski recognizes in several places that Merton's social position as a white man had an impact on his writings, stating that he did not preach "as one who has never had prejudiced or selfish thoughts. . . . Merton reflects on race, as he does on all things, *as one of us*" (94). He also points to the impact of Merton's position within the church as "there were many who questioned what a cloistered monk might possibly have to say about matters beyond the walls of Gethsemani. In addition, as we will see, he found himself in opposition to many within the Catholic Church as well. What could he have to offer and by what right could he offer it?" (50). Despite raising these important questions, Vinski does not provide a systematic examination of the impact of Merton's whiteness and position within the Catholic Church on his race-based writings, both of which could be deeply informative and support his message that the "evolution of Thomas Merton's thoughts on racial justice may well serve as a model of how we might approach the social concerns of our time" (106). Had Vinski layered this analysis with an exploration of the impact of Merton's writings on race on his own life, such a self-analysis in the spirit of Merton could have made the book more accessible and relatable.

As such, *Thomas Merton, The Monk of Civil Rights* presents an interesting perspective on "Letters to a White Liberal" and Merton's other writings on race, effectively showing how Merton's external

writings developed over the course of his life. At the end of the day, however, it left me wanting more analysis of Merton's criticisms and solutions, more self-reflection and more exploration of the ongoing relevancy of his works. Given the cost of the book, I would not necessarily recommend it for those looking for an introduction or thorough analysis on Merton and race, but for those who already have knowledge on the subject, it can provide a beneficial exploration of Merton's life-long development towards effective racial justice advocacy.