

Reviews

HORAN, Daniel P., *Engaging Thomas Merton: Spirituality, Justice, and Racism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2023), pp. xii, 251. ISBN 978-1-62698-544-5 (paper) \$29.00.

Daniel Horan's book is a gift to teachers, activists and people looking to be holy in a new era. It's the fruit of many years he has spent wrestling with Merton's witness, writings, hopes, horizons, limitations and changes. Each chapter conveys a piece of his insights on Merton. Some are previously published essays while others are new contributions from homilies or conference presentations. As I write in this in November 2024, while so many of us hope for the world to convert, Horan gives us a depiction of someone who learned to surrender to "a lifelong series of conversions" (6). I consider this a welcome time to turn to Merton, and in my class on his life and writings at Loyola Marymount University I'll be using chapters from this book that clarifies how his witness speaks amid the unspeakable. I suspect others will find it useful as well.

Though their styles differ, Horan's book reminds me of Sophronia Scott's *The Seeker and the Monk*,¹ in that both examine an aspect of Merton's thought in chapter-sized bits, discussing its relevance in the twenty-first century in personal terms. His work can greet both those new to Merton and those already deeply acquainted. The book is organized into five sections. The first (1-25) covers Merton's ongoing significance decades after his death, which speaks in a special way to Generation Z readers. In the second (27-89), Horan addresses Merton's relevance to specific aspects of Christian life, including marriage, growing up in a digital world and the priesthood. The third section (91-148) features chapters focused on how Merton addressed specific virtues like love and discipleship. Fourth comes three chapters on the spirituality of racial justice (149-203), which would pair well in the classroom with literature covering a decade of the Black Lives Matter movement. In the fifth (205-48), Horan addresses Merton on social justice issues like ecological destruction, dialogue and nonviolence.

A recurring contribution of the book is placing Merton among the

1. Sophronia Scott, *The Seeker and the Monk: Everyday Conversations with Thomas Merton* (Minneapolis, MN: Broadleaf Books, 2021).

theologians. Different chapters interpret Merton's insights with other thinkers in the church: Elizabeth Johnson, Bryan Massingale, Walter Kasper, Gustavo Gutierrez, Avery Dulles, the luminaries of the *ressourcement* movement and so on. In doing this, Horan shows the ways Merton anticipated aspects of Vatican II (in his revelation theology, for instance) or contemporary antiracist thought (white supremacy is a white problem, he argued). More than anyone, Merton is joined with Pope Francis to show the deep continuity between their emphases on mercy, humility and openness beyond the institutional church. He illustrates that Merton is relevant to understanding the state of Catholic theology today – both in academia and encyclicals – with the kind of specificity that helps students connect historical lines.

But Horan's concern is broader than theology. He argues for Merton's continuing significance in spiritual and political life, from prayer to marriage to radical movements. His chapter on "Martin, Malcolm, and Merton" (189-203) provides something many of my students are yearning for: a bridge that connects Catholic spirituality with working to destroy white supremacy. Horan's approach is nuanced and careful not to overstate Merton's insights or utility today, and the virtue of combining different talks and essays into these sections is on display in parts like this. The previous chapter, a presentation at Bellarmine University's Thomas Merton Black History Month Lecture in 2019, had laid out "The Limits of Merton's White Self-Criticality" (183-87). Yes, Merton is a beacon in the history of white Catholicism in the U.S. when it comes to white supremacy, Horan shows, but he doesn't give us an undiluted framework for dismantling it. By showing Merton's own shortcomings, Horan accentuates his humanness, finitude, situatedness, and (speaking as a teacher) in so doing only makes him all the more worthy of attention.

So when we get to the next chapter, a 2018 essay, we are primed to look at Merton's grappling with Malcolm X in real time not for proof of Merton's perfection but with an example of an antiracist struggling to keep growing in how his faith relates to the catastrophes of the time. His initial written response to Malcolm's assassination is, in a word, bad.² But Horan shows us a more nuanced (yet still incomplete) response three days later³ (see 197). We get to watch Merton's conception of sainthood play out as he takes one more step in becoming himself. And for committed antiracists today, we see an example of conversion taking time. We

2. See Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage. Journals, vol. 5: 1963-1965*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 211.

3. See Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994) 250.

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 fun⁴ 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

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