

# Sensing water on the skin

Esther de Waal listens to a conversation with Thomas Merton

**A Silent Action: Engagements with Thomas Merton**  
Rowan Williams  
SPCK £10.99  
(978-0-281-07056-5)  
Church Times Bookshop £9.90

MOST readers of Thomas Merton return to him time and again, discovering something that is new, or that touches them afresh. This should hardly surprise us, since Merton remained a mystery to himself. There was, as the former Archbishop of Canterbury Lord Williams says at the start of this book, a chameleon-like dimension to his mind; but at least, as we encounter him in yet another suit of borrowed clothes, he acknowledges that this is what he is doing. So, not only is he always exploring his own self-identity: the quality of his mind is always being abraded and refined by his sharply self-critical honesty.

In his foreword, Williams emphasises how this is of central importance: he discovered ever more deeply the serious unseriousness of trying to be honest before God — the “unbearable lightness” of faith.

It is, therefore, almost inevitable that new books will be written about Merton, as authors approach him from a wide range of perspectives — some more superficial in their quest to find an uncultivated plot in this fertile ground. It is thus refreshing to be taken back to Merton in the company of someone who has had what he calls “an interrupted conversation” for more than 40 years. I was energised and encouraged after reading this book (an enlarged edition of one that appeared in the United States a couple of years ago).

Besides the five lectures reprinted here, it contains attractive photographs, and a poem that concludes with the powerful lines “Not to make sense, inside the keel of sweating ribs, not to make sense but room”. Finally, there is an afterword by Metropolitan Kallistos Ware, an essay on Merton’s complex and paradoxical understanding of human personhood.

No matter that Williams and Merton never met: here we see all the best qualities of an ongoing friendship, which grows outwards to embrace many others. Williams looks at the key intellectual and spiritual relationships that emerge in Merton’s writings as he explored the impact on him of thinkers as diverse as Barth, Arendt, Lossky, Pasternak, Evdokimov, and many more, living and dead.

All the time, Merton is refining his ear for self-serving nonsense, poisoned language. He asked what the believer was to do if there was to be a renewal of language, and if the believer was caught, as he saw it, between clichés and posturings. Perhaps, as Williams suggests, he never arrived at a solution; but all his writings, public and private, show us why he thought the question urgent.

It is this that is timely, and that commends the appearance of this book to a wide readership. When many people feel battered by ill-chosen language, and betrayed by tired and over-used words, we are given the happy conjunction of two people who take seriously their vocation to write and speak responsibly, recognising that words are agents of clarity and of action.

Williams shies away from describing Merton’s voice as prophetic. Instead, he says that he spoke words of “uncomfortable truth to the systems of his day”, while at the same time drawing back from binding himself to words and actions that threatened to become the breeding-ground for new clichés.

The dilemma, however, remains, equally true for the monk as for any Christian. Any Christian renewal of the space of public exchange demands a renewal of language. The chapter on “The Only Real City: Monasticism and the Social Vision” opens with this sentence: “Transformed language, language delivered from prison, necessarily means transformed relations.”

For many readers, as poetry comes increasingly into the public domain, some of the most significant sections of this book will be those in which Williams considers Merton and poetry (and where we discern, of course, the poetic understanding that the two have in common). He chooses to address what he sees as four main enemies of poetry, helping us to put up warning signs — in particular, anything that can direct attention to the will and psyche of the artist constructing a self.

Instead, he points towards an attunement to the pure act of God as fundamental to the activity of poetic writing. He quotes the vivid image that Merton uses of “the sense of water on the skin”, to describe this unique instant, the moment of contact with truth.

*Esther de Waal is the author of Seeking Life (Canterbury Press, 2009) and other books.*



Nuns’ story: the Carmel de la Paix convent, Mazille, in Burgundy, in J. K. Birksted’s exploration *An Architecture of Ineloquence: José Lluís Sert’s Carmel de la Paix: A study in modern architecture and religion*. The convent was designed and built from 1968 to 1972. The nuns asked for something “ordinary”, but had extraordinary requirements. The result, “quietly erased from architectural history”, challenges basic Modernist principles besides avoiding conventional architectural ways of evoking “holiness”, the author argues (Ashgate, £60 (£54); 978-0-7546-7801-4)

## Ideals and apartheid

A microcosm of the South African tragedy, says John Davies

**A Christian Community in South Africa, 1838-2008**  
Fiona Vernal  
OUP £45 (978-0-19-984340-4)  
Church Times Bookshop £40.50

AT FIRST sight, this might appear to be a book with a very limited appeal. Its author is an American academic historian, who has recorded the history of a small Methodist mission in the Xhosa-speaking Eastern Cape of South Africa. She concentrates on this one place, with little reference to the wider environment.

In nearly 300 well-filled pages of text, she explores Xhosa people’s understanding of relationships, of health, and of knowledge, and their skills in moulding Christianity to meet their own reality; but, with one great exception, there is hardly any sense that the national issues of apartheid and white supremacy made an impact on the community. And there are few references to other Christian enterprises in the country.

But there there are unique features in the Farmerfield Mission, which justify this exclusive study. It came into being in the first place, not through the enterprise of missionaries, but at the request of African Christians themselves; their energies kept it going, even when, at times, the Methodist leadership

would have been happy to see it fade away. It was envisaged as being a kind of élite Christian village, with higher than normal standards of behaviour and commitment. And, most significantly, it was formed and developed in an area claimed by white colonials as their land, not on “reserves” set aside for Africans.

It was this last factor that made it a target for the apartheid regime’s policy of mass removals of “black spots”. At this point, the author engages in detail with the national issues concerned, with the oppressive intricacies of the South African laws and customs regarding land-tenure. She makes it clear that the displacing of Africans by the theft of their lands was going on long before it was hardened into national policy by the apartheid regime. Deeper than their protest against Bantu Education, Job Reservation, the Immorality Act, or their exclusion from the franchise, it was the sense that they had been cheated out of their land that stirred the most painful anger in African people — and still does.

This book offers a microcosm of the South African tragedy at this level, and as such is a valuable window into 200 years of oppression. Successive British governments enabled and permitted this oppression, which is deep in our culture. Our treatment of land as a commodity and our notion of outright ownership amount to theft from our Creator as well as from our neighbour; for “the earth is the Lord’s.”

*The Rt Revd John Davies is a former Bishop of Shrewsbury; for 15 years he was a mission priest and university chaplain in South Africa.*

## Liberation theologian lionised

Lavinia Byrne sees the praise piled on a peace activist

**Dorothee Soelle — Mystic and Rebel: The biography**  
Renate Wind  
Fortress Press £16.99  
(978-0-8006-9808-9)  
Church Times Bookshop £15.30

THIS nicely produced book is an act of *pietas*, a testimony to the life and influence of Dorothee Soelle, written by a fellow theologian and peace activist, Renate Wind.

Soelle was born in 1929 in Cologne, where she studied theology, philosophy, and literature, and completed a doctorate on the connections between theology and poetry. Subsequently, she spoke out against the Vietnam War, the arms race of the Cold War, and injustice in the developing world, while teaching both in Germany and at the Union Theological Seminary in New York. She married twice, and had four children.

Accused by some of “theological cynicism” because she found gaps between the traditional understanding of God and the demands of life in post-Holocaust, post-war Germany, Soelle wrote extensively on suffering and Christian ethics. She enjoyed genuine celebrity in Christian circles, and was a well-known and loved conference speaker, valued for her original and challenging contention that “every theological statement must be a political statement as well.”

Her preferred platform was the ecumenical “Political Evensong” — a forum for information, meditation, discussion, and action — which she developed through the 1960s and ’70s. Her biographer enhances her profile by adding the word “mystic” in the title, claiming spiritual authority for her writings as well.

In this book, the part played by Soelle is somewhat undermined by the author’s adulation and the constraints of the German language. Wind heaps noun upon noun to assure us of her subject’s importance and integrity. She writes: “For Dorothee Soelle the mystical love of God is indissolubly bound up with the longing for a better world.” So far so good. But then Wind adds: “She was a path-breaker and a torch-carrier, a symbol and a role model . . . an enlightened and therefore a politically active, fighting woman.” More is not always better, and I am not certain that the author has been well-served by the rather wooden translation.

This is a careful examination, a eulogy rather than a critical appraisal, of someone who was an important product of her times. Post-war Germany needed a voice such as hers, and here it is displayed; so, too, is the full extent of Soelle’s political activism.

But I am left wondering whether her value as a theologian stands the test of time. To put it another way: does liberation theology need new prophets and, in the 21st century, a more nuanced edge?

*Lavinia Byrne is a writer and broadcaster.*

### new titles just published

**Creation, Power and Truth: The gospel in a world of cultural confusion** by Tom Wright (SPCK, £9.99 (£9); 978-0-281-06987-3).

**Running Over Rocks: Spiritual practices to transform tough times** by Ian Adams (Canterbury Press, £14.99 (£13.50); 978-1-84825-168-7).

**Discernment: Reading the signs of daily life** by Henri Nouwen with Michael J. Christensen and Rebecca J. Laird (SPCK, £12.99 (£11.70); 978-0-281-07144-9).

**More Selected Prayers for Public Worship** by Nick Fawcett (KM Publishing, £21.99 (£19.80); 978-1-84867-626-8).

**Pope Francis: Untying the knots** by Paul Vallely (Bloomsbury, £12.99 (Church Times SPECIAL OFFER PRICE £10.99); 978-1-4729-0370-9).

Selected by Frank Nugent, of the Church House Bookshop, which operates the Church Times Bookshop.