

truly burn within us with a love for all people . . . . "Truly the Lord is risen! Alleluia!" (56).

Christopher Pramuk

SHAW, Mark, *Beneath the Mask of Holiness: Thomas Merton and the Forbidden Love Affair That Set Him Free* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. ix + 246. ISBN 978-0-230-61653-0 (cloth) \$27.00.

Author Mark Shaw's website includes a brief biography that opens with these lines: "Mark Shaw is a 'reformed' defense lawyer and radio/television personality turned author. Curious about the theological aspects of conversion and other spiritual topics, he graduated from San Francisco Theological Seminary with a Masters degree in theological studies in 2008." The subjects of his books (he has published "about" twenty) include an attorney, an aviator, a Holocaust survivor, and several sports legends. Shaw also wrote an investigative book on Mike Tyson's rape trial. When Mark Shaw turned his attention to the Merton story, he brought to the task the skills and perspectives honed and employed in previous works. Perhaps, more significantly, he also brought to the new project a fascination with and enthusiasm for Merton in whom he finds "inspirational words and teachings, ones that have greatly changed [his] life for the better" (220). In his "Acknowledgements," Shaw avows that the writing of the book "has been truly guided along by the Holy Spirit. . . . Many days I could actually feel the spirit infiltrating the writing, causing me to witness firsthand the power of divine intervention" (220). This statement not only suggests that the writing of the book was a very personal effort but may also account for Shaw's absolute insistence that he has written "the true story" of Thomas Merton's life. The provocative, some might say sensationalizing title, *Beneath the Mask of Holiness: Thomas Merton and the Forbidden Love Affair That Set Him Free*, states Shaw's thesis in brief: Thomas Merton was not the man or the monk he appeared to be. Beneath a holy exterior was a tormented man, held captive in his monastery by a tyrannical abbot. Moreover, the image of Merton as a holy man was carefully constructed and maintained by the Catholic Church whose officials conspired to hide the truth. When, in 1966, Merton fell in love, he embarked on a "love affair" that would finally set him free. And so, Shaw concludes, in the last paragraph of the book: "Through his experience with [M.],<sup>1</sup>

1. Although Mark Shaw refers to the woman with whom Merton fell in love

he had reached the perfection of this new rebirth where there was 'no more selfishness, there is only love.' Having attained this state of enlightenment, he was free to take the last step toward God and walk over the line passing from this earth to his next state of being with no 'unfinished business' to worry about. He may have been Thomas Merton in real life, but now his true name was indeed, as he had hoped, Love" (218). How does Mark Shaw arrive at this bold and far-reaching conclusion? By a somewhat circuitous route as I will explain below.

This review will offer an overview of the book and the arrangement of its contents, which incorporates an ample sampling of Shaw's own statements, as well as a discussion of Shaw's claim and the interpretive framework he employs. Finally, I will share a few thoughts as the editor of volume six of Merton's journals.

*Beneath the Mask* consists of a Prologue, twenty-two chapters divided into six "books," endnotes, acknowledgments, and an index. The titles of the six "books" – I. "Blossoming Love"; II. "The Seven Storey Mountain"; III. "The Thomas Merton Journals"; IV. "The Merton Biographers"; V. "[M.] or God"; and VI. "The True Merton" – provide a glimpse of the content that follows as well as the primary sources on which Shaw draws: Merton's best-selling autobiography; his published journals, particularly the sixth volume; and the work of a host of biographers of Merton. In addition, Shaw refers to books by Merton such as *No Man Is an Island* and *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. It also should be noted that Shaw references communications and conversations with individuals who knew Merton such as fellow monks Fr. John Eudes Bamberger and Br. Paul Quenon, and with others who have studied and written about Merton such as Paul Elie and Jonathan Montaldo, and uses their comments to support his interpretation of Merton – an interpretation they may not necessarily share.

### Overview and Arrangement

In the Prologue, Mark Shaw introduces Thomas Merton as the author of the best-selling autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, who was "the most famous Catholic monk in the world" (vii) during the 1950s and 1960s. Merton, Shaw contends, "was promoted by the Catholic Church and its superiors at the Vatican in Rome as the poster boy for the contemplative life detached from

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by name, I will continue referring to her as M. as I did as editor of *Learning to Love*, the sixth volume of Merton's journals.

the material world" (vii). Despite such apparent success, Merton was, in Shaw's view, "a tormented, and suffering monk imprisoned by the abbot of the monastery he sought to leave" (viii) and living in "a secret world haunted by ghosts of past conduct related to irreverent behavior with women" (viii). In the midst of this turmoil and confusion, "the sky opened in late March 1966 and he was presented with a chance at salvation" (viii). The "instrument of hope" (viii) was a student nurse assigned to his care while he was hospitalized for surgery. She was, in Shaw's words, "a true-to-life angel" (ix). This book, Shaw writes, is "the true story of his life, warts and all" – a story which, Shaw contends, provides "inspiration for anyone who has ever suffered during a search for the meaning of love" (ix).

Shaw introduces the story of Merton's relationship with M. in Book I, narrates the story in detail in Book V, and interprets its meaning in Merton's life in Book VI. In Books II-IV, he develops the back-story in order to describe the monk who met M. in 1966.

Book I opens with a picture of Merton in 1963. The forty-eight-year-old monk was teaching the novices when he observed that "the man who loves for the sake of love only – he is completely free" (1), unaware, Shaw observes, "[t]hat God would tempt him with forbidden love in future years" (4). He continues with an account of Merton's meeting, in March 1966, with the student nurse with whom he fell in love and a description of what Merton experienced and felt during the next month and a half. Shaw's dramatic account relies on Merton's own journal entries with occasional references to Michael Mott's official biography of Merton<sup>2</sup> and John Howard Griffin's account of Merton's hermitage years.<sup>3</sup> The tone of Shaw's treatment of Merton's relationship with M., a tone that strikes this reader as sensational, is set from the beginning, as Shaw likens the sponge bath the nurse gives Merton to "a spiritual baptism of sorts" (7).

In Book II, Shaw turns his attention to the story of Merton's early life – as recounted in *The Seven Storey Mountain* – even though Shaw contends that the autobiography was not "the whole truth, but instead a watered-down version of what really occurred" (21).

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2. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1984).

3. John Howard Griffin, *Follow the Ecstasy: Thomas Merton, The Hermitage Years, 1965-1968*, edited by Robert Bonazzi (Fort Worth, TX: Latitudes Press, 1983; rpt. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993).

He argues that "the misrepresentation was intentional" and part of "a quiet conspiracy, a cover-up" and concludes that Merton was "a sinner of the first degree" (21). Heavily censored, the autobiography, in Shaw's judgment, presents only part of Merton's pre-monastic story. Shaw suggests that "all copies" of the bestselling autobiography, published in 1948, "should be recalled until a disclaimer is included indicating to readers that the book they are reading is less than truthful" (22). The titles of the three chapters in this section – "The Orphan," "Visions of Merton's Father," and "Franciscan Denial" – underscore aspects of the autobiographical account Shaw chooses to highlight – even if, in his opinion, the book is not completely truthful.

In Book III, Shaw resumes his search for "the true Merton" (55) by turning to the seven volumes of Merton's private journals, "arguably the most accurate source for Merton's version of portions of his life story" (55), in order to fill in the details he finds lacking in *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Again, Shaw's chapter titles suggest something about his reading of the Merton story: "Searching for the True Merton," "Freedom Seeker," "People Think I Am Happy," and "Dancing in the Water of Life," this last the title which editor Robert Daggy gave to volume 5 of Merton's journals. In these chapters, Shaw considers Merton's entry into the monastery; the publication of his best-selling autobiography; the challenge of his being a monk *and* a writer; his deepening longing for solitude; his desire to leave Gethsemani and join an "alternative order" (70) such as the Carthusians; and his being forbidden, in 1962, to publish on the subject of war (the Cold War and the threat of nuclear war – not the Vietnam War as Shaw says). While he picks up on the themes of identity and illusion, authenticity and freedom with which Merton grappled during his life, Shaw highlights Merton's reflections on sexuality, sexual desire, and earlier relationships with women, which are threaded through the journals, to build a picture of the monk who would fall in love in 1966.

In Book IV, admitting that "[s]ome information may appear duplicitous" (91), Shaw returns once again to the same events and experiences, this time in light of information gleaned from biographies of Merton, including the authorized biography written by Michael Mott as well as books by Monica Furlong, Basil Pennington, Jim Forest, David Cooper, William Shannon, James Harford, Michael Higgins, Paul Elie and Joan Carter McDonald. Shaw asserts that Merton's biographers have provided informa-

tion that Merton “never divulged” and thus reveal “secrets” that “neither Merton nor the Catholic censors wished to expose” (92). It appears that Shaw uses the term “biographer” loosely since not all the authors he names have written biographies per se. In the pages that follow, Shaw pieces together the story of what he terms the “Calamity at Cambridge” (101) including the “mock crucifixion” (103) Merton and his friends enacted at Clare College, Merton’s promiscuity, and, finally, that he impregnated “a young shop girl” (104) – which led his guardian to order him back to America. Borrowing a phrase from Monica Furlong, Shaw entitles a chapter, “The Harebrained Neurotic” (121), in an attempt to point to Merton’s “disconcerted mindset” (122), already in evidence near the end of *The Seven Storey Mountain* when he speaks of “the old Merton” (122) who followed him into the monastery. In elaborating on the reasons for Merton’s discontent, Shaw points to the split between being a monk and a writer, his status as “the chosen one” in the community who was unable to blend in, his becoming “public property and a cash cow” (123), his meeting psychologist Gregory Zilboorg, and his anger with Dom James Fox. However, the “root of discontent,” Shaw argues, “lay in one important factor: he had never learned the true meaning of love” (127).

Shaw devotes the six chapters of Book V to the subject of Merton’s relationship with M. As the title suggests, Shaw sees the key question as “[M.] or God” (129). In the first three chapters, Shaw considers why Merton “was suddenly vulnerable” (131) to falling in love and suggests that “he was a tormented monk seeking salvation” (132). Merton had become, in Shaw’s words, “the abused spouse in a marriage to Gethsemani and the Catholic Church” (133). The “gift” of M. was a “catalyst for Merton’s final steps to truly loving God, and God alone” (134). Once again, Shaw returns to the subject of Merton’s treatment by and of women in his earlier life and finds added reason for Merton’s torment. In the second chapter of Book V, Shaw questions whether Merton “was a true converted Christian” (142), a question that “is significant since he gave the impression that he was Christ-like in nature through his words and messages, which portrayed someone who certainly *sounded* converted, someone who was one with God” (142). Although Shaw acknowledges that there are differences between Protestant and Catholic perspectives on conversion, he contends that interpreters of Merton have overlooked his self-admitted, continuing need for conversion and instead considered him converted. For Shaw, all

this bears directly on the choice Merton would make. Shaw puts it this way: "How Merton ultimately dealt with the question of [M.] or God in 1966 directly relates to whether he was in a state of being one with God, or disabled in his true beliefs, having slid backward as the years passed at Gethsemani" (144).

Given Shaw's approach to the Merton story, it is not surprising that he entitles Book VI "The True Merton." In a chapter entitled "Broken Vows," Shaw questions "the true nature of [Merton's] physical relationship with [M.]" (191) and asserts that from "the ashes of the [M.] affair a new Thomas Merton had emerged" (199). To support his view, Shaw quotes Br. Paul Quenon, Paul Elie, Fr. John Eudes Bamberger, John Howard Griffin and even cites a few lines which I wrote in the introduction to *Learning to Love*. For Shaw, "the new Merton" is "the compelling spiritualist who had become liberated as never before, since he had not only conquered sinful inner demons, but broken free of the chains the Catholic Church imposed upon him" (211). In the final chapter, "Thomas Merton: the Man, the Legacy," Shaw ends on an inspirational note, concluding that if Merton was able to find love, so can we.

Trusting that this overview of the content and arrangement of *Behind the Mask* provides a sense of what Shaw says and how he says it, I turn to two major issues I have with the book: what Shaw claims to do and the interpretive framework he employs to do it.

### Claim

Mark Shaw claims that he is revealing what was heretofore unknown about Thomas Merton and that, in so doing, he is giving readers the "true story." However, *Behind the Mask* is not the exposé Mark Shaw claims it to be. He draws on previously published sources: *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton's published journals, and the work of biographers of Merton. Both Merton himself (in his autobiography, journals, and letters) and Merton's biographers have already told what there is to tell, including the story of Merton's falling in love with M. It is almost fifteen years since the publication, in 1997, of the sixth of seven volumes of Thomas Merton's journals: *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom*, the journal that spans the period from January 1966 to October 1967 and so includes Merton's brief but nevertheless intense relationship with M. It is worth noting that the publication of this volume of Merton's journals did not reveal an aspect of Merton's life that was previously "unknown." While the journal

offered readers the opportunity to read Merton's own words on the subject, a detailed narrative of Merton's relationship with the student nurse in the spring and early summer of 1966, drawn from the journal, had already appeared in Michael Mott's biography, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, published in 1984. As official biographer appointed by the Merton Legacy Trust, Mott had access to Merton's private journals and quoted substantially from them, as had John Howard Griffin, who had originally been named Merton's biographer by the Merton Legacy Trust and who, although he was unable to complete the biography, had drawn on Merton's journal entries between 1965 and 1968 to write a story of Merton's hermitage years. In *Follow the Ecstasy*, published posthumously in 1983 (and reissued in 1993), Griffin devotes some thirty pages of the one hundred-fifty-one page book to the love story.

The claim that *Beneath the Mask* finally reveals "the true story of his life, warts and all" is, in my view, at the very least an overstatement. In giving permission for his journals to be published, Merton was himself telling his story "warts and all." What I wrote in the introduction to *Learning to Love* applies to all the journals: Merton's journal entries show him as he was: "capable of profundity and pettiness, sensitivity and self-absorption, insight and illusion, focus and distraction."<sup>4</sup> Merton himself created a record of his life and did so with remarkable candor.

Readers of *Beneath the Mask* who are familiar with Thomas Merton's life already know the facts of Merton's story including the fact that after twenty-five years in the monastery, he fell in love. These readers also know that the relationship was short-lived and that Merton soon recommitted himself to his monastic vocation. We can read, in his own words, the ecstasy and the anguish he experienced. But what we are to make of Shaw's retelling is quite another matter: it is a matter of his interpretation.

### Interpretive Framework

Mark Shaw views and interprets Merton's life through a single lens – the lens of his relationship with M. Reading the whole of Merton's life through such a narrow lens, however meaningful that relationship was, simply does not do justice to the whole of his life. Merton's life was rich in dimension and paradox. Think-

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4. Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom. Journals, vol. 6: 1966-1967*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) xxiii.

ing of the multidimensionality of Merton's life, I am reminded of an essay by Glenn Hinson, written just a few years after Merton's death and entitled "Merton's Many Faces."<sup>5</sup> The essay appealed to me the first time I read it and it continues to do so because Hinson resists reducing Merton's life to a single dimension; instead Hinson presents and honors the "multifaceted Merton." Hinson readily acknowledges the challenge we face in interpreting Merton: "Interpreters and biographers of Thomas Merton face a vexing problem – that of contradictions, paradoxes, and inconsistencies in a complex, precocious, and inspired personality." Noting that "Merton himself was aware of the problem," Hinson quotes Merton's own remark in the Preface to *A Thomas Merton Reader*, published in 1962. Merton writes: "I have had to accept the fact that my life is almost totally paradoxical."<sup>6</sup> Reflecting on Merton's self-description, Hinson concludes: "Thomas Merton appeared to the world in many faces. To some he was a typical saint, to others an unconventional and puzzling contemplative, to others a playboy monk, to others a misplaced activist. Each of these images represents a facet of a many-sided gem which we were privileged to see." Even though we have benefitted from almost four decades of research and reflection by Merton scholars as well as from Merton's own posthumous publications, especially his journals and letters – all of which have added texture and depth to our understanding of Merton, we are still left studying "Merton's many faces." In Merton's own writings and in our writings about him, we continue to encounter the seeker, the contemplative, the social critic, the witness for justice, the writer, the poet, the ecumenist, the bridge-builder between East and West, and yes, the lover. The very nature of Merton's life and work – its complexity and multidimensionality – should, I believe, inspire a reticence when it comes to absolutizing our conclusions. The best work on Merton has been characterized by humility and a sense of limits of the ability of any one biographer, scholar, interpreter or reader of Merton to capture the *whole* Merton. This is why I find Mark Shaw's volume disconcerting.

Mark Shaw's insistence that Merton's falling in love with M. is *the* defining experience of Thomas Merton's life is simply egregious.

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5. E. Glenn Hinson, "Merton's Many Faces," *Religion in Life* 42 (Summer 1973) 153-67.

6. Thomas Merton, *A Thomas Merton Reader*, ed. Thomas P. McDonnell (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1962) ix; rev. ed. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Image, 1974) 16.

Yes, we all pick and choose facts and texts as we try to puzzle out meaning and build the case we want to make. But most of us do so with a modicum of humility – a virtue not in evidence in *Beneath the Mask*. Shaw believes that he has discovered “the true Merton” despite a conspiracy orchestrated by the Catholic Church to hide the truth. I do not believe that Mark Shaw has discovered “the true Merton” nor do I believe that there has been a conspiracy to hide the truth about Merton. Readers looking to deepen their understanding of Merton would be well served to return to the original sources and read Merton’s own writings, including *Learning to Love* as well as the seventh and last volume of Merton’s journals, *The Other Side of the Mountain*.<sup>7</sup>

### A Few Final Thoughts

I readily admit that I came to the reading of *Beneath the Mask* from the perspective of my work as editor of *Learning to Love*, volume six of Merton’s seven journals. As editor I transcribed Merton’s holographic journal line by line – a discipline that forced a slow reading of the text and heightened my awareness of the richness and complexity of Merton’s life story. Reflecting on the material in volume six – material much broader in scope than the account of Merton’s love for M. – I intentionally resisted and still resist the temptation to reduce the story of Merton’s relationship with M. to a neat package of interpretation and meaning – even though I have been invited to do so by questions posed by some readers of the journal. It is may be tempting to conclude as someone once said to me: “Merton needed to fall in love and so God sent him M.” (a view that certainly resonates with the picture Shaw sketches in *Beneath the Mask*). But such an interpretation presumes an image of God I cannot embrace, to say nothing of how such an interpretation objectifies M. Merton’s falling in love with M. was what it was – a significant experience in his life and an experience that contributed to the making of who he was, as did many other experiences, but it was *only one* experience in the life of this extraordinary and ordinary monk and man.

Each of the editors of Merton’s journals (in consultation with general editor Brother Patrick Hart) entitled the volume he or she edited. The title of volume 6, *Learning to Love*, was intended to highlight two dimensions of Merton’s life. One was Merton’s

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7. Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey. Journals, vol. 7: 1967-1968*, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998).

falling in love with M.; the other was Merton's continuing commitment to live a monk's life, a life which called and challenged him to learn to love. When Merton joined the monastery in 1941, he entered what St. Bernard had described as a "school of charity." Learning to love is an essential element of a monk's life. In 1966 and 1967 – the time span of the volume 6, Merton was living in a hermitage on the monastery grounds and, as the sub-title of the journal suggests, "exploring solitude and freedom." That exploration was not without struggle, not without missteps. What Merton experienced then and there was an important part of his story; it was not the whole of it.

One final comment: we live in a culture with a flagrant disregard for privacy. We assume that we have a right to know it all and to know it now. News alerts, instant reports, immediate interpretation – all work together to reduce complicated realities to simple story lines, the more sensational the better. Add to the mix tweets and blogs and anyone and everyone can become a pundit. Sadly, none of this encourages appreciation for the complexity and the mystery and the paradox of human life and love.

Christine M. Bochen

PLEKON, Michael, *Hidden Holiness*, Foreword by Rowan Williams (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), pp. viii + 295. ISBN 978-0-268-03893-9 (paper) \$25.00.

*Hidden Holiness* is a sort of sequel to Michael Plekon's earlier book *Living Icons: Persons of Faith in the Eastern Church* (2002), which presented detailed portraits of ten significant modern Orthodox Christians relatively unfamiliar to most Americans. A professor at the City University of New York and an Orthodox priest (who had once been, as he casually mentions in the course of this new book, a Carmelite), the author provides here a more ecumenical spectrum of examples of contemporary holiness, drawing principally on Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Episcopalian traditions, with a smattering of representatives from various Protestant denominations. But his main purpose is not just to introduce his audience to particular holy people, which he does in fascinating sketches throughout the book, but to arrive at an understanding and appreciation of the meaning of holiness for today's world.

The title immediately suggests the presence of unrecognized sanctity in obscure, seemingly ordinary people, and Plekon cer-

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