of her in the book with her grandchildren, radiating the love that is so prevalent in the pages of this volume.

John Collins

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HOLDER, Arthur, ed., *Christian Spirituality: The Classics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), pp. xvi + 376. ISBN 978-0-415-77601-1 (cloth) $90.00; ISBN 978-0-415-77602-8 (paper) $26.95.

This collection of brief introductions to thirty significant texts of Christian spirituality, ranging chronologically from Origen's *Commentary on the Song of Songs* in the third century to Thomas Merton's *New Seeds of Contemplation* in the twentieth, is aimed at a broad audience but written by recognized scholars in the field, most of them associated with the Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality (nine of the thirty contributors, including editor Arthur Holder, have served as president of the SSCS). The scope is ecumenical, with both subjects and contributors drawn from Eastern and Western, Catholic and Protestant traditions; while only seven of the works discussed are by women, sixteen of the commentaries have female authors. The purpose, in the editor's words, is not merely to provide significant cultural, historical and biographical background for understanding and appreciating the texts, but to present them "as *living wisdom documents* that invite – even compel – contemplative reflection and existential response" (xiv), and of course to encourage readers to read, or reread, the works themselves.

Simple as it is, the book's title is perhaps somewhat of an overreach: "*The* Classics" may seem to suggest that this particular selection of texts constitutes the essential list of Christian spiritual writings over the centuries. Most of them would certainly appear on almost every "short list" of the most influential and significant texts of the tradition – works by Gregory of Nyssa and Pseudo-Dionysius, Augustine, Benedict and Bernard, Julian of Norwich and *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Luther and Ignatius, Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, Thérèse of Lisieux and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Some lesser known texts, like *The Mirror of Simple Souls* by Marguerite Porete, burnt as a heretic in 1310, or Howard Thurman's *Jesus and the Disinherited* (1949), are convincingly described as worthy of inclusion. Some works not immediately categorized as "spirituality," like Jonathan Edwards' lengthy treatise on

Religious Affections or Evelyn Underhill's largely discursive and descriptive study *Mysticism*, also may be considered to have earned their place here after reading the cogent interpretations of their commentators. But there do seem to be certain gaps. For example it is surprising not to find Hildegard of Bingen, surely one of the most fascinating and highly regarded medieval women spiritual writers. There is no representative of the Rhineland mystics – perhaps the format of selecting one specific work (only Pseudo-Dionysius gets a pair) made it difficult to find a way to include Meister Eckhart, whose major works are for the most part individual sermons, but certainly John Ruusbroec, considered by some to be the greatest of Christian mystical writers, could have been represented by any one of a number of substantial works. One might wonder at the inclusion of Mme. Guyon's controversial *Short and Very Easy Method of Prayer* (1685), the language of which even author Bo Karen Lee describes as "erratic and extreme, often difficult to swallow" (258), though perhaps its subsequent influence on evangelical Protestantism explains its presence. Likewise George Herbert's *The Country Parson*, generally considered a distinctly secondary achievement compared to *The Temple*, his superb collection of religious lyrics, seems rather idiosyncratic, though perhaps signaling the editor's appreciation for texts focused on pastoral dimensions of spirituality, as seen in his own discussion of Gregory the Great's *Cura Pastoralis*. In terms of influence, and even of intrinsic significance, such works as *The Imitation of Christ*, or, from Herbert's own country and century, Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, might have been more suitable choices than these. (If a prose work by a seventeenth-century English poet were wanted, *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* by Herbert's friend and older contemporary John Donne, with its famous evocation of the bell which "tolls for thee" as one realizes that "no man is an island," might seem a more likely candidate for selection.) Perhaps an appendix listing other works that would qualify as classics, even though they could not be discussed because of space limitations, would have been a helpful addition and precluded the almost inevitable questions about why this work appears and not that one.

Each of the individual essays, which all run about twelve pages, follows a standardized format: a short introduction, a section on "Author and Audience," a "Synopsis" of the particular work, discussions of "Influence" (omitted, inexplicably, only in the final article on Merton) and on "Reading the Text Today," followed by a brief bibliography of relevant primary and secondary works. While this structure might initially seem somewhat rigid, in fact it generally functions quite well, and the authors were free to decide how to distribute the limited space at their disposal according to their own sense of the relative importance of the different subsections for their particular topic. The "Author and Audience" section for the anonymous *Cloud of Unknowing*, for example, is considerably shorter than that for the *Triads* of Gregory Palamas, from the same century, where the author's participation in the hesychast controversy that roiled the Orthodox Church of the period needs to be understood in order to appreciate the work's purpose and significance. But in virtually every case, there is an inclusive balance between text and context, historical and contemporary relevance.

While every essay provides worthwhile insights, it is inevitable in a collection such as this that the quality of the contributions will vary to some degree. Particularly helpful is Mary Frohlich's discussion of Teresa of Avila's *Interior Castle* (209-20), which succinctly but comprehensively describes the text's seven "dwelling places" as they reflect the stages of spiritual development. Douglas Burton-Christie's essay on Athanasius' *Life of Antony* (13-24) is especially rich in its presentation of the work's "afterlife" (he begins with a striking depiction of Antony's presence in Mathias Grünewald's famous Isenheim Altarpiece from the fifteenth century) and in extracting key themes for a contemporary audience. Elizabeth Dreyer both situates Bonaventure's *Soul's Journey into God* (111-23) in the context of the spiritual and intellectual turmoil of mid-thirteenth-century Franciscan life that Bonaventure had to deal with as the order's minister general, and provides a careful mapping of the work's comprehensive structural and thematic design. Wendy Wright's expertise on the Salesian tradition is clearly in evidence in her masterful presentation of St. Francis' *Introduction to the Devout Life* (233-44), especially of the work's structure and imagery.

A few of the essays, while generally insightful, have curious gaps. For example, in his essay on Bernard's *On Loving God* (86-97), Mark Burrows makes no mention of the three-fold progression from slave to mercenary to son that is central to the final section of the treatise. Elizabeth Koenig's discussion of Julian of Norwich (148-59), which seems aimed largely at allaying possible non-Catholic unease with Julian's work, concentrates heavily on the parable of the Lord and the servant, and to a lesser extent on her theology of God as Mother, both part of the fourteenth of the sixteen revelations, with little attention to the earlier revelations with their vivid depictions of the suffering Christ, and with no mention at all of the famous similitude of all creation like a hazelnut in the hand of God that epitomizes Julian's recognition of the cosmic scope of creation, nor of the simple but profound realization that "Love was His meaning," which sums up the book's message.

Timothy Wengert's chapter on Luther's *Freedom of a Christian* (184-96) seems rather surprisingly polemical for an ecumenical collection. He writes:

> *The Freedom of a Christian* approached Christian life and faith so as to call into question notions of spiritual advancement in Luther's day, and it challenges common approaches to "spirituality" today. . . . Contemplation and meditation are two monastic "buzz words" for spirituality. Yet Luther includes these, too, in defining works of the outer, old creature, even while admitting that they are "works" of the soul. Luther takes dead aim at much of what passed (and passes) for Christian spirituality. (192)

There is no indication that the author's views diverge from those of his subject on these points, making the relationship of this chapter to many of the others rather problematic.

Perhaps the least satisfactory of the essays is that on *The Dark Night* of John of the Cross (221-32). Author David Perrin points out that both this work and the earlier *Ascent of Mount Carmel* are commentaries on John's poem also entitled "The Dark Night," but provides little indication of what the poem itself is about (and never mentions that neither prose commentary gets beyond the third of the poem's eight stanzas). The synopsis seems to be as much about *The Ascent* as *The Dark Night*. It states, "The active journey is the main focus of the commentary in *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*. The passive journey is the main focus of the commentary in *The Dark Night*" (224), but then goes on to provide a chart that shows the contents of *The Ascent* as "Active Night of Senses" and "Passive Night of Senses," and of *The Dark Night* as "Active Night of Spirit" and "Passive Night of Spirit" (225). The statements and the chart are not necessarily incompatible, but some explanation is needed to reconcile them. The essay also required more careful editing: the author repeatedly speaks of the commentaries being "filled with many excursions," which the "reader should not be tempted to skip" (224), when the appropriate term is surely not "excursion" but "excursus"; a later discussion of "sensual and material attachments" goes on to say that "in the earliest readings of the commentaries on 'The Dark Night,' these attachments were often seen as being ends in themselves, rather than means to an end" (228) – the reference to "commentaries on 'The Dark Night'" (i.e., the poem) could easily be misunderstood as referring to John's own commentaries in the two prose works being discussed, and in any case it would certainly not be "attachments" that would be erroneously considered ends rather than means to an end, but rather *detachment* from sensual and material things. The author also points out that whereas *The Ascent* and *The Dark Night* "tend to emphasize a harsh kind of asceticism," John's later works present a more "positive evaluation of the world" (223) associated with the higher stages of the spiritual ascent; one wonders if *The Spiritual Canticle* might not have been a better choice for inclusion, both for this reason and because it is complete in itself (and also comments on the entire poem, of the same title, on which it is based).

As already mentioned, the final chapter, on *New Seeds of Contemplation* (353-64), is lacking the section on "Influence" (certainly not because the work has not been influential!), but otherwise author Bruce Lescher has provided a well-organized and substantial overview of what is often considered Thomas Merton's most significant single work. There are a few minor errors: Merton and his father are sent to Cuba rather than Bermuda during Owen's painting expeditions (355); the monastic conference near Bangkok at which Merton died is described as "an interreligious conference on monasticism" (356), when in fact it was the earlier Temple of Understanding conference in Calcutta that was primarily interreligious – there was a visit from Buddhist monks to the Thailand meeting, but virtually all the actual participants were Catholic monastics; Gerard Manley Hopkins loses the "e" in his middle name (362); the three authors of *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* are described (as, alas, is generally the case) as editors (364). While the author rightly points out the differences between *New Seeds* and the original 1949 *Seeds of Contemplation* of which it is a revision, he doesn't note that some of the most striking quotations he provides (for example the passage on natural beauty of colt and flower from "Things in Their Identity" [357], and that on identity from the same chapter: "For me to be a saint means to be myself. Therefore the problem of sanctity is in fact the problem of finding out who I am and of discovering my true self" [358]) are actually already present in the original version. But he manages to include a compressed yet comprehensive overview of Merton's life and work, emphasizing his "genius for exploring religious concepts in language that captured the imagination of his contemporaries" as well as his "gift for speaking to an audience much wider than Roman Catholics" (356). He highlights in his synopsis of *New Seeds* the key themes of "Contemplation," "Identity," "Solitude and Community" and "Tradition and Revolution" and he points out in the final section on "Reading the Text Today" that Merton was a pioneer of the contemporary turn to spirituality in his emphasis on "what is most personal and most vital in religious experience" rather than on "dogmas as such" (361), that he brought the contemplative tradition out beyond the monastery to make it available to all, that he recognized and celebrated the presence of God in nature, as briefly but notably described in the chapters "Things in Their Identity" and the concluding "The General Dance," and that one finds in *New Seeds* the beginnings of that connection between contemplation and "a prophetic social critique" (363) that will be such an important aspect of Merton's final years.

Some mention of the profoundly Christocentric and Paschal nature of Merton's spiritual teaching in *New Seeds*, which roots it firmly in the tradition represented by so many of the works discussed earlier in the book, most of which Merton knew well, loved deeply and learned much from, would have been a particularly appropriate aspect of the text to consider. For ultimately the value of *Christian Spirituality: The Classics* for an admirer of Thomas Merton may not be so much in the chapter focused explicitly on Merton himself, which largely covers familiar territory (Fourth and Walnut!) and is necessarily so brief as to touch only on highlights of *New Seeds* in particular and Merton's work in general, but in situating Merton as the final figure (so far) in a grand procession that includes such influential predecessors as Origen and Athanasius and Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine and Benedict and Bernard, Bonaventure and Julian and the *Cloud* author, Ignatius and Teresa and John and Thérèse, all of whom

Merton eloquently celebrated and explicated in works ranging from *The Seven Storey Mountain* through *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* and beyond, and all of whom contributed to the development of Merton's own work as a classic articulation for the present day of the essential wisdom of Christian spirituality.

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