

Thomas Merton in Italy, continues such inquiries into both the published and unpublished correspondence between Merton and Giovanni Battista Montini, later Pope Paul VI, seeing in it the influences of its blessings on and guidance in Merton's Cistercian commitments (85-98). Zaninelli concludes that even though Merton considered his contribution to the Pope's initiative in "Message of Contemplatives" (1967)<sup>4</sup> to be an "utterly forgotten" failure, his enormous desire for "contemplative renewal" by integrating the cloistered contemplative life with the external life of influence in the world "could open great prospects for the renewal of religious life today" (96). In response, one can only hope that the current papal authority will continue in this vein as he has begun. Maurizio Renzini, President of the Associazione Thomas Merton Italia, takes up the correspondence between Merton and Giorgio La Pira, longtime mayor of Florence and prominent peace activist (50-57). Renzini finds in their friendship, begun by La Pira's visit to Gethsemani in 1964, a desire for influence on the politics of America which had at that time become a profoundly disturbing concern to both of them in their efforts to escalate peacemaking in the world and in their shared respect for both the active and contemplative lives necessary to the endeavor. The attention paid to these sets of correspondence is worthwhile in that it once again reminds us of the overwhelming generosity and expansive engagement that Merton offered to his correspondents along with his unrelenting willingness to seek wisdom, peace and personhood wherever it might be found and fostered.

This volume of European perspectives on Thomas Merton is a fine centennial delight for the community of his students and friends. It will provide reference and reflection for those who indulge it, comprising a confederacy of intellectual and spiritual insights, to be selected and mused on, each for its own merit, inflection and further value in the next century of thought and wisdom from the legacy of this compelling, influential and enigmatic writer/monk, whose humanity has blessed us all with his "universal vision."

Lynn R. Szabo

DEIGNAN, Kathleen Noone, CND, *Prophet and Mystic of Creation: On Retreat with Thomas Merton*, 6 Conferences on 2 DVDs / 3 CDs (Rockville, MD: Now You Know Media, 2014) \$29.95 (DVDs); \$19.95 (CDs); \$15.95 (MP3).

This series of six short presentations (between 21 and 25 minutes each)

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4. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 154-58.

conveys Kathleen Deignan's extended meditation on the devastation of "our paradise home," and what it might take for us to return together to that paradise home, guided by Merton. Readers who know and appreciate Sr. Kathleen's earlier work on Merton and creation<sup>1</sup> will find here a contrasting approach. Whereas the book is a thematized collection of nature-oriented selections from Merton's writing, these recorded talks include relatively few Merton citations. Instead, we have here an overview, painted in broad strokes and delivered with urgent passion, of an eschatological, prophetic call derived from Merton's writing and from other sources – a call to rediscover, to recover and to inhabit a vision of paradise all around us, of ourselves in the midst of a God-given paradise. These recordings and the earlier book effectively complement one another as resources for the kind of retreat here envisaged by the author and *Now You Know Media*. The talks are presented in a style suited to a retreat "designed to transform your spiritual imagination and deepen your contemplative consciousness, conscience and practice," with a clear call to align ourselves with an urgent shift towards heightened ecological awareness and effective action. To this end, the accompanying study guide includes a series of questions to guide and extend the listener's reflections, and to encourage, implicitly, our articulating the kind of "eco-biography" described at the beginning of the fourth conference, "Remembering Paradise." Most of the content is included in the study guide as script, which I found helpful for navigating around the conferences, and for identifying the sources of quotations and references. The study guide also offers review questions for each conference.

Where does our retreat guide take us? The opening conference is on the one hand a lament for spoiled and lost paradise, and on the other an urgent call to rediscover paradise on this earth. Merton is introduced as a man responsive to the social-political currents of his time, and we are called to be responsive to what we know in our own time about ecological destruction and fragility. This is a call to appropriate grieving and reorientation of desire rather than, say, technological innovation. The second conference is about reading the Book of Nature alongside the New Testament and other classical church sources which point to the cosmic Christ and the glory of God's creation. Attention is drawn to Merton's ways of reading as much as to what he has to say. The third conference highlights Merton's "love for the paradise mystery," weaving a meditation around the biblical picture of Eden and Merton's late essay, "Baptism in

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1. Thomas Merton, *When the Trees Say Nothing: Writings on Nature*, ed. Kathleen Deignan, CND (Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2003).

the Forest: Wisdom and Initiation in William Faulkner.”<sup>2</sup> Review questions probe deeply: “how much does [your existential anxiety] fuel your need to consume or hoard?” “How are you working with the loss of wilderness?” “How intimate are you with your part of the earthly Paradise entrusted to your care and celebration?”

In the fourth conference, some early biographical episodes and later literary encounters are identified as influencing Merton’s evolving eco-consciousness, culminating in the delight with which he arrived in the landscape of Gethsemani. The story continues with further episodes as the fifth conference takes us to the woods and Merton’s hermitage years, with some longer passages from Merton’s later work, and mention of his relationship with the nurse we know as M. With this latter theme I felt as though we were heading off in another direction, but here indeed was another illuminating perspective on the Paradise consciousness. The way in which relationship with a “soul mate” can revivify our sense of the world perhaps indicates how Merton can accompany readers into a heightened sensitivity to the glory and the groaning of creation. The conference series concludes by inviting us to reconsider our current reality in light of the creative and hope-filled tension between the production of the *Rule of Benedict* and a climate of social-political anxiety from which it emerged.

The listener is encouraged to view Merton as creation mystic and ecological prophet. Of the many perspectives from which we can view Merton, this one is surely a priority for our precarious times, as Sr. Kathleen, Monica Weis and others have long been telling us. I could not agree more with the conviction about needing to “heal the technologized psyche.” What will this take? Writing from these British Isles, I wonder whether we need to dig more vigorously into the harsh and rugged realities of traditions we call “Celtic.” If we do, Merton continues to accompany us across craggy and fierce landscapes, calling us to emulate something of his unrelenting detachment from the comforts and deceptions of a consumer culture even more overwhelming and embedded than it was in his own time.

The recordings are delightfully interwoven with Kathleen’s evocative singing, which sets the tone for attentive reflection. For listeners less familiar with Merton, these talks are not really designed as a general introduction to the life and work of the writer-monk. Rather, they describe and affirm traditions which recognize the “book of nature” as revelatory, then encourage us to give attention to a vital and recurring theme throughout the Merton corpus. Listeners who know Merton well might

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2. Thomas Merton, *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. Patrick Hart, OCSO (New York: New Directions, 1981) 92-116.

find themselves re-reading familiar passages as a renewed call to natural contemplation and its practical outworking, and as impassioned celebration of “creation as the body of divinity – at once veiling and unveiling the God Merton so longed to behold.”

Gary Hall

HIGGINS, Michael W., *Thomas Merton, The Seven Storey Mountain, and the Rest of the Story*, 12 conferences on 4 DVDs / 4 CDs (Rockville, MD: Now You Know Media, 2014) \$49.95 (DVDs); \$29.95 (CDs); \$24.95 (MP3).

“Old hands” are frequently asked by newcomers to Thomas Merton’s writings, “where should I begin?” Accomplished Merton scholar Michael W. Higgins (former college president, now vice president at Sacred Heart University, author of three books on Merton, and current president of the International Thomas Merton Society) provides an excellent entrée by means of these twelve lectures on Merton’s autobiographical writing which focus on the journals in which Merton tells the rest of his story.

After a general introduction to Thomas Merton and to his *Secular Journal*<sup>1</sup> (which describes his pre-monastic life), Higgins devotes two lectures to *The Seven Storey Mountain*,<sup>2</sup> which provides the frame of reference for the other lectures and to which he returns in the final one. Higgins then traces Merton’s life through the original versions of his journals with the addition of lectures on the “restricted” journals that were published after Merton died and on his early autobiographical novel *My Argument with the Gestapo*.<sup>3</sup> Higgins never loses sight of the fact that Merton was a poet and wrote with a poet’s sensibility. He uses the monk’s poetry to good effect in the lectures whose hearer is guided through Merton’s life “in his own voice” with (largely) helpful interpretive commentary by a respected Merton scholar.

These “autobiographical lectures” evince many strong points. Higgins helpfully reminds us that Merton was a European (born in France, raised there and in England); thus his intellectual framework was largely shaped before he came to America and Columbia University. Higgins utilizes as a theme in the lectures the importance of Merton’s study of William Blake and demonstrates how Blake’s visionary world influenced Merton the monk and writer. The lectures give the listener excellent literary

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1. Thomas Merton, *The Secular Journal* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1959).

2. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948).

3. Thomas Merton, *My Argument with the Gestapo: A Macaronic Journal* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969).