
Charles J. Healy
**MODERN SPIRITUAL WRITERS:
THEIR LEGACIES OF PRAYER**

New York: Alba House, 1989
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Reviewed by Keith J. Egan

In the preface to his classic study, *Prayer*, Friedrich Heiler emphasizes that prayer is not a human achievement but God's work. The writers studied in this book are unanimous on this Jewish-Christian conviction and much else besides. This conviction is, indeed, a central motif in the writings of Thomas Merton. However, Merton, without special attention, is only one of nine writers presented in these pages by Father Healy, a Jesuit who was once a provincial and now teaches theology at Pope John XXIII Seminary in Weston, MA. Healy writes clearly, economically and insightfully about two Catholic women, four Catholic men, and seven other male writers: the Anglican C. S. Lewis, the Lutheran Dietrich Bonhoeffer and a Jew, Abraham Joshua Heschel. All of these writers died in the present century except John Henry Newman. Hence the author calls these spiritual writers modern.

A review in *The Merton Annual* must attend to Merton's place in a book on spiritual writers. Had it been possible for Merton to gather the eight other writers in this book at his Gethsemani hermitage, I would love to have been a fly on the wall to hear what would have transpired during what would have been, I am sure, a lively exchange about prayer. I would liken this discussion to a session of one of Merton's choirs of those who had influenced him and with whom he resonated, imagery that he used in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. From this group of eight writers the one with whom the Trappist most resonated was the laywoman Dorothy Day for whom he had a deep and abiding reverence and affection. To his Abbot General Merton wrote that "Dorothy Day... is one of the holiest persons among

us...."¹ To the founder of the Catholic Worker, Merton wrote: "Bless you, Dorothy, and pray for me your least brother."² These kindred souls, Day and Merton, were writers whose influence on American spiritual consciousness is one of the most significant events in American religious history during the twentieth century.

Dated but respected for Merton were the writings of the Benedictine Columba Marmion whom Merton found "... always safe and solid" (*SC*, p. 145). Put off at first by John Henry Newman, the monk from Gethsemani, who always wanted to be a writer of substance and style, came to like and admire the cardinal who was one of the heralds of Vatican II.³ Merton remained ambivalent about the Jesuit Teilhard de Chardin whose followers made the monk suspicious of a cult gone awry (*HGL*, p. 454). Not only was Merton delighted with a visit by Heschel, he wrote to Erich Fromm: "Recently I have been deeply impressed and moved by the wonderful work of Abraham Heschel" (*HGL*, pp. 432; 315. See also pp. 430-431). The courage and integrity of Dietrich Bonhoeffer held an abiding attraction for Merton who quotes extensively in *Conjectures* from Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*. One does not hear much from Merton about C. S. Lewis. Yet, one correspondent wrote to Merton that he was led to his writings on the recommendation of C. S. Lewis who had written "...that he just discovered your writing, and found it quite the best spiritual writing he had come across in a long time." Merton replied: "I am certainly happy to think that so sound a judge as C. S. Lewis found something to like in my writings" (*R to J*, p. 369). Voracious reader that he was, it is difficult to imagine that Thomas Merton did not read and like Caryll Houselander with her constant theme of the presence of Christ in others. However, a quick check of obvious sources does not reveal comments by Merton about the woman who described herself as *A Rocking-Horse Catholic*.⁴

1. Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction*. Selected and edited by Brother Patrick Hart. (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1990), p. 144. Hereafter referred to in the text as *SC*.

2. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*. Selected and edited by William H. Shannon. (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1985), p. 148. Hereafter referred to in the text as *HGL*.

3. Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: The Letters of Thomas Merton to New and Old Friends*. Selected and edited by Robert E. Daggy, (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1989), p. 231. Hereafter referred to in the text as *R to J*.

4. New York: Sheed and Ward, 1955.

Healy devotes about twenty pages to each of the nine spiritual writers whom he has chosen for this book. Writers are introduced with some brief biographical data along with dominant themes from their writings. There are reflections on what these authors have to offer to those who are seeking wisdom about prayer. Healy clearly did not intend these essays for someone who has read extensively in any of these authors. Yet, the book is helpful as an overview by significant religious writers of their wisdom about God, life and prayer. Spiritual directors will find this a handy book to recommend to those setting out on the spiritual journey. It will give them a broad perspective on the place of prayer in the journey to God. This book gathers up key fragments from the lives and works of writers who cared deeply about prayer and who shared in writing their religious concerns. Healy makes it clear that his book will have achieved its purpose when it sends its readers to original writings of the nine religious authors.

The essay on Thomas Merton, like the others in this book, is compact, able only to highlight dominant themes in the monk's writings. Emphasized is Merton's God alone theme which sets one on a contemplative stance before God, issuing in love of God and love of neighbor. The latter involves one, as it did Merton, in a commitment to social justice. Thomas Merton did not write the last word on any number of spiritual issues and Healy cites the lack of integration of liturgy and contemplation in his writings. But, as readers of the *Annual* know, Thomas Merton has inspired countless God-seekers to take seriously the divine invitation to pray. He did more than he could have dreamed.

Robert F. Morneau

THE IMPACT OF DIVINE LOVE

Canfield, Ohio: Alba House, 1990

Eight cassette tapes [sixty minutes each] - \$59.95

Reviewed by Clyde F. Crews

The Impact of Divine Love lectures by Bishop Robert Morneau, auxiliary bishop of Green Bay, provide popular spirituality in the finest sense of the term. These recordings from a summer institute at St. Norbert's Abbey in Wisconsin are laced with insight,