

# ENTHUSIASM FOR MERTON, BONHOEFFER & HILLESUM

Review of

Peter King

*Dark Night Spirituality*

London: SPCK, 1995

85pages / L8.99 paperback

Reviewed by **Paul M. Pearson**

In April this year a one day conference was held at St Peters, Dulwich, to explore the work of Thomas Merton and Dietrich Bonhoeffer and to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of Bonhoeffer's execution by the Nazis. This conference, the first to address both writers, was led by Edwin Robertson, Terry Tastard, Wilfrid Harrison and Peter King, whose first book, *Dark Night Spirituality*, has just been published.

*Dark Night Spirituality* brings together for the first time the lives and writings of Thomas Merton, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Etty Hillesum and traces in their work a common thread — their approach to contemplation. King then develops their thought on contemplation associating it with recent developments in theology and, in particular, with the major paradigm shifts that have taken place. Peter King's task may sound awesome but he has accomplished it with simplicity in a slim, very readable and accessible book.

Thomas Merton's writings on contemplation require no introduction for readers of *The Merton Seasonal*. Many will have come across the life and work of Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Fewer will have heard of Etty Hillesum or have read her deeply moving diaries and so a few words of introduction to her here will be of value. Etty was a Dutch Jew with no formal religious affiliation whose diaries written between March 1941 and her death at Auschwitz in November 1943 articulate a "profoundly creative and powerful spirituality" of a fully human person who "lived and loved and ate and loved again" (p. 36). For each of these three modern prophets Peter King explores their understanding of contemplation making it clear from their writings that contemplation was not a passive concept for them but one which led them to the reality of their self, the world and God and which demanded of them a commitment to work for the reality of the vision they had glimpsed.

The backgrounds of the three writers examined in this book are diverse: Cistercian, Lutheran and Jewish. Similarly their places of writing differ: monastic hermitage, prison cell and concentration camp. Yet all three face up to the dark night in their own lives and to the dark nights of the twentieth century in such a way as to make that mystical concept relevant to our own time where, in the author's words, with "Auschwitz, Hiroshima, the Ozone Layer, and so much else, the 'dark night' is no longer the experience of the few" (p. 46). Through their experience of the dark night Merton, Bonhoeffer and Hillesum were each led to a new world view in which they saw the connectedness of all life and for each their response was an all-embracing compassion, the discovery "of being at one with everything in that hidden ground of Love for which there can be no explanations" (p. 21).

After having drawn together the common threads in the writings of Merton, Bonhoeffer and Hillesum, Peter King moves on in his final chapter to place their experience within the context of the major changes in theology in recent years. He outlines four characteristics which he sees as central to these changes and suggests that, in their life and writings, Merton, Bonhoeffer and Hillesum were precursors of these changes and of the political and liberation theologies which are among the major manifestations of these changes.

*Dark Night Spirituality* is a very clearly and simply written book in which Peter King shares his enthusiasm for Merton, Bonhoeffer and Hillesum in an infectious way which makes the reader want to explore further their writings. This challenging book opens up some profound questions while also pointing towards contemplation as a way forward which faces up to modern life with all its joys and its hopes, its sorrows and anxieties, its beauty and its evil. Through contemplation the dark night can be transformed from an impasse to a time of *kairos* which the author encourages us to embrace after the examples of Merton, Bonhoeffer and Hillesum.

**Paul M. Pearson** is a member of the Community of St. Peter in East Dulwich, London, England, and is currently working on a doctorate at the Heythrop School of the University of London. He is Secretary of The Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland and an International Adviser to The International Thomas Merton Society. He is Coordinator of The First General Meeting of the TMSG&I which will be held at La Sainte Union College of Higher Education in Southampton in May, 1996. He will present a paper, "Thomas Merton: The Earliest Stories."