

An Intelligent, Friendly Guide

Review of
Spiritual Masters for All Seasons

By Michael Ford

Mahwah, NJ: HiddenSpring, 2009

176 pages / \$18.00 paper

Reviewed by **Thomas Del Prete**

Taking a cue from Thomas Merton's love for jazz, author Michael Ford presents Merton, Henri Nouwen, Anthony de Mello and John O'Donohue as four contemporary religious voices in a complementary array in *Spiritual Masters for All Seasons*. He suggests by way of preface that each of them sheds light on the interior Christian life and bears witness to the possibility for each of us on the interior Christian journey. This constitutes his basic rationale for bringing them together; and, to be sure, they each are compelling in this respect, for different reasons. But it is also clear that they happen to be particularly compelling voices for him, through their writings and their accessibility, or the accessibility of those who knew them, via interview. Ford, in turn, strives to make them accessible to us. He is in fact a journalist with a strong interest in theological and spiritual understanding and how they are communicated and applied. He has a particular hope in the power of spiritual insight to shape civic leadership, evidenced by the extensive parallel he draws in the book's prelude and postlude between Barack Obama's inauguration speech and themes from Merton and the other writers.

So we come to know these writers mainly through a personal and journalistic lens. Sometimes it seems as if Ford is reporting to us what he has learned; often he listens – and asks us to listen – to interviewees, sometimes he is reflecting, and occasionally he editorializes. This style may not be typical, and at different stretches we simply move from one interview to another. Yet Ford's journalistic approach also casts light on different facets of the four men and adds personal insight and humanity to the narrative. Those who know the Merton community well will hear familiar voices – for example, Brother Paul Quenon, Father James Conner, Father Matthew Kelty, Brother Patrick Hart, Canon A. M. (Donald) Allchin. Less familiar perhaps will be Dr. Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, who discloses Merton's influence on him and his impressions of Merton. Collectively, these perspectives remind us of Merton as lover of solitude and nature, of Merton as simultaneously contemplative and active commentator on issues of peace, racial justice and depersonalizing cultural influences, of Merton as community member, priest, and monastic teacher, of Merton as spiritual guide, of Merton as facilitator of interreligious dialogue. And Ford encapsulates many of the essential messages, for example: "Contemplation was spiritual wonder

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and spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life and of being” (32); what “he [Merton] was seeking in solitude was not fulfillment but salvation for all” (37).

Ford’s portrait of Henri Nouwen, drawn from a previous interview and a more lengthy study, is likewise pithy and insightful. It certainly resonates with many of my own impressions gleaned while a student of Henri’s in a graduate course on spirituality. Nouwen’s extraordinary empathy for our wounded condition and his own confrontation with loneliness and emotional restlessness are well-represented. In a short section comparing Merton and Nouwen, Ford calls on John Eudes Bamberger, for whom Merton was once spiritual director, and who welcomed Nouwen for a long retreat at the Abbey of the Genesee while he was abbot there, to offer perspective. Fr. Eudes sees Merton as “a born artist and literary figure” and Henri as “a teacher and a communicator on the popular level” (93).

From Ford’s account of de Mello, we learn both of the eclectic mix of sources that informed the Indian-born Jesuit’s spiritual teaching and his charismatic storytelling, and the questioning by others of his fidelity to Christian theology. Ford chooses to emphasize the transcendent message of this man “of paradox,” honed by the teachings of eastern religion, that “The key to inner transformation [awakening to God] is awareness” (131-32).

In a chapter entitled “Befriending the Soul,” Ford describes John O’Donohue as an Irish philosopher and poet who “sought to rescue prayer from conventional forms of piety and return it graciously to the ancient narrative of the soul” (133). As in Nouwen’s case, Ford was able to interview O’Donohue directly. He emerges as an exceptionally sensitive poet of inner and outer landscapes. While walking with Ford on Ireland’s west coast, O’Donohue refers to a glacial deposit of huge rocks as “tabernacles of silence and memory” (135). The theme of awakening appears again, as O’Donohue speaks to benumbed inner lives needing liberation in the modern age. There are other themes: imagination, “soul friendship” (139), and the experience of beauty as the “awakening of a forgotten brightness” (145). Not least is the Eucharist – “where time and eternity came together” (154). O’Donohue’s personal story is complicated by his ultimate decision as a priest disenchanted with institutional Catholicism to give up public ministry.

Clearly Ford sees the human struggle and vulnerability of these writers, set alongside their heightened awareness of what Merton called the interior journey, as signs of their authenticity for our time. All four men were priests. But Ford is not concerned with their relation to orthodoxy or institution so much as with their power to evoke a deeper inner life within us; they “conveyed an intrinsic message of love and hope unconditioned by time or context” (161). In this lies their common appeal and their common relevance.

Some readers might want more critical and comparative perspective, or something more searching, in the way, for example, of *The Life You Save May Be Your Own: An American Pilgrimage*, Paul Elie’s study of Merton, Walker Percy, Flannery O’Connor and Dorothy Day. Notwithstanding, Ford’s book is highly readable and captures core ideas that reflect an author deeply committed to learning from his sources and trained to pay close attention to them. In the end, one might wish for a few more things: a woman’s voice, such as Joan Chittister’s, to complement the men’s; a bit more balance between the interview excerpts and the discursive text; a more extensive comparative summing up of the individual writers – an extension of the journalistic and reflective effort into something more general based on Ford’s belief in the power of these voices to help awaken us,

during a time when such awakening seems more needed and possible than usual, to our deeper selves. What we have is an idiosyncratic mix of commentary on the authors' teachings and their humanity from which we can make our own inquiries and judgments and reflect on our inner in relation to our cultural lives. For a synoptic journey into the writing and personal worlds of Merton, Nouwen, de Mello, and O'Donohue, Ford's *Spiritual Masters for All Seasons* is an intelligent and friendly guide.