

Sacred Disrupters as Spiritual Guides

Review of

Thomas Merton and Henri Nouwen: Spiritual Guides for the 21st Century

By Michael W. Higgins (12 lectures on 4 CDs)

Rockville, MD: Now You Know Media, 2018

\$119.95 (list); \$35.95 (sale) CD/Audio Download

Reviewed by **Gray Matthews**

Bear with me for a moment. The final book by the internationally renowned Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Heart* (1997), published the year he died, concluded with reflections on faith and the struggle for hope in relation to the “inconclusion” of being alive. Freire reasoned that “if hope is rooted in the inconclusion of being, something else is needed in order to personify it. It is necessary to accept the inconclusion that one becomes aware of. As one does that, one’s inconclusion becomes critical, and they may never lack hope again. Critical acceptance of my inconclusion necessarily immerses me in permanent search” (106). To become aware of the Life of your life disrupts premature conclusions.

Thomas Merton and Henri Nouwen represent what Michael Higgins calls “sacred disrupters” who enter the fields of our understanding to force us to think differently and help us to see differently – not merely provide us with new thoughts that we didn’t have before, but actually disrupt and reopen our very ways of seeing, thinking and living. Higgins shares his creative and integrative perspective of Merton and Nouwen as sacred disrupters in a new 12-lecture set of audio recordings entitled *Thomas Merton and Henri Nouwen: Spiritual Guides for the 21st Century*. The series provides a thorough investigation for both newcomers to, and longtime scholars of, the writings of Merton and Nouwen, of their lives and their influence on countless readers around the world. Higgins blends the words, biographies and histories of each man beautifully and in ways that avoid standard, stock treatments. This is a fresh appreciation of the uniqueness of what both men shared as affective intellectual and spiritual guides.

The twelve lectures are organized in four parts, though the series runs fluidly without a sense of overly labeled divisions or excessive typecasting of either Merton or Nouwen. The two opening lectures constitute the first major segment of the series, in which Higgins introduces and discusses both men together in terms of their being “principal architects of our spiritual wisdom.” The second section, the next four lectures, focuses primarily on Merton, yet Higgins

Gray Matthews, Assistant Professor of Communication at the University of Memphis, has served the International Thomas Merton Society in various capacities, including site coordinator for the ITMS Tenth General Meeting, co-editor of *The Merton Annual* and member of the ITMS Board of Directors. He has also served as the coordinator of Memphis ITMS Chapter since 2001. He will present his research on “Merton and Decolonization” at the ITMS Sixteenth General Meeting in June 2019.

always keeps sight of Nouwen in making comparisons and contrasts; Higgins concentrates here on the nature of Merton's prophetic and contemplative guidance in opening up spiritual life. The third section, likewise four lectures, switches to focus primarily on Nouwen, using the concepts of "Joy and Anguish" to flesh out Nouwen's insights and gifts in spiritual guidance. Finally, the fourth section, the two final lectures, hones in on their roles as spiritual disrupters, examining ways in which both Merton and Nouwen invite ways of "Fresh Seeing" into our lives.

These two concluding lectures represent and extend the scope of a keynote presentation by Higgins in 2017 at Yale Divinity School at a conference on Merton and Nouwen, co-sponsored by the Henri Nouwen Society and The Thomas Merton Center. The conference, which also featured presentations by Ron Rolheiser, Jim Forest and Robert Ellsberg, among others, commemorated the legacies of Nouwen and Merton while also honoring Nouwen's previous role as a professor at the school in 1971-1981. A video of Higgins' talk is available on YouTube at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=InJnV1IVt1>. Anyone who enjoys this video lecture by Higgins will likely want to hear the ten audio lectures in this particular set that provide an extensive background for his eloquent account of Merton and Nouwen as spiritual disrupters who were "unhoused in their language."

Thus this CD series grows out of the continued reflection of many about the unique contributions of Nouwen and Merton. Higgins, of course, is well known to Merton scholars and readers through his involvement in the ITMS and as author of *Heretic Blood: The Spiritual Geography of Thomas Merton* (1998), *Thomas Merton: Faithful Visionary* (2014) and *The Unquiet Monk: Thomas Merton's Questing Faith* (2015). Higgins is also a Nouwen scholar and biographer, co-author of *Genius Born of Anguish: The Life and Legacy of Henri Nouwen* (2012), and has also served as a clarion voice introducing other CD sets of lectures by Merton and Nouwen published by Now You Know Media.

Some remarks about Higgins' voice and conversational manner in this series are necessary to highlight what is so attractive and valuable about this series. The lectures are extremely well-edited and of the highest quality in sound production. They also move fluidly and effortlessly, in a style that one may have to remind oneself is not a spellbinding fictional tale! I say this because Higgins' style is far from the dry, stiltedly read and recorded script of a formal scholastic lecture, but instead enraptures the listener as if hearing a suspense story. For as much as you may already know about Merton and Nouwen, Higgins will disrupt your conclusions and help you see both afresh. Perhaps most surprising to me was the realization that you could listen to these lectures while driving, while sitting at a desk taking studious notes, or while listening late at night as if attending a theatrical drama. In fact, there is a cinematic quality to ways in which Higgins helps listeners see Merton and Nouwen.

Higgins not only discusses the two primary subjects, but also weaves reflections on a number of other guides to the spirit, peppering his lectures with quotes from people like Marilynne Robinson or from Vincent Van Gogh's letters to his brother Theo. These references are essential and vital to Higgins' ease in helping us appreciate the plentiful ways in which Merton and Nouwen broke open the living world and celebrated the struggle and hope of breaking through the hardness of our hearts and the hardness of our relations with others. Higgins understands

and conveys the integration of encouragement and honesty that Merton and Nouwen continue to refresh us with.

I must return to Paulo Freire now to share his reminder that “the struggle for hope is permanent, and it becomes intensified when one realizes it is not a solitary struggle” (106). Listening to Michael Higgins’ lectures on Merton and Nouwen is very likely to “intensify” one’s realization that we live in relation to one another, that our struggles to live are deeply shared, and that Merton and Nouwen were always disrupting our fatalistic conclusions otherwise so that we could live a living life.