

to speak and to take a definite position, and this has been weakness and betrayal on the part of those whose responsibility it was: they have been too deeply identified with secular interests” (183). Collins observes: “Thomas Merton’s belief in Christ’s church was much deeper than its structures or its rulers. He had experienced the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the community called church, something that endured no matter what happened to the ‘skeleton’ of the church” (186). With a certain finality, Merton comments to Doherty about the cost of true reform and renewal: “Well, we won’t really get out of the wilderness until everything is pressed out and there is nothing left but the pure wine to be offered to the Lord, transubstantiated into His blood” (195).

Padraic O’Hare

SWEENEY, Jon M., *Thomas Merton: An Introduction to His Life, Teachings, and Practices* (New York: St. Martin’s, 2021), pp. xxix, 127. ISBN: 978-1-250-25048-3 (paper) \$14.99.

“There are so many books about Thomas Merton, so why another?” asks Jon M. Sweeney in his introduction to *Thomas Merton: An Introduction to His Life, Teachings, and Practices* (xxv). Sweeney offers that he wishes to explore Merton “in a way that speaks directly to religiously unanchored people living in the twenty-first century” (xxv-xxvi). It is not, then, an academic study, and this is immediately apparent from the opening sentence, where he asks, “I would love to know what brought you here” (xvii). “Why another” book on Merton was the first question that occurred to me when I picked up the book. The second question was whether Sweeney could do justice to Merton’s life, teachings and practices in a mere one hundred and twenty-five pages?

Sweeney has built an impressive body of work that seeks to make the riches of contemplative and mystical Christian spirituality accessible to non-specialists. He has written a biography of St. Francis focused on sharing the friar’s spiritual teaching and practice,<sup>1</sup> collaborated with poet Mark S. Burrows to create two volumes that distill the thought of Meister Eckhart,<sup>2</sup> and recently released a biography of the Lakota medicine man and Christian mystic, Black Elk.<sup>3</sup> He would seem well suited to the task

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1. Jon M. Sweeney, *St. Francis of Assisi: His Life, Teachings, and Practices* (New York: St. Martin’s Essentials, 2019).

2. Jon M. Sweeney and Mark S. Burrows, *Meister Eckhart’s Book of the Heart: Meditations for the Restless Soul* (Newburyport, MA: Hampton Roads, 2017) and *Meister Eckhart’s Book of Secrets: Meditations on Letting Go and Finding True Freedom* (Newburyport, MA: Hampton Roads, 2017).

3. Jon M. Sweeney, *Nicholas Black Elk: Medicine Man, Catechist, Saint* (Collegeville,

of probing Merton's life and teaching for inquirers.

Sweeney connects with twenty-first century spiritual searchers by framing the story of Merton's life as a journey of spiritual seeking. He starts by providing a brief chronological list of the significant events in Merton's life (xiii-xv). This is followed by an Introduction (xvii-xxix) and nine short chapters, with each given a title that describes an aspect of Merton's spiritual journey and legacy (e.g., "A World-Weary Man" [c. 2] or "Leaving Sainthood Behind" [c. 8]).

Beginning with the Introduction he engages the reader with a direct, almost conversational, prose style. He asks questions, offers personal reflections and entices the reader forward by hinting at what is to come. The opening paragraph makes interest in Merton a shared project, but leaves the reader wondering why Sweeney was drawn to Merton. "What led you to go looking for Thomas Merton? I have my own reasons, which I'll mention in a minute" (xvii). On three other occasions he entices the reader by making a comment and following it with "more on that later" (xviii, xx), and on another occasion by letting the reader know there is a list of resources on Merton at the end of the book (xxiii).

Sweeney tells how, at age seventeen, a Mennonite acquaintance introduced him to Merton's writings on peace when he was thinking through ethical questions about war and registration for the draft. He then read *The Seven Storey Mountain*, visited the Abbey of Gethsemani and began to reflect on a possible vocation to monastic life, eventually electing to live out monastic values in the world. In offering this, Sweeney keeps the promise he made in his opening paragraph, identifies himself as a spiritual pilgrim and more deeply aligns himself with the seekers he is addressing.

The chapters that follow review Merton's life in roughly chronological sequence, occasionally moving back and forth in time to help emphasize the tensions and contradictions that beset him, and the interests and relationships that formed him.

The brief opening chapter (1-4) begins in 1968, with Merton in Bangkok, Thailand. Starting at Merton's death by accidental electrocution may seem an odd way to commence a biographical study. Sweeney, however, uses it to offer context for the era in which Merton wrote, and to begin his exploration of the spiritual journey that brought Merton to that point.

The second chapter (9-18) covers Merton's life from his birth in 1915 to his entry into the Abbey of Gethsemani in 1941. World Wars I and II, the death of Merton's parents, multiple geographic moves, Merton's wide interests and evident intelligence, his on-and-off spiritual seeking and his slow movement towards Catholicism are employed to offer

today's seekers a model of what the spiritual pilgrimage may look like. "Men and women everywhere were seeking meaning in the vacuums of what used to exist" (11), he writes. Sweeney points out that Merton was seeking advice on a religious vocation while shopping for a publisher for his poems and novels. He quotes a friend of Merton who observed, "He drank a lot, partied, chased (and caught) women. He impressed the hell out of . . . us by saying he had learned Hungarian in bed" (10). Sweeney notes, "despite his new faith and religious life, many of his dissipating ways of living continued" (14).

Merton's spiritual path was not straight, even after entering the monastery. Sweeney captures this ambiguity, concluding, "For people like Merton, a religious conversion is mostly about a way of seeing – or glimpsing something – that explains the world and their place in it. . . . But he wouldn't know where it would take him for a few more years to come" (18).

The third chapter (19-38) offers the reader a glimpse of the unremarkable life Merton led after entering the Abbey of Gethsemani. The abbot was experimenting with utilizing Merton's writing talents, but that didn't exempt him from a monastic formation that required manual labor, getting up at 2:00 a.m. for the first communal service of prayer and completing all seven services at their regular intervals by 7:00 p.m., along with periods of reading and study. There was little contact with the world outside the monastery. Encouraged by his abbot, Merton began to write more, eventually publishing poems and his autobiography. This led to commercial success and a contract for four more books, bringing him fame unbecoming to a monk. "His cumulative royalties, by 1954, had paid his monastery more than \$1 million" (34). Merton struggled for the rest of his life with the tensions created through his desire for solitude, his need to write, and the fame and expectations his writing brought.

The two chapters that follow (39-52; 53-63) trace Merton's teaching on the true and false self, the tension he experienced between the demands of community and his desire to be a hermit, his ongoing conflict between the need for solitude and the demands of writing, and the testing of his vows during his romantic affair with "M." Sweeney continues to connect the issues to his readers' search. He characterizes Merton as seeking "to honestly discern who he was, and distinguish this from who he might be pretending to be" and then remarks, "This is something that every person . . . has to undergo" (40). He points out Merton was willing to put his contradictions and struggles on paper, eventually coming "to see the flaws themselves as a natural part of a flawed self, seeking salvation" (46). He advises, "we should all be so self-aware, as Merton

was, and so willing to reconsider who we are as we are on a journey of lifelong conversion” (48).

Sweeney briefly sketches Merton’s affair with “M.” He admits this part of Merton’s life is seen by some as only sin and unfaithfulness to his vows, but he takes a more generous view, using it to explore notions of love and holiness. He suggests Merton learned through the affair that “love is not just more important than holiness but that holiness is impossible without love.” Yes, Merton broke his vows, but he also returned to his vows, “and that’s what conversion is always about” (63).

There is a brief chapter (64-70) dealing with Merton’s move to the hermitage. Sweeney begins by contrasting the closing lines of *The Seven Storey Mountain* with Merton’s experience at Fourth and Walnut. He depicts Merton as moving from triumphant, world-denying convert and monk, towards being a monk who realized that “following Jesus meant discovering humanity – his own, and that of others – and the essential unity of all things in God” (65). Moving to the hermitage allowed Merton to move beyond the structures of the cloister, towards a freedom more akin to the experimental and experiential spiritual quests of the fourth-century monks of the Egyptian desert. Sweeney sees during this period a softening of Merton’s heart and a deeper willingness “to live in the mystery of things, finding God in the questions that are without answers” (69).

He credits Merton with opening the metaphorical doors of the monastery, and “reaching into the monastic life of prayer and pulling its fruits and practices out for all to use. . . . He pointed toward monastic spiritual gifts for ordinary people. He showed us that it is possible to do what monks do, and to attain what monks are reaching for, while having jobs, families, and busy lives” (71). It is a monasticism that embraces the world. Sweeney emphasizes this by quoting Christine Valters Paintner: “The root of the word monk is *monachos* which means single, as in singular of focus, or single-hearted. The monk seeks to discover the divine presence in everything, every moment, every person. This is, of course, a lifelong practice and is never ‘perfected’” (76).

Merton’s curiosity and persistent searching took him into situations that disqualify him from traditional perfection-based views of holiness: exploration of eastern religions, broken vows of chastity and obedience, occasional recklessness, and his protests against war and racism that didn’t resonate with many Catholic bishops and theologians. Merton was dropped from stories featuring prominent American Catholics in the 2005 edition of the *United States Catholic Catechism for Adults*. Yet, suggests Sweeney, it is these very tensions that make Merton a trustworthy guide. Merton offers today’s spiritual seekers a holiness rooted in transparency

and love, conversion as a lifelong journey, and a willingness to engage the controversies of the times and speak prophetically to them.

Sweeney brings the reader back to Bangkok in the final chapter (97-110), sketching how Merton spent seven months searching out locations that might provide greater solitude, met with Buddhist teachers including the Dalai Lama, and encountered massive statues of the Buddha in Sri Lanka. He speculates that had Merton not died in Bangkok he would have likely relocated to a hermitage somewhere in the world that provided greater solitude, but likely would have continued “receiving guests, dancing at picnics, investigating whatever stimulated his mind, corresponding with rebels and saints all over the world” (100).

Sweeney introduces the reader to Merton’s thought in a way that is not overwhelming, quoting brief sections from Merton’s essays, journals, poetry and contemplative works. At the end of the narrative, in “Suggestions for Further Reading” (111-14), he offers a list of primary and secondary sources on Merton, prefacing it with “In my view, Merton’s most important books in the order in which they were published.” He goes on, “All the letters – You may want to begin with . . . All the journals – You might want to begin with . . . For the poetry, start here . . .” (111, 112). Approaching the resources this way he continues to act not as an expert, but as a guide accompanying the reader.

Some Merton followers might be disappointed with the material Sweeney covers or the resources he offers. They may not find “their Merton” in this book. Merton the poet and visual artist, for example, does not get significant attention. Merton’s deep connection to creation and its relationship to his life of prayer merits more extensive treatment, perhaps. Someone might prefer a more sustained reflection on Merton’s involvement in the peace movement. Readers might note there is no itemized list or detailed description of Merton’s spiritual practices. Those criticisms, however, would miss the point. Sweeney refuses to dictate to his readers. Instead, through consideration of Merton’s life and writing, he gently guides them, preferring to allow consideration of Merton’s life circumstances to suggest spiritual practices of solitude, prayer, friendship, deep listening and openness to the world. Merton is allowed to demonstrate that our seeking of the divine, our conversion to wisdom and love, is a lifelong quest.

Sweeney set out to give Merton to “religiously unanchored people” as a model of what it means to be an authentic seeker of wisdom. He offers Merton as a writer and seeker, constantly on pilgrimage. He is forthcoming about the contradictions in Merton’s life, of why some readers find him confusing or suspect, but presents Merton’s honest, autobiographical

writing as offering today's seeker a model of authentic searching for wholeness in the context of everyday living. Merton was "willing and able to be honest about his problems: . . . always he was open in sharing them . . . [he] wants to share what he has learned and is learning, and the learning is in real time." He quotes Merton offering "My life is a great mess," observing, "That may be so, but in that mess each of us who understands our life also as a kind of pilgrimage may find direction" (110). *Thomas Merton: An Introduction to His Life, Teachings, and Practices* is a remarkably fine introduction to both Merton and spiritual pilgrimage. It has immediately become my first recommendation to those who ask me, "Who was Thomas Merton?"

Paul Pynkoski

FOREST, Jim, *Eyes of Compassion: Learning from Thich Nhat Hanh*, Introduction by Mobi Warren (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2021), pp. xvii, 138. ISBN 978-1-62698-424-8 (paper) \$20.00.

Buddhist monk, spiritual leader and writer Thich Nhat Hanh (b. 1926) only preceded Jim Forest (b. 1941) in death by about a month in early 2022. In a brief period, we lost two of Merton's friends and significant peacemakers of the Vietnam War era and beyond. I did not have the chance to meet Nhat Hanh, known to friends and devotees alike as "Thay" (Teacher). Jim Forest was an Orthodox Christian, writer and peacemaker who first encountered Thomas Merton in 1961 during his work with Dorothy Day at the Catholic Worker, serving for a time as its newspaper's managing editor. He later worked for the Fellowship of Reconciliation and cofounded the Catholic Peace Fellowship, assisting Catholic conscientious objectors to the Vietnam War. Forest himself served in the U.S. Navy before conversion to Catholicism and receiving an early discharge from military service on the grounds of conscientious objection. He would later in life serve as the international secretary of the Orthodox Peace Fellowship after being received into the Orthodox Church. He has written memoirs and books, including biographies of Dorothy Day and Merton.<sup>1</sup>

I met Jim on a few occasions and through some brief correspondence. It was a pleasure to spend more time with him, even if virtually, through a book. Because of the personal and conversational tone of *Eyes of Compassion*, other readers may share this impression of being in the presence of two devoted peacemakers and learning from each wisdom

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1. Jim Forest, *All Is Grace: A Biography of Dorothy Day* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011); Jim Forest, *Living with Wisdom: A Life of Thomas Merton* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991; rev. ed. 2008).