

tive life with a prophetic commitment is challenging and will challenge the status quo in most professional contexts. At the same time, Lootens' book is both promising and refreshing. It is promising because we can take heart from Lootens' own experience of using Merton for his own theological reflection in his own professional contexts in Belgium and Germany. Lootens introduces some of the best scholarship and practices to enhance ongoing professional development for the practical theologian. This is refreshing because it can breathe a new spirit into both work and life. Finally, Lootens' book is important because it is birthed on the European continent with work contexts located there. This underscores Merton's own global life and continuing global relevancy.

Alan Kolp

DENNY, Steven A., *The Merton Prayer: An Exercise in Authenticity*, Photographs by Stephen L. Huffman (Chicago: ACTA, 2022), pp. ix, 182. ISBN: 978-0-87946-703-6 (cloth) \$24.95; 978-0-87946-717-3 (paper) \$19.95.

In the acknowledgments section of his new book, author Steven Denny expresses surprise, shared by his publisher, that no one had previously taken a "deep dive" (180) into what is probably the most widely familiar of Thomas Merton's writings, the prayer that begins "My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going."<sup>1</sup> Fortunately Denny has taken the plunge, and the resulting volume is replete with various "pearls of wisdom" drawn from reflections on the text of the poem, from related scriptural verses and from anecdotes of the author's own experience.

Denny is perhaps an unlikely, or at least unexpected, advocate and commentator for the prayer. Born into an evangelical Kentucky family, he was ordained a minister at an early age after attending bible college and became an enthusiast for biblical and eventually other ancient mid-eastern languages who went on to study at the University of Chicago until it became evident that positions in academia for his specialty would be virtually unavailable. After serving as a patient advocate in a Chicago hospital he eventually went to law school, and for nearly three decades he has committed himself to pursuing the rights of the poor and marginalized in his one-person law firm with its motto of "Striving for Justice in an Imperfect World" (177), while continuing to serve in various positions in local Protestant congregations and ministries. This rather unusual combination of clerical and scholarly formation and a legal practice

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1. Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1958) 83 (subsequent reference will be cited as "TS" parenthetically in the text).

serving the underserved has given him a particularly rich perspective in which to consider Merton's prayer. He successfully combines the textual perceptiveness of the scholar, as adapted to a popular audience, with the personal testimony of the believer, while avoiding conventionally pious rhetoric that sometimes mars the "devotional" genre.

After a brief Introduction (1-5) tracing the original impetus for the book to a 2014 conversation with a fellow attorney who was equally attracted to and moved by Merton's prayer, and a slightly longer Part One: "Why The Merton Prayer . . . and Why Merton" (9-16), that highlights both the influence of the prayer and of Merton himself as one of the most significant spiritual teachers of twentieth-century American Christianity, Part Two, the body of the book, entitled "Unpacking The Merton Prayer" (17-143), consists of fourteen sections, devoted to reflections on the successive phrases of which the prayer is composed.

Each of these sections follows the same basic five-fold pattern. All are preceded by evocative photographs taken by the author's friend Stephen L. Huffman, which are intended to provide a visual analogue or "prompt" for the verbal segment of the prayer to be discussed. For example, §II: "I Have No Idea Where I Am Going" (33-41), features a dirt path emerging in the lower left-hand corner and soon disappearing into the undergrowth and the misty wooded landscape ahead; §XIV: "And You Will Never Leave Me to Face My Perils Alone" (137-43) shows two climbers ascending a sheer cliff-face (also reproduced on the book's cover). The final photo of a waterfall in the midst of a forest, with a footbridge bathed in sunlight above the stream, suggests key images of the prayer as a whole (146).

The second element is a selection of six scripture passages for each segment, presented without comment, in which the author finds significant parallels with that part of the prayer. For example, §III: "I Do Not See the Road Ahead of Me" (43-49), features three Psalm verses (5:8, 18:36, 25:4, 8, 12) referring to the "right" or "wide" path, along with passages from Deuteronomy about the journey on which the Lord goes before his people (31:8); from James warning the overconfident who think they do in fact see where, how and when they are going when in fact "life is like the morning fog" (4:13-15); and from Ephesians, expressing Paul's desire that his community may have the eyes of their hearts enlightened and so put their hope in the promises and power of their God (1:18-19a). In these sections Denny makes no claims that the specific passages quoted necessarily had any direct, conscious (or even subconscious) influence on Merton's ideas or wording, but suggests that they do provide a context for recognizing the rich matrix of revelation out of which the prayer emerged.

The third element in each section is Exegesis, a rather bold use of a

technical term for an audience many of whom may find it unfamiliar and perhaps even daunting. But he has explained and exemplified it in his opening note, even providing its literal translation of “leading out” the inner meaning of a text (20-21). These commentaries, typically ranging from a couple of paragraphs to a couple of pages, elucidate the intellectual meaning of the language of the text, without becoming overly academic or abstruse. For example, in §VII: “But I Believe That the Desire to Please You Does in Fact Please You” (77-87), Denny sees the “little adversative word *but*” as the turning point of the entire prayer, moving beyond all that is not known to the trust and faith that “turns everything around in this prayer” – even to the point of maintaining that “in fact” the desire to please God is itself pleasing to God, which says something profound about God’s relationship to the people of God, made in God’s own image.

The fourth component, “Personal Stories,” is always the lengthiest. Here Denny draws on his own experiences (or occasionally those of friends and colleagues) to illustrate the ways in which what is being described in a particular segment of the prayer is reflected in the concrete circumstances, sometimes ordinary, sometimes transformative, of one’s own daily life. While relying extensively on incidents from his own life, these stories do not come across as self-centered, even when they are deeply self-revelatory. They direct attention to the words of the prayer, and to the divine Master to whom these words are addressed. For example, §XI: “Therefore I Will Trust You Always, Though I May Seem to Be Lost and in the Shadow of Death” (115-20), presents his struggle with the 2016 diagnosis of “very aggressive prostate cancer” (also considered earlier, in §IV, when he notes that it was stubbornly unpassed kidney stones which prompted the biopsy that revealed the cancer that would otherwise have gone undetected until it was too late), and his simple declaration that “The Merton Prayer saved my life,” as its repeated use brought a deep calm and “the confidence that God is real, trustworthy, and cares about me, just like Merton’s prayer says. . . . God alone is worthy of my unwavering and total trust. . . . even in ‘the shadow of death’” (118-19). But he also warns against a facile, superficial interpretation of the divine will in particular circumstances, as in §VI: “And the Fact That I Think That I Am Following Your Will Does Not Mean That I Am Actually Doing So” (67-75), in which he tells of an incident when a colleague’s claims to divine approval of a questionable decision becomes a rejection of a process of communal discernment, a choice of self-deception and manipulative behavior, whether intended or not.

The final element of each section is called “Turn It, Turn It, Turn It,” borrowed from a rabbi’s directive as to how to study Torah – by looking

at the text from all angles, in all its breadth, depth and height (3-4). It is a set of five questions for further reflection and appropriation to help make the words of the prayer one's own. For example, in §V: "Nor Do I Really Know Myself" (59-66), readers are encouraged to ask when they last "made more than a cursory inquiry into who you are and what is really happening in your life," to hear the challenge of the prophet Jeremiah to "chew on your own 'heart condition' with brutal honesty," to make a special effort to "match your private life with your public persona," to discover what is blocking complete transparency with God and oneself and wrestle as Paul did with the gap between recognizing and doing what is right (65-66).

The purpose of this five-fold approach, as Denny proposes at the very outset of his book, is to demonstrate how "The Merton Prayer can be a model prayer for Christians seeking greater authenticity in their prayer life," in the hope that the "158 words of this amazing prayer may become for you, as they have for me and many others, a powerful connector to God," an integral part of one's daily prayer practice as "you turn to God with your petitions, thanks, and intentions" (4). Denny proves to be a congenial, attractive and persuasive guide to the spiritual wisdom articulated in this famous and beloved prayer.

It should probably be pointed out before closing that while Denny is a genuine scholar, though one who wears his learning lightly, he is not, and makes no claim to be, a Merton scholar. His very brief overview of Merton's life (12-15), included for the sake of those encountering the monk for the first time, includes a few quite minor errata. For example, he was not "lecturing to Buddhist monks in Thailand" at the time of his death, but to fellow Christian monks in the Benedictine tradition. Somewhat more pertinent is the conjecture, made with no supporting references, that the prayer "was likely created . . . in the mid-1940s," a supposition that is inconsistent with his suggestion in the following sentence that it "may have been first written down by him while praying in St. Anne's" (15), the converted tool-shed (not a "tiny chapel-hut") that was first given to Merton for prayer in 1953 (as Denny himself notes later in the book [153]), at the time that, according to Merton himself (see *TS* 11), he wrote what was to become *Thoughts in Solitude*.

More to the point, though, than these minor inaccuracies and inconsistencies, is that what Denny wisely makes no attempt to do is to weave Merton's own "personal stories" into the discussion of his prayer. There is only a single reference (in §VII), to Merton's own "failures and flaws," and virtually no instances where Merton's other writings are cited to help illuminate the meaning of the prayer. Denny's purpose is not to

focus attention on the prayer's author, but to show how this prayer can assist others not to come to know Merton better but to come to know themselves better, to discover their own true identity, to reflect on the process of their own spiritual journey, above all to encounter and deepen their relationship with the Lord who is their companion, their guide and their goal. Ultimately, the "I" of the prayer is not primarily its composer but anyone and everyone who makes its words their own, the "pray-er" (see 9) who engages in this "exercise in authenticity." Thomas Merton himself, no doubt, would wholeheartedly agree.

Patrick F. O'Connell

MIKULICH, Alex, *Unlearning White Supremacy: A Spirituality for Racial Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2022) pp. xl, 168. ISBN: 978-1-6269-8466-0 (paper) \$27.00.

Kerry Connelly writes in *Good White Racist* that the best way for white folks to begin the conversation on unlearning white supremacy culture is to accept our own part in it, unequivocally: "Hi. I'm Kerry, and I'm a racist," she begins.<sup>1</sup> Catholic theologian and ethicist Alex Mikulich takes a similar approach in *Unlearning White Supremacy: A Spirituality for Racial Liberation*, admitting his own complicity and frequently addressing the reader as "we": "*We* have never fully confronted the colonialist roots of white supremacy. *We* need to confront the ways in which US democracy is built upon anti-Black coloniality" (xxxviii, emphasis added). Drawing on Thomas Merton's *Seeds of Destruction*,<sup>2</sup> his "primary inspiration" (xi), Mikulich doesn't just invite white people of faith to take responsibility for our role in anti-Black white supremacy; he insists the responsibility is ours, and he doesn't spare himself, even as someone who has been doing anti-racist work in churches for decades.

To be honest, I wondered what Mikulich might bring to this ongoing conversation that hasn't already been said. The canon of white folks writing about issues of racial justice and white supremacy is growing, after all, and Mikulich himself has been writing about the topic for more than 20 years while working as an antiracism facilitator. In this book, he draws on years of practical personal experience to invite white readers of faith into hard truths, historical perspectives, powerful self-reflection and possible ways forward. This approach is an important addition to the genre, especially for white Merton scholars and white Catholics.

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1. Kerry Connelly, *Good White Racist? Confronting Your Role in Racial Injustice* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2020) 1.

2. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964).