

seekers that made the counterculture after World War II so profane and yet inspired, ludic and yet deeply serious.

Lisette N. Gibson

BRAGAN, Kenneth, *The Rising Importance of Thomas Merton's Spiritual Legacy* (Singapore: Strategic Book Publishing, 2016), pp. xviii + 49. ISBN: 978-1-681815893 (paper) \$9.95.

In the context of the 2015 centenary year of Thomas Merton's birth and the 2018 fiftieth anniversary of his death, it is certainly timely to assess Merton's spiritual legacy, and the title of this book offers to do that. In his introduction to this slim volume, Kenneth Bragan lays out his stall. He places Merton's spiritual legacy in the context of natural spirituality, which he feels has received a boost from recent neuroscience claims that "there is an area of the brain receptive to signs of transcendence just as there are areas responsive to the five senses" (vii). From this viewpoint, mystical experience is now "a natural phenomenon. . . . Nothing unworldly or supernatural about it – it is just another function of the brain, although one that is only consciously operative in special states of awareness, such as meditation, prayer, and contemplation" (vii). Traditional theism is then replaced by an experiential approach where God is found in human wholeness, which further connects with neuroscience.

Here Bragan brings in Merton's spirituality and "the equation of finding the truth of oneself along with finding God" (viii). It is this perspective, apparently given legitimacy by neuroscience, that the author thinks will lead to a rising importance of Merton's take on spirituality. In the remainder of the introduction, Bragan outlines Merton's early life and conversion, writing that Merton's inner changes "are amenable to being fully understood by the advances being made in neuroscience. . . . His journals make this abundantly clear" (xvii).

In the next chapter Bragan draws on one piece of research where near-death experiences in the operating theatre are linked to certain neural pathways that the author then calls the spiritual doorway in the brain. Under certain crises, physiological changes in our brain produce neurochemistry, which leads to strange sensations of intense spirituality, which are then framed and defined by life experiences and memory.<sup>1</sup>

Merton records no such experiences from the times when he was actually on a hospital operating table. However, Bragan proceeds to place him on a metaphorical one as he then dissects Merton's "God-experience"

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1. See <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2011/mar/13/kevin-nelson-near-death-experience> (accessed 8 March 2017).

as an inter-subjective and purely experiential “this-world” spirituality. Largely moving away from neuroscience in the remaining chapters, Bragan explores Merton’s relationship with Christ that “provides particularly convincing evidential support” (12) of Christ’s healing and redeeming power. He firmly links this to Merton’s love for and loss of his father. This idea is taken from one of Bragan’s earlier books<sup>2</sup> (he has written three on Merton), and more from that work re-emerges in the chapter called “Saintliness” and in the next one on self-psychology. A general exploration of what faith might mean from a Christian perspective follows, and the final chapter moves back to mysticism and to internalized self-object experiences (also covered in his earlier work). Bragan ends with hope of a spiritual revival where we put away concerns about belief and learn from Merton’s spiritual legacy.

For this reviewer, the arguments were unconvincing and presented in an incoherent and sometimes random manner; ideas were picked up and then taken nowhere, leaving the reader confused. A measured exploration of what natural spirituality means and how Merton’s writings might or might not support this was missing, and the study of the one neuro-scientist that was quoted needed to have been placed in context. It was only by looking the study up myself that I could understand the scientist’s findings, which actually seemed at odds with what Bragan took from the study. Merton’s hugely impressive theological understanding of the importance of the frame and context of contemplative prayer was ignored, and his wide and deep understanding of inner manifestations of religious experience bypassed.

Aspects of today’s scientific orthodoxy where the self is seen as nothing more than an elaborate illusion can be seen to have some resonance with Christian mysticism and indeed Buddhism, but there is more to us and to our religious life than a jumble of brain cells. The philosopher Mary Midgley argues against simply equating brain and self, and reveals in a recent book<sup>3</sup> how ideas, traditions and myths have been twisted to fit in, seemingly naturally, with science’s current preoccupations with the physical, and in doing so have made many other valuable activities and ideas appear as anti-scientific.

Finally, Kenneth Bragan draws selectively on William James, Carl Jung’s theory of archetypes and Joseph Campbell, amongst others, but, as highlighted in an earlier review,<sup>4</sup> once again the author does not

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2. See Kenneth Bragan, *The Making of a Saint: A Psychological Study of the Life of Thomas Merton* (Durham, CT: Strategic Book Group, 2011).

3. See Mary Midgley, *Are You An Illusion?* (Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2014).

4. See Fiona Gardner, “A One-sided Venture: Review of *The Making of a Saint*:

include full references, has no bibliography and continues to misspell Gethsemani (it is *not* Gethsemane). I share Bragan's love and hope for the promulgation of Merton's work, but sadly this is not the vehicle for it and for the accompanying spiritual revival.

Fiona Gardner

LUCAS, F. Dean, *Merton's Abbot: The Life and Times of Dom James Fox* (Lexington, KY: Frederic D. Lucas, 2016), pp. 388. ISBN 978-0-9978073-0-1 (paper) \$19.95.

Merton's abbot, Dom James Fox, has long been of some marginal interest because – well, he was Merton's abbot. One of three of Merton's abbots, Dom James held responsibility for Merton the longest – twenty years from 1948 to shortly before Merton's death in 1968. Here in Lucas' book is at last a rounded picture of the man, Dom James Fox, as he stands on his own, in the broader context of his times and actions. We see him as the person he was, as he understood himself as a monk trying to serve God. His simple, consistent spirituality is brought into sharp focus and remains essential to understanding every episode of his story. He was a man of many mottos, but his principal motto expressed the real, wholehearted dedication he maintained over many decades: "All for Jesus, through Mary – with a smile."

Dean Lucas follows Dom Fox's curriculum vitae from the family background in Boston, through his public-school education and devout Catholic family life, to his stellar performance at Harvard. It was there that Fox suffered a loss of faith. Eventually Henry Fox's self-proclaimed ambition to become a millionaire was brought to a halt by the realization that he had one radical choice, either worldly wealth or Jesus alone. That pivotal decision set the radical tone of his subsequent life, aimed at 100% personal dedication to the Lord.

After service in the U.S. Navy, Fox entered the Passionist Order, and that religious formation forever set the tone and focus of his spirituality through his subsequent monastic years. After six years in the Passionists, dedicated to apostolic life, he felt a call to a strictly contemplative way of life of "silence, solitude and seclusion." Upon entering the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani, Fr. James aspired to a hidden place in the community. He was assigned to attend to health needs of his abbot, Dom Edmond Obrecht, eventually becoming his traveling companion. Obrecht's successor, Dom Frederic Dunne, recognized in Fr. James a talent

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*A Psychological Study of the Life of Thomas Merton* by Kenneth Bragan," *The Merton Seasonal* 37.1 (Spring 2012) 29-33.