

contents, Poks focuses on Merton's transcending of binary divisions in the poem, not only sexual and racial, but even human and non-human. The image of the Lamb in the opening section of the poem not only deconstructs the associations of God with patriarchal domination, but extends the reach of ultimate communal integration both to the outcast fratricide of Genesis: "Lamb admits ties to Cain' enacts an epistemic decolonization of the nonhuman, or the not-quite human, beyond the mirror game of oppositional politics" (126) – and to the entire creation: citing a line of his poetic master Blake about his own place of residence, Merton is "suggesting cross-species kinship," Poks writes: "the name Lambeth, the place of the Lamb, resonates with a promise of justice that extends beyond the human to non-human animals. . . . In God's Kin(g)dom every being will be a node in a dense web of relations" (128-29). Echoing the words of a seventeenth-century "Ranter," Merton affirms the presence of God "in all creatures . . . the life and being of them all" (130) so that heaven is already found wherever love and mercy reign.

Whether by happenstance, divine providence or a particularly well-crafted call for papers, this group of conference presentations has a degree of textual and thematic unity unusual in such collections. There are a few minor infelicities: the numerous instances of one-syllable words being hyphenated over two lines may provoke amusement or annoyance, or both; Thielman's references to "Third Advent 2017" (102) and to "Dostojewski" (105, 106) in his generally competent translation of his own essay may cause some puzzlement; reversing the order of the two final pieces might have been an appropriate alteration for publication, grouping all the formal presentations together and thus giving "Merton" the last word. But gratitude is due to the editors, authors and translators for making this material available and accessible to an English-speaking audience, able to participate at least vicariously in "an occasion marked by companionship and mutuality, conversation and laughter, prayer and feasting" (8), all made possible by a grant well deserved and funds well spent, as ITMS members can confirm for themselves by purchasing a copy, very reasonably priced and readily obtainable through Amazon.

Patrick F. O'Connell

PRAMUK, Christopher, *The Artist Alive: Explorations in Music, Art & Theology* (Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2019), pp. 324. ISBN 978-1-59982-838-1 (paper) \$29.95.

In August 1969, the musical festival Woodstock happened. Artists performed in front of over 400,000 people, three days of peace and music.

Less than three months later, at the Altamont Speedway in California, the Rolling Stones headlined “Woodstock” west. Four people died and the tenor of the experience was one of paranoia and fear. The Hells Angels, given the task of security, were liberal with pool cues as weapons. They also used bike spokes as makeshift stabbing devices. The Rolling Stones played *Sympathy for the Devil* as fights broke out in the front rows, as if the evil of humanity had been called out by the song. A year and a half earlier, in April 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated. College campuses on both coasts were in havoc, and the Grateful Dead played a free concert outside of Columbia Law School, a chaotic sort of art to amplify the strange tremors of freedom and ferment. Thomas Merton died some months later in Thailand by electrocution. Merton seemed to have sensed the coming fusion of art, protest and subversive poetry in his appreciations for John Coltrane and Bob Dylan, not to mention his own counter-cultural *Cables to the Ace*,¹ a foray into what amounts to a post-modern critique of language and culture. When Merton died, Joni Mitchell, who did not make it to Woodstock but wrote an anthem to the event, was 25. Cradle Catholic Bruce Springsteen was 20. Their fertile minds would transpose the agonizing and the redemptive into beautiful music. They persist in their art, turning the vagaries of human experience into doxologies, redeeming the time. They are two of the “alive” artists who figure in these *Explorations in Music, Art & Theology*.

In many ways Woodstock and Altamont represent dramatically the dynamic hope and tragedy of American history, an intensive recapitulation of America’s ideological propensities: Eden’s atmospherics devolving into turf wars and violence; the utopian Puritan and ordered landscape of Massachusetts Bay, confronting what seems to them a chaotic wilderness traversed by native tribes; Jacksonian democracy and manifest destiny meeting the violent and Hobbesian searches for gold and oil; American history – the idealism of progressive and utopian vistas meeting the stark realities of what has become technocratic power. Those with capital, efficient technology and marketing do the talking and determine how the rest of us might be inclined to approach matters of life, death and meaning. How do we stop this train (wreck)? Can we get off, walk away, think, pray, start over and move contemplatively into the remaining years of this twenty-first century? Can theology help here? Christopher Pramuk’s explorations have something to do with living in the tensions of such contrasting visions of the American drama.

The theological work of the likes of John Courtney Murray and Reinhold Niebuhr, those for whom religion and democracy were highly

1. Thomas Merton, *Cables to the Ace* (New York: New Directions, 1968).

valued prospects, is both accessible and logical in terms of framing the relation of faith and secular democracy. But the clarity of their voices has become lost in the cacophonies of digital culture. As Neil Postman, and before him Walter Ong, have made so clear, this digital culture is low on the scale of reading literacy, and high on the scale of imagistic, sonic and digital literacy. How do theologians operate in this milieu? At the least, they must be bi-literate. First, if like Pramuk you came of age in the seventies and eighties, there really is no way to disaffiliate from certain cultural aesthetics. Rock-n-roll, television and movies have presented a world to you, a world Thomas Merton could only begin to imagine. And if you were a person of faith, and were raised with an eye toward justice, you would inevitably begin to carve out an aesthetic space among the mass of expressive possibilities of what it means to be human. Merton's attraction to Coltrane and Dylan, among other artists, is evidence of his foresight that theology must begin to shift literacies. This is not, however, either a desire to be relevant and faddish (thus mimicking the very culture one interprets), nor is it a desire to lose the literacy of logic and argumentation to forge the truth. It is, rather, a pastoral desire to give the world a deeper experience of contemplation and awareness and thus enliven a sense of the mystery of Christ's presence in the world. Not only has Merton's hermeneutic been deciphered by Christopher Pramuk, it is now taken up and given legs in this highly accessible and teachable book.

In two widely acclaimed previous books, *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton*² and *At Play in Creation: Merton's Awakening to the Feminine Divine*,³ Pramuk invites us to remember, with Thomas Merton, the good and sacred intentions for the world as an elemental aspect of Christian freedom. *Artist Alive* invites us to enter the possibility, and perhaps, the existential ground of such hope. If I could move beyond the message of the art, to the wisdom that both prefigures it and confirms its possibility, then I may be able to foster a stance which gives hope to others. That is the melody I hear Pramuk belting out.

The song goes something like this. In the introduction and first chapter the nature of art is interpreted as a discipline of perception that expands the human spirit. In this way art is a preparation for grace, because through it we renew our vision of ourselves and the world. This creative perception Pramuk connects to the Holy Spirit (see 17). Opening these first chapters we come to understand that the book is

2. Christopher Pramuk, *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009).

3. Christopher Pramuk, *At Play in Creation: Merton's Awakening to the Feminine Divine* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014).

an invitation “to explore some of the deepest questions rising from the human spiritual and social journey as mediated by artistic voices in both popular and religious culture” (10). This will be undertaken in a “case studies” approach informed by artist Robert Henri (1865-1929), whose work *The Art Spirit* inspired Pramuk to connect contemplative methodology and the arts. Also, as becomes clear, the book is inspired by the author’s sixteen years of teaching and builds upon “joyful practices of shared theological reflection and vocational discernment” (17). I can attest to how resourceful it is, having adapted some of the expressions to the undergraduate classroom in a philosophy of communication class by listening to Pink Floyd with digital natives. I can see how easily the resources would translate into retreat or even graduate settings, since bibliographies are provided for each case study, including audio and visual resources. These resources become necessary for the reader’s experience, because the author consistently invites the reader to stop reading in order to listen or see the art in question (available on the internet). Five appendices provide detailed suggestions for pedagogical activities and assessments (284-94). In ten dense chapters, the author works through many sides of the following question: is the artistic spirit, inflamed by wonder, akin to the prophetic spirit, and if so, how? Here, the notion of presence is offered, the way embodied experience of receptivity and openness interrupts routinized perception and presumptions. Art can invade and even deconstruct more essentialist interpretations of the way things are, just as prophets tend to do. A plethora of examples follow, mostly provided by prominent figures in the cultural canon, drawing theological reflection from somewhat familiar cultural sources.

The book’s structure builds on the second chapter’s focus on post-World-War-II alienation. For Pramuk, it is Pink Floyd’s *Dark Side of the Moon* which reveals the madness of the English-speaking West’s aimless will to power. That sort of alienation is parsed out in chapters three through nine, which amplify how anxiety pervades and instantiates various demographics, including the rich and powerful. Joni Mitchell and Bruce Cockburn are featured as poets who critique and lead us beyond materialism. Jean Giono and Godfrey Reggio are paired, providing analysis of how both literature and film can reveal the emptiness of technological culture as both call for a deeper awareness and silence in their arts. We are invited to see through racist structures with the blind artist Stevie Wonder and author and activist John Howard Griffin; explore a theology of death and communion with Billie Holiday, Peter Gabriel and U2; interrogate the meaning of love and sexual mores with the Indigo Girls; free the digital gaze for a theology of iconography with Fr. William Hart

McNichols; confront the American reality of suffering and evil with the help of Bruce Springsteen.

In carefully analyzing both artists and their expressions, Pramuk is deeply sensitive to the moral complex of mass culture, often repressed, but cathartically re-presented in art. Alienation always leaves us with a contested epistemology. All adolescents who inevitably see the hypocrisy of their parents experience this dissonance. When the dissonance is writ large, say, when a teacher calmly tells you to prepare for a shooting drill, or in the case of Pink Floyd, prepare for an actual bombing with cool equanimity, the dissonance is amplified. Who is really crazy here? And if, as a child conforming to the standard routine of preparing for mass violence, I am not crazy, then everyone else around me has to be. This dissonance is put in different keys with each case study. For example, Pramuk has us consider Joni Mitchell's lyrical poetry and beautiful voice and melodies in order to deconstruct modern materialism. Mitchell's song "*For Free*" interrogates her own status as a paid musician, a ward of the record company indulging in frivolous comforts while a street musician performs for the love of the art. Such vulnerability and self-criticism accompanied by Mitchell's artistic rendering invites a contemplative moment to situate itself in the midst of mindless consumption.

Stevie Wonder's sonic reflections on his own childhood ("*I Wish*") become buoyant evidence of our innate desire to return, with Jesus, to childhood – a mind structured to a sense of justice, goodness and truth. This "child-mind," a focus of Buddhism as well, can be both encapsulated and evinced through this music (like Pramuk I would encourage us to listen to the song to give "buoyant" its proper adjectival reference). The sixth case study, for me, is explicitly Catholic in its orientation and provides the reader/student with multi-dimensional lenses to examine history, suffering, truth and redemption. The art by Billie Holiday, Peter Gabriel and the Irish band U2 is examined in terms evoking anamnesis: deep memory and the public, conjured presence of martyrdom. Holiday's "*Strange Fruit*" is especially haunting in this regard and Pramuk leads us to the foot of the lynching tree. The theological work of loosening the grip of American amnesia through the sonic evocation of anamnesis is shown to be a vitally necessary, yet painful, process. Pramuk demonstrates how to confront both the art and the historical evil it brings so intimately close to our experience. He thus provides a sort of premonition of how to enter into the suffering of the trauma of living under the constant force of white racism. Solidarity is strengthened, if not born, in artistic renderings of suffering, pain, trauma and injustice. Here is where the teaching aspect of this book is so applicable to digital culture. Billie Holiday's music is

highly accessible today. Students can be given the tools to contextualize her music and thus can be provided the interpretive tools to engage the truths of history with dispositions of openness and aesthetic appreciation. Since prophetic Christianity involves the constant resistance to evil and easy answers, this way of approach can bear more healthy fruit.

Recent events have reminded the church that violence too is a form of communication. Repression and oppression, artistically expressed, have their own artistic logic. One question that remains for me, having read this richly informative and teachable book, is the way art can represent not only tragedy and hope, but also frivolity, meaninglessness and annihilation. Some of Pramuk's discussions rightly hold the church accountable for egregious errors resulting in suffering and trauma, but there is never a probing of the phenomena of the arts celebrating over-indulgence, narcissism and sexual promiscuity – something rock-n-roll in particular proudly owns as part of its narrative. In other words, the artist alive can also mean something the author rarely acknowledges, the YOLO (you only live once) effect that many students embrace as the inheritance of John Lennon's gnostic anthem, *Imagine*. One wonders how Merton might evaluate the unfettered freedom of art that contains in its very form and methodology the necessity of unbounded animus, freed from any constraints that detract from its exploration and expression. Adolescents are certainly attracted to such freedom, and music and art can set off a new path of exploration for many of us. But people of faith are ultimately bound, with the prophets, to the oftentimes boring and arduous tasks of telling the truth and loving our neighbors, even when those neighbors *hate* our most cherished icons like Pink Floyd or U2. The teenage lovers in Bruce Springsteen's "*The River*" are the very same people who will likely vote for a candidate that we enlightened contemplative types may despise (another chance to look up a song). A love of Springsteen's art and the political values of his fans cannot be directly correlated. A Springsteen fan does not necessarily hold the same values as Bruce Springsteen. This is because art is never constrained by the ideologies from which it is expressed. In my reading, sometimes I got the sense that Pramuk wants the reader to embrace a certain ideological position, some sort of implicit shared understanding that results from engaging the art. This seems to confirm what I can only call a therapeutic hermeneutic, and students consistently expressing how they "feel," not necessarily what they think. The hip Bill Clinton invited us to feel the future by employing Fleetwood Mac ("*Don't Stop Thinking about Tomorrow*"); we're living in that future and it doesn't feel so good. Apparently many of us did stop *thinking* about tomorrow. Bi-literate theologians can re-construct discursive processes, we hope, after the art

dissipates into the digital ether. Pramuk does that pretty consistently, but there are certain presumptions in his conclusions which can constrict rather than open up a dialogue.

Despite this caveat, I have to consider at bottom how I have been affected by the book. The truth is that I am a “better” Pink Floyd fan, a better teacher and more attuned to art for reading this book. Followers of Jesus have to live somewhere between Woodstock and Altamont, seeing each as an expression of a fallen humanity. I have concluded thus because Pramuk brings us along with sensitivity and pastoral care, opening us to artistic renderings of glory and tragedy in order that we feel them more authentically – informed, we hope, by the tenderness of the Holy Spirit.

Aaron K. Kerr

MEYER, William, *Three Breaths and Begin: A Guide to Meditation in the Classroom* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2019), pp. 242 pp. ISBN: 978-1608685721 (paper) \$16.95.

William Meyer, author of two young adult historical adventure novels and an illustrated picture book for children on guided meditation, *Big Breath*,¹ offers a practitioner’s guide for educators to introduce meditation into the classroom through his latest work, *Three Breaths and Begin*. As a full-time secondary educator, always in search of additional classroom resources to help engage students to further self-discovery, I was intrigued and excited to get my hands on a copy of this book to learn what type of practical insights could be gleaned and integrated within my own course materials.

The premise of *Three Breaths and Begin* is a timely one. Students at all levels need more opportunities to engage and come in tune with the needs of a wholeness of health and exploration of the self in contemporary culture (see 5). There has been a recent growing body of scholarly literature exploring the incorporation of meditative practices in the classroom, to engage students of all ages into a deeper sense of mindfulness and stress release with much acclaim and success.² In the realm of popular

1. William Meyer, *Big Breath: A Guided Meditation for Kids* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2019).

2. See Lana Zinger, “Educating for Tolerance and Compassion: Is There a Place for Meditation in a College Classroom?” *College Teaching Methods & Styles Journal* 4.4 (2008) 25-28; Jennifer Mata, “Meditation: Using It in the Classroom,” in W. V. Moer, D. A. Celik & J. L. Hochheimer, eds., *Spirituality in the 21st Century: Journeys beyond Entrenched Boundaries* (Oxford, UK: Inter-Disciplinary, 2013) 109-19; E. James Baesler, “Meditation in the Classroom: Cultivating Attention and Insight,” *Listening Education* 1.6 (2015) 8-15; Daria Pizzuto, “Mindful in Middle School: Strategies for Teachers,” *Kappa Delta Pi Record* 56 (2020) 122-27.