

monastic or religious vows – into better followers of Christ” (xv).

But what is necessary to make this “possibility” an “actuality” is the closing concern of this review. I earlier underscored the importance of keeping in mind the setting of these lectures. They were presented to novices living a monastic life, guided by a novice master overseeing their monastic formation, and reading the texts noted in the lectures during time set aside for *lectio divina*. We need no less. Our formation requires more than words found either in books or heard in lecture halls. We too need a way of life, a community of mutual support and continuous reflection on sacred readings. In other words, if we want to discover the spirituality of the desert, we have to live it. So I suggest that we consider forming small groups interested in spiritual formation, in particular the spirituality of the desert, and be willing to creatively modify our ways of life accordingly. If open to this approach, the lessons of *A Course in Desert Spirituality* will be of true benefit.

David J. Belcastro

MERTON, Thomas, *Thomas Merton on Franz Kafka* (4 tracks: 1 MP3 CD) (Rockville, MD: Learn25, 2019) \$29.95.

The title of the single release of Thomas Merton recordings during 2019 by Learn25 (formerly NowYouKnow Media) is apt to be somewhat confusing, for a couple of related reasons. One might expect that *Thomas Merton on Franz Kafka* would be, like previous sets on such literary figures as Rainer Maria Rilke (2012), William Faulkner (2013; 2018), James Joyce (2013) and John Milton, T. S. Eliot and Edwin Muir (2018),¹ a collection of presentations Merton made to his monastic community, an impression that is certainly suggested by the description of them on the case as “four talks on Franz Kafka that Thomas Merton delivered during

1. “*God Speaks to Each of Us*”: *The Poetry and Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke* (11 talks with Introduction by Michael W. Higgins: 5 CDs) (Rockville, MD: Now You Know Media, 2012); “*All the Living and the Dead*”: *The Literature of James Joyce* (4 talks with Introduction by Michael W. Higgins: 3 CDs) (Rockville, MD: Now You Know Media, 2013); *Thomas Merton on William Faulkner* (6 talks with Afterword by Michael W. Higgins: 3 CDs) (Rockville, MD: Now You Know Media, 2018); revised version of *Thomas Merton on William Faulkner and Classical Literature* (10 talks with Introduction by Michael W. Higgins: 5 CDs) (Rockville, MD: Now You Know Media, 2013); *Thomas Merton on Literature: John Milton, T. S. Eliot, and Edwin Muir* (6 talks: 3 CDs) (Rockville, MD: Now You Know Media, 2018). All these sets were presented to the entire monastic community during Merton’s hermitage years (1965-68); see also the series on literature given during Merton’s final months as master of novices: *Seeing the World in a Grain of Sand: Thomas Merton on Poetry* (16 talks with Introduction by Michael W. Higgins: 7 CDs) (Rockville, MD: Now You Know Media, 2013).

the month of June” 1967. But in fact these are taped recordings of varying length made by Merton himself at his hermitage over the course of nine days, during the same general period when he was putting together series of audio reflections for various religious communities of women.² But with their frank critiques of contemporary trends at his own monastery and in the Cistercian Order generally, it seems doubtful that Merton had a particular audience, beyond or within the abbey, in mind for this set; if he did there is no indication of who that might be. The other misleading aspect of the title is that while there is some discussion of Kafka’s novel *The Castle* on each of the four segments, it cannot be said that this writer and his work are the major focus here. If the listener is able to put aside these expectations, Merton’s ruminations provide significant insights into his state of mind and spirit after almost two years of living in solitude and observing Cistercian life at a critical distance.

The recording for June 12 (39.03 min.) opens with Merton commenting that he will be reflecting on the Church and monastic renewal, and may bring in *The Castle* as an ironic counterpoint, but doesn’t know if he will. He then discusses the visit on the previous day of brothers from the French ecumenical monastery of Taizé who were living in Chicago at the time, and the discomfort many in the Gethsemani community felt at interacting with these much less traditional monastics. He reads from his journal entry for that day³ that considers both his fellow monks’ defensiveness and the peculiar situation of the Taizé group’s desire to keep the approval of Catholic officials so that they have become “fully implicated in the hierarchical Catholic castle life” (LL 250) – the faceless bureaucracy and apparently pointless sets of unwritten rules that characterize Kafka’s novel, as he will go on to point out. Though he says he doesn’t particularly feel like talking about it, he provides a brief summary of the situation of the surveyor “K” who had been summoned to the castle but left to wait indefinitely for his instructions, receiving only irrelevant messages or encountering unresponsive officials. Alternating back and forth between reading and expanding upon other journal passages on the novel and on the current situation in the Church and in the Order (LL

2. *Prayer and Growth in Christian Life* (13 sections with Introduction by Fr. Anthony Ciorra: 6 CDs) (Rockville, MD: Now You Know Media, 2013); “*Man to Man*”: *A Message of Contemplatives to the World* (1967) (10 sections with Introduction by Fr. Anthony Ciorra: 3 CDs) (Rockville, MD: Now You Know Media, 2013); *Living Contemplatively: Address to the Carmelite Sisters of Savannah* (1967) (8 sections with Introduction by Fr. Anthony Ciorra: 4 CDs) (Rockville, MD: Now You Know Media, 2013).

3. Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom. Journals, vol. 6: 1966-1967*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 250-51; subsequent references will be cited as “LL” parenthetically in the text.

246-47 [June 9]; 249-50 [June 11, 12]), he presents Kafka's absurdist vision as a kind of template for what sometimes seem to be the equally pointless routines of not only monastic life but business, government and society in general. To leave the monastery is no solution, since to leave the monastery is not to leave the castle, which is at root a state of mind as much as a social and political construct. He concludes this session by reading an extensive excerpt from chapter 19 of the novel, dealing with the involved but pointless routines of castle functionaries at the inn of the adjacent village, where "K" is staying.

The second segment, from June 15 (22.28 min.) seems to be heading in a quite different direction, as Merton begins by discussing St. Gregory of Nyssa's ideas on virginity as incorruptibility, though he notes at the outset that he might tie this in with *The Castle*. He then briefly refers to the lack of openness to life, the ethos of corruption, in the stifling atmosphere of the castle and the village, compares it to the obsessive focus on sexual desire and sexual experiences in contemporary society, and interprets the patristic ideal of chastity as a liberation from a constricting focus on individual satisfactions, a true personalism that moves beyond institutional limitations and demands. He affirms his own position in favor of the option of marriage for diocesan priests so that celibacy can be a matter of charism rather than juridical rule, and turns to Joan of Arc's "revolutionary" commitment to virginity and Pascal's stance of personal integrity, in contrast to the Jesuit emphasis on "team spirit" and institutional conformity to royal absolutism, as exemplifying the liberating, eschatological potential of virginity. It is, he concludes, a sign of contradiction to a "castle" mentality rife with unconscious (and often conscious) sexual implications, as he will explain in the recording to follow.

In the third segment, recorded on June 17, which is considerably the longest (56.48 min.), Merton begins by mentioning proposals for reforms being put forth at the Cistercian General Chapter presently in session, and the fact that the Gethsemani community is completely reliant on the reporting of its abbot for news of the proceedings. He then reads the section on Camus and Kafka from the commentary on *The Plague* that he is currently writing,⁴ referring to Camus' own section on *The Castle* in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, in which he denounces conventional notions of morality as submission to arbitrary norms that force one "to renounce his human dignity, his honor, his assertion of his personal truth and worth,

4. Thomas Merton, *Albert Camus' The Plague* (New York: Seabury, 1968) 24-26; Thomas Merton, *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. Patrick Hart, OCSO (New York: New Directions, 1981) 201-202. Merton does not include the final paragraph of this section in his reading.

and submit blindly to ‘answers’ and ‘commands’ which are an insult to his humanity” (25). Merton points to the incident in the novel of the village girl Amalia, whose refusal to accede to the “most insulting proposition” of a castle official exemplifies Camus’ idea of “‘revolt’ against the arbitrary and absurd,” but results in the disgrace and ostracizing of her entire family. Merton considers Camus’ interpretation of *The Castle* as an attack on the mystifications of religion to be a caricature of authentic faith, yet one that is only too accurate historically, but is actually (if unconsciously) a defense of grace in conflict with law. He then returns to a discussion of the General Chapter, seeing the various proposed changes in regulations as superficial and not intrinsically related to the real need to recover the monastic charism of the contemplative quest for God. Again he reads from his journal (June 15 and 17 [LL 251, 253]), questioning the purpose of relaxations proposed at the General Chapter as having no rationale other than keeping monks from leaving, and then commenting on an inept survey sent out by leadership that could not be tabulated and so was useless, only to be replaced by a new questionnaire that would be irrelevant to the deeper issues of the future direction of the Order. He admits his own perspective is one-sided, but still considers proposed changes as more symbolic than real, designed more to prop up the institution than to transform lives. He asserts his own determination to remain faithful to his vocation in order to “make something” out of his own life and hopefully assist others in doing likewise, but has little confidence in the various institutional reforms being proposed through official channels. In the final section of this session he turns to the analysis by the British lay theologian Brian Wicker of similar problems in the wider Church,⁵ in which the attractions of “secular Christianity” as a replacement for the outdated structures and perspectives of an essentially medieval institution are finally considered to be ambiguous if not completely inadequate, an adoption of a different set of conventions rather than a program for genuine spiritual renewal and liberation. The alternative strategies of the “modernizer,” focused on incremental pragmatic improvements in the Church, Merton concludes, reflect precisely the same problematic approach being taken by the Order, writ large.

The final track in this series, from June 21 (22.47 min.), is the only one of the four that can be regarded as focused principally on Kafka. Merton comments on an article published two decades earlier in the French journal *Dieu Vivant* that examines the religious dimension of Kafka’s

5. Brian Wicker, *Toward a Contemporary Christianity* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1967).

work.⁶ The author analyzes Kafka's unsuccessful interior rebellion against his father's conventional, superficial Judaism, his clear realization of the folly of the old man's complacency yet his inability to escape the domination of his ignorant but self-righteous will. The futility of the situations in which he places his characters reflects a desperate search for meaning where there is no longer a belief or even hope that meaning can be found, a submission to pointless routines and arbitrary rules that gives the illusion of following a divine plan as asserted by communal authority but is actually a betrayal of one's authentic identity and values. Once again Merton sees this pattern in religious life, a clinging to an outdated ideal that has lost its vitality and is reduced to empty formalities sustained by political manipulation. It is a rejection of the freedom of the gospel in favor of enslavement to collective myths that promise a false security, or a willingness to settle for pseudo-modernization, for superficial surface changes to the castle milieu rather than accepting the liberation that comes only through the Spirit. Merton expresses his fear that monasticism has lost its soul and in settling for legalist routines has renounced the eschatological and prophetic dimensions of this vocation. He concludes that to leave the castle does not mean to leave monastic life, since the problem is basically in interior one and requires a willingness to respond unreservedly to the grace that alone can effect genuine change.

This series of taped reflections actually includes two additional segments, from June 22 and 23, the first a brief (15.45 min.) additional note on Brian Wicker, commenting on his critical review⁷ of a new book by theologian Leslie Dewart,⁸ along with some further remarks on Wicker's own book; the second a more extensive discussion (23.02 min.) of the necessity for individuals, communities and the human race as a whole to make a fundamental existential decision for or against God, for or against love, for or against authentic selfhood, that transcends moral choices and is at the heart of the question of religious renewal. Because they have no mention of Kafka, these final portions of the recording have not been included in this set, though Merton clearly intended them to be an integral part of what he called at the outset his "mosaic" of ruminations. A somewhat more expansive title for the set could easily have allowed for their incorporation and so reflected Merton's intentions more accurately. Still, the four segments that have been made available, with their integration

6. Though not further identified by Merton, the article in question is clearly Roger Bauer, "Kafka à la Lumière de la Religiosité Juive," *Dieu Vivant* 9 (1947).

7. Brian Wicker, "The Future of Belief," *New Blackfriars* 48 (June 1967) 468-78.

8. Leslie Dewart, *The Future of Belief: Theism in a World Come of Age* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1966).

of excerpts from his private and public writing and his largely spontaneous musings, provide a rare opportunity to encounter Merton “live” in his hermitage, engaging with critical issues at the point of intersection between a literary masterpiece and his own chosen way of life.

Patrick F. O’Connell

PARK, Jaechan Anselmo, *Thomas Merton’s Encounter with Buddhism and Beyond: His Interreligious Dialogue, Inter-Monastic Exchanges, and Their Legacy*, Preface by Bonnie Thurston, Foreword by William Skudlarek (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2019), pp. xi + 285. ISBN 978-0-8146-8474-0 (paper) \$29.95.

I keep a list of new books to read about Merton in my Amazon account. Father Jaechan Anselmo Park’s *Thomas Merton’s Encounter with Buddhism and Beyond* had been on it since it was published last year. I had every intention to read it, eventually. Some of my Merton friends had praised it and I knew it won the ITMS “Louie” Award at the most recent general meeting. Despite all that, I kept finding other Merton-related things to read because I was concerned that there wasn’t much new ground to till when it came to the subject of Merton and his engagement with Eastern thought. Having finally read this wonderful book I am delighted to report that after more than 50 years of Merton scholarship it is still possible to bring fresh perspective to Merton and subjects that have already received much attention.

Park’s work is a valuable addition to the subject of Merton and Buddhism. As a South Korean Benedictine priest and monk, he brings a fresh perspective to Merton’s engagement with Eastern thought and his enduring legacy as a pioneer for inter-religious dialogue. Merton’s writings had a profound impact on Park and he credits them for changing his academic, spiritual and monastic life. Near the end of his book Park describes reading about Merton’s epiphany at the corner of Fourth and Walnut and being “suddenly overwhelmed with an ineffable light, and felt that Merton spoke to me: ‘You love all people, and none of them could be totally alien to you. I love you not because you are a monk, but because you are my friend. I am only another member of the human race, and you are too!’” (255). He credits this experience for helping remove his “superior attitude” as a priest and monk, recognize his deep connection with God and gain a new understanding about human and monastic life.

Park uses Merton’s contemplative life and experience as a kind of Rosetta Stone to better understand Merton and his exploration of Buddhism. For Merton, the starting point of contemplation was the discovery of the