

compassionate. Walk humbly with God. Live the truth. Embrace divinity in yourself, and in others” (133). Our world is not okay, but Dekar invites us to dream alongside Merton of a better world – and together they inspire us to work toward its transformation.

Emma McDonald

COLLINS, Patrick W., *A Focus on Truth: Thomas Merton's Uncensored Mind*, Foreword by Jonathan Montaldo (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2021), pp. xvi, 197. ISBN 978-0-8146-8849-6 (paper) \$19.95.

Patrick W. Collins has written a splendid book founded on the premise that an “uncensored view of the life and thoughts of Thomas Merton can be found by plumbing his correspondence with family, friends, and colleagues over the years” (xv). He reminds the reader: “Five volumes of his personal and professional correspondence have been published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux” (xv). Collins has also chosen well key themes with which this correspondence deals, even while cautioning the reader that “Merton’s views as expressed in the correspondence are not, of course, fully worked-out theses about any particular subjects” (xv). These themes are truth and conscience, spirituality, liturgical renewal, church authority, ecumenism, priesthood, being a hermit, interreligious dialogue, monastic renewal and the church. Further, Collins sets the letters associated with the themes under consideration in the context of Merton’s life, those matters and issues he is experiencing and corresponding about.

The first theme covered in the book is truth and conscience (1-14). Collins says: “Truth for him was not just knowledge in the head. It was love in the heart. Therefore, he especially sought to know and experience what he later called his True Self – the God-Self within each person” (1). Merton writes in a letter to Abdul Aziz: “Personally, in matters where dogmatic beliefs differ, I think that controversy is of little value because it takes us away from the spiritual realities into the realm of words and ideas” (4).

Second is spirituality (15-51). Merton explains in a letter to Etta Gullick: “what I object to about ‘the Spiritual Life’ is the fact that it is a part, a section. . . . Our ‘life in the Spirit’ is all-embracing, or should be” (18). Collins asserts: “Thomas Merton’s principal metaphor for the spiritual life is that of journey. For him, spirituality is simply a journey from the false self toward the True Self” (20-21). He continues: “Merton consistently taught that spirituality involves realizing in one’s consciousness that God is ever-present in the depth of the soul” (23). As Merton writes to John Harris, “The Being of all and my own Being is a vast

emptiness containing nothing: I have but to swim in it and be carried away in it to see that this nothing is All” (23). For Merton, spirituality was contemplative. And, prophetically, he writes to Christopher Mwoleka, “I believe that African Christians will bring new life to the Church of the future. Perhaps God wants you to experience contemplation in a deeply African way, which I would surmise to be a way of wholeness, a way of unity with all life, a sense of the deep rhythm of natural and cosmic life as the manifestation of God’s creative power: and also a great warmth of love and praise” (51).

Third is liturgical renewal (52-60). Collins writes: “Merton’s lack of enthusiasm for liturgical reform [was] rooted in his love and respect for tradition” (54). But it was enhanced by reform liturgists: “I don’t hold with these extreme liturgy people for whom all personal and contemplative prayer is suspect. If you make a meditation they think you are a Buddhist,” Merton expresses in a letter to Etta Gullick (55). (The joke of the day was “What is the difference between a terrorist and a liturgist?” The punch line: “You can negotiate with a terrorist.”) But Collins adds: “By 1967, Thomas Merton was expressing more positive views of liturgical renewal” (58) as demonstrated in the following words from the Circular Letter to Friends: “Certainly it is fine that now the liturgy is becoming more spontaneous, more alive, and people are putting their hearts into it more” (58). And to teenager Philip J. Cascia, Merton remarks, “Good folk music at Mass can be a big help, but bad singing and trifling hymns are not much help. But so is bad Gregorian” (59).

Fourth is church authority (61-79). Collins states: “Throughout his life Thomas Merton sought true freedom – within himself, around himself, and for others” (61), and, “As Merton grew in monastic life, he chose not to conform in many ways. He judged that monks were reluctant to let go of the external authoritative norm and launch out into the deep with the Holy Spirit” (62). However, he conceived the exercise of authority of Pope John XXIII as wholly providential. In a letter to E. I. Watkin, Merton writes, “I do think Pope John has been entirely providential, a great and fine Pope, and so much better than the last one. He has shown that a little initiative at Rome can really work great changes” (74).

Fifth is ecumenism (80-91). Thomas Merton was early and deeply involved in Catholic-Protestant encounter. He writes to John Harris in 1959, “Christ speaks in us only when we speak as men to one another and not as members of something, officials, or what have you” (81). He was especially appreciative of the Shakers, writing to Edward Deming Andrews, a distinguished scholar of Shakerism: “The Shakers remain as witnesses to the fact that only humility keeps man in communion with

truth, and first of all with his own inner truth” (86). He also was deeply engaged in Jewish–Christian relations, especially with Abraham Joshua Heschel. As Collins notes: “By 1967 Merton’s interests had clearly grown from ecumenism toward interreligious dialogue” (91). The following excerpt from a letter to Harold and Elsie Jenkins illustrates: “I see a lot of ministers and others on an ‘ecumenical’ basis. My main interest in that line however is keeping up with Buddhists, especially Zen people” (91). This ecumenical bent is also seen in his growing knowledge and valuing of Sufi Islam, his principal interlocutor being Abul Aziz.

Sixth is the priesthood (92-101). Collins points out: “After theological studies in his monastic community, Merton was ordained to the priesthood at Gethsemani Abbey . . . on May 26, 1949” (94). As that day approached, Merton wrote to Mark Van Doren: “I know the priesthood is going to be something tremendous. A kind of a death to begin with. But that is good” (94). As Collins explains, “During the 1960s, Merton moved beyond some of his earlier and more pious views of the priesthood. He became more realistic about what it is and what it is not to serve as priest” (95). This change of attitude comes across in his comments in a letter to Daniel Berrigan: “I find I have reached the stage where I involuntarily wince when I come upon another poem by a priest called ‘Vocation’” (95).

Seventh is on being a hermit (102-34). Merton took up full-time occupancy of the hermitage on August 22, 1965. Collins explains: “Over the years,” he “became more and more convinced of the necessity of silence and solitude, not only for himself but for all persons” (108). Merton expresses this conviction in a letter to Etta Gullick: “The more I see of it, the more I realize the absolute primacy and necessity of silent, hidden, poor, apparently fruitless prayer” (108). He shares with W. H. Ferry: “This [hermitage] is what I came here for, and I think it will be, as it already has been, very fruitful. I realize that I am extremely fortunate to be able to do exactly what I am supposed to do in life” (109). During this time Merton fell in love with “M,” and she with him. This may be in part what he writes of when he shares with Linda Sabbath: “All is not simple and easy in the solitary life” and “It is simply the only life that I am at all ready to live seriously and for keeps” (118).

Eighth is interreligious dialogue (135-54). Collins writes: “By the late 1950s, Thomas Merton’s insatiable quest for spiritual truth had led him into the study of Eastern religions. . . . Once steeped in the Western spiritual tradition” he “felt free to look toward the East for further inspiration and different expressions of the one, same truth” (135). This was especially true of Zen, which Merton explains in a letter to William Johnston, SJ, “has great importance because it is so closely related to such

movements as phenomenology and existentialism, besides responding to certain inarticulate spiritual needs of man today” (141). Elsewhere, in a letter to Linda Sabbath, Merton states that “the genuine Zen experience implies so much of humility, of selflessness, of self-emptying and renunciation, and the ‘void’ seems to me to be so capable of being a masked fullness which might well be that of the Spirit” (144).

Ninth is monastic renewal (155-72). Collins relates: “From the day he entered the Abbey of Gethsemani on December 10, 1941 . . . [Merton] expended a great deal of time and energy studying the roots of monastic life” (155). As Merton writes to Pope John XXIII: “It seems to me that, as a contemplative, I do not need to lock myself into solitude and lose all contact with the rest of the world; rather this poor world has a right to a place in my solitude. It is not enough for me to think of the apostolic value of prayer and penance; I also have to think of a contemplative grasp of the political, intellectual, artistic and social movements in this world” (157). Further, Collins links this awareness of Merton’s with his famous “Fourth and Walnut” experience: “In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut Streets, he had his now-famous moment of conversion back toward the world. He realized that he was in the monastery not just for his own salvation but also for others. Solitude had made him feel connected with others at ever deeper levels” (156). But for Merton, the key to monastic witness in the renewing Church is the reform of monasticism. He freely expresses this opinion to Daniel Berrigan: “And now about the monastic life and ideal, in relation to the world. . . . a lot of the monastic party line we are getting, even where in some respects it is very good, ends up by being pure unadulterated crap” (158). Merton speaks similarly on the subject with Catherine de Hueck Doherty: “The monasteries both of common life and of hermits . . . are organized in a rigid and stereotyped way for one kind of life only, which is not bad in its own way. . . . It is a matter of rules and observances which keep the monk busy” (161). Merton links renewal of monastic life to renewal of the Church, but resists, albeit gently, friend Rosemary Radford Ruether’s insistence that he is not honest in his monastic vocation, and seeks multiple efforts to leave Gethsemani and open a more contemplative monastic community.

Tenth is the church (173-95). As Collins points out, Merton had no formal ecclesiology; his writings on the church are not those of an academic but of a contemplative theologian. Still, as late as the commencement of Second Vatican Council he “stated his conviction that, despite all of the defects in the institution and its members, the church was nevertheless indefectible [not subject to failure] because it is of God” (182). Still, Merton writes to Doherty, “the Church has been too slow

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).

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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,¹ collaborated with poet Mark S. Burrows to create two volumes that distill the thought of Meister Eckhart,² and recently released a biography of the Lakota medicine man and Christian mystic, Black Elk.³ He would seem well suited to the task

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,