but also to his vocation as teacher, mentor and friend. As the sub-title *Liber Amicorum* suggests, these essays are as much acts of gratitude as analysis. They are rich with heartfelt tributes to Dart's generosity and kindness, as well as his genuine interest in the lives of others. Readers interested in his wide-ranging thought will find a gold mine of intellectual stimulation leavened with much personal warmth. Taken together, these essays offer an inspiring portrait of what it means to live the *vita contemplativa* in the company of friends, embodying both the classical ideal of the philosophical life and the distinctively Christian union of charity and contemplation. For those drawn to Merton, this collection bears witness to the continuing vitality of the contemplative tradition that both Dart and Merton sought, in their own ways, to renew.

George A. Dunn & Xu Xiaoyan

HALL, Cassidy, *Queering Contemplation: Finding Queerness in the Roots and Future of Contemplative Spirituality* (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2024), pp. x + 170. ISBN: 978-1-5064-9339-8 (cloth) $25.99.

Whether organized as families, tribes, congregations, nations or in some other social configuration, people who are marginalized, harassed, legislated against, denied membership, denied health care and denigrated from church pulpits need heroic voices around which they can rally. Cassidy Hall raises such a voice for the LGBTQIA+ panoply of allied communities that for much too long have suffered – and continue to suffer – the consequences of an alarming level of malevolent human behavior that tramples the fundamental cosmic tenet expressed in the Golden Rule and leaves sick at heart anyone whose faith leans on the Beatitudes. Hall's book offers hope and encouragement and an aura of friendship, as she serves as example of and witness to a convergence of queerness and a contemplative attitude toward the world.

Rev. Hall (she/her/hers) is an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ, and with her experience as a counselor, her seminary studies specializing in contemplative spirituality and queer theology, her creative filmmaking and her extensive visitations to monasteries across the United States, her personal story acts like a centripetal force pulling everything nearby towards it as she explains how the coping skills she learned as a child – such as going "into my room to pause, feel big emotions, or go away from others to simply center, gather, or clear my mind" (2) – laid the foundation for what evolved into a genuine contemplative worldview. *Queering Contemplation* is not a technical treatise but rather an invitation to re-visit and re-interpret certain concepts and practices long associated

with the "status quo contemplatives" (14) and to see them through the experience of a queer body and an open mind. "Queerness, in my life," she writes, "has been not only about sexuality but also about expanse, curiosity, openness, pleasure, weirdness, love, oddity and liberation . . . . queerness relates to *oddness*, *strangeness*, *eccentricity* and *unconventionality* . . . . this book engages the great expanse of the word" (6).

Hall's descriptive narrative runs in passages interspersed throughout ten chapters and describes how her worldview, shaped as it is by her own emerging queerness, envisions the contemplative life. In each chapter, she ties a fragment of her own story to a quality long associated with traditional contemplation such as solitude, silence, mysticism and ritual, and interprets it in the new light of queer. For example, in chapter 5, "Boundless Limits: Queering Ritual," Hall describes how "queering ritual includes examining the spaciousness of choice and imagination within the ritual itself" (68), whether that be how one responds to monastery bells calling believers to prayer or to the calming rhythm of a liturgical celebration or to the joy of a friend's wedding. Hall has discovered the importance not only of being present in the moment and recognizing what is right in front of you, but also of choosing whether or not to engage and, if so, in what way. She describes how during her work as a hospital chaplain while in training for ordination, instead of arriving with a script of prayers in hand and doing what she thought was expected of her, she focused on what the patient expressed as to what was most needed that Hall could provide in the moment, whether that be a prayer, a hand to hold, a smile to see or a tear to absorb; that is, Hall "queered the typical rituals and routines . . . in order to care more deeply, see more expansively, cultivate connection, and do no harm" (71). In other contexts, she considers how the ordinary routines of our lives – morning coffee, long walks, observing the ducks on the pond – take on aspects of the sacred and "become rituals the second I sense an internal bow to the moment's entanglement with holiness, with mindfulness, with love, wonder, and awe" (76).

So what does it means *to queer* contemplation? In this case, Hall sets out, she writes, "to disentangle my own experience of contemplation from the grasp of Western Christian expressions formed in heteronormativity, patriarchy, and Eurocentricity/whiteness" (6). Hall cites her "social location as a cisgender queer white woman" (ix), and when she began reading classic Western Christian texts on contemplation in 2011, she eventually felt something was missing as she found most of them were written by cisgender straight white men. "It became clear to me," Hall writes, "that this particular canon didn't reflect the fullness of my experience as a queer woman in the contemplative life" (7). She discerned

that for people like her, people searching to find "their own voice and companionship in contemplative life" (11), traditional Christian texts and interpretations may be obstacles. But that's where Hall started, and it was Thomas Merton as much as anybody, and more than most, who got Hall into the contemplative palace in the first place, leaving accents of his influence echoing in Hall's vivid writing style. But what began echoing in Hall's ear was a question: "Whose voice is missing?" (13). After acknowledging the achievements of Merton and others, Hall concludes: "I cannot learn from Merton what it feels like to be trans in America being denied health care, or what it means to be an LGBTQIA+ person rejected by a church, or to be Black in America, or to face AAPI racism, or to be a refugee turned around or arrested at the border" (13).

As a note of personal disclosure, this reviewer's social location is a cisgender straight white married male. As a 70-plus-year-old cradle Catholic, pre-Vatican II altar boy, Christian Brothers' (de la Salle) schooled, having lost a younger brother to AIDS in 1988 when it was commonly called "walking pneumonia," I had to look up the meaning of the word cisgender, that is, identifying with your birth sex, and it was a happy occasion that led to discovering an array of resources regarding social justice issues.

Not surprisingly, Hall's mission includes expanding the experiential, spiritual field of vision, and to that end, she introduces contemporary voices in relevant fields – academics, theologians, social justice activists – at the end of each chapter in the form of an excerpt from a book, an interview or a podcast that illuminates the topic at hand. In fact, each of the ten chapters can serve as rich meditation matter for individuals or discussion topics for groups. Expand the possibilities. Don't be manipulated by expectations dictated from who knows where. Don't work at judging who doesn't fit in; work at understanding how everyone fits in. The queer worldview questions the status quo of everything at every turn – nothing gets a bye – and it highlights the interconnectivity of all that lives. It assumes an open-mindedness that sees and understands the world around us differently, and in doing so, inspires adherents to live more attentively and compassionately in that world. These are among the lines of development Hall tracks in her compelling story, and they are all important. But from the queer perspective, more is at stake than just having the freedom to choose a particular spiritual path or lifestyle and pursuing it in peace. From the queer perspective – and that of all the LGBTQIA+ allies – fighting for basic civil rights and social acceptance is part of everyday life. Here is a short litany of recent events that illustrate the virulent discrimination aimed at those communities:

- January 2025: On Donald Trump's first day in his second term as president, he signs an Executive Order directed at oppressing the transgender community;
- September 2025: Texas A&M University, among the largest in the country, fires English Department faculty and staff members over gender identity issues in the content of a Children's Literature course;
- November 2025: Texas A&M University System (12 schools) institutes policy requiring faculty to acquire approval from the school's president regarding what race and gender topics can be discussed in the classroom;
- November 2025: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, at their fall meeting in Baltimore, voted to revise the guideline document titled *Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services* to mandate that Catholic facilities NOT provide gender-affirming health care for transgender patients.

Hall's book is dynamic in that everything is ongoing, moving, growing, expanding and searching. The deeper the contemplation, the more expansive the worldview becomes, and thus the more inclusive, the more compassionate and the more vulnerable to being moved by the Spirit right here, right now. In 2011, Hall was working as a substance abuse counselor in Iowa when she had a serious anxiety attack. The work was overwhelming and the staff over-loaded. A saving grace for her was her decision to go "beyond the curriculum of the program" (23) and, with her clients, read and discuss poets and writers of various backgrounds. Among her selections was Merton's *New Seeds of Contemplation*, in which they read "Integrity,"[1] an essay that prompted Hall to ponder "what it might mean if I took a trust-fall into welcoming myself" (23). It also inspired her to inquire more about Merton and monastic life. She booked a weekend at Gethsemani Abbey's guesthouse, and on the eleven-hour drive returning home after the visit, she "continued to feel submerged in that bath of silence and solitude that had brought my rattling, anxious soul back into alignment. It seemed I processed everything and nothing all at once in the quiet of the car. I gathered myself while letting myself be free. I found and welcomed myself anew. I was beginning to learn my own belonging" (27-28). The epiphany not only changed her life, it propelled it. "I knew whatever it was I had gotten in touch with at that

1. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 98-103.

monastery was a piece of the Divine and myself," she writes, "a piece I was determined to chase after for the rest of my life" (28). Soon enough, she quit her job (with a 30-day notice) and proceeded to plan and execute a trip to visit all seventeen Trappist monasteries in the United States over an eighteen-month period in 2012-2013.

But Hall's relationship with the monasteries was not without its difficulties and questions. On the one hand, she identified with the "oddity" of a community following *The Rule of Benedict* – "the strangeness of lives of silence and contemplation" – and "found that the queerness of monastic life informed my own queerness, revealing the limitless expanse in the queerness of my body and the monastery walls" (29-30). On the other hand, she found the dark side of Catholicism's history – that is, "the institutional violence of the Catholic Church (via oppression of LGBQTIA+ folks, Indigenous folks, people of color, violence toward children and oppression of women)" – impossible to ignore. In addition, as her pilgrimage continued, new questions arose. "While at the beginning of the journey I was asking monks about silence, solitude, and contemplative life, by the end I was wondering about sexuality, self-expression, mental health, creativity, the difficulties in silence, and encounters with loneliness" (31). Now, over ten years later, and after visits to other monasteries such as the Episcopal Benedictine abbey near her home, where her "first conversations with the guest master were about a local lesbian Episcopal priest who regularly visits with her wife" (33), Hall knows that a stone-and-mortar monastery isn't necessary in order to live in a contemplative way and she emphasizes that "there are plenty of other options to soak in this limitless expanse, this infinite silence, without being in fear of danger or harm to mind, body, or soul. And that is precisely what queer – and all marginalized folks – deserve: a place of rest and respite, a place of expansiveness and welcome without fear" (34). But there is much more to it, and as Hall's experience confirms that inward meditation and outward action not only fit hand-in-glove but are indeed inseparable, another question occurs: "Where does action fit into the contemplative life?" (31).

Although Hall dismisses Merton as status quo, he keeps showing up on her dance card. Take, for example, chapter 7, "Unlimited Becoming: Queering the True Self." Hall's first encounter with the idea of the true self was through the work of Henri Nouwen, Richard Rohr and Thomas Merton, three Catholic priests – all status quo contemplatives – who "as primarily straight-identifying and presumably celibate white men, come from a completely different world than I do" (101). Hall points out that if you claim there is a true self, there must be a false self as well.

"And that's problematic," she writes. "When such a binary is created, it instantaneously puts up boundaries and limits" (100). Hall suggests that by queering the true self "away from the assumed binaries," a broader, more inclusive expanse of possibilities arises from which the true self can emerge. Time passed, experience deepened, knowledge broadened. And as that maturing process unfolded, Hall struck new insights, finding that her

> most poignant lessons about the true self have come from those who have experienced marginalization or oppression, those who have existed and persisted in a world that tells them not to. In their lives, their stories, I have learned that the concept of the true self must exist alongside a commitment to liberation. . . . The true self shows up most authentically when it is dedicated to the well-being of all, amid a deep understanding of oneself." (101-102)

Hall also found that, in the face of active aggression and oppression, the collective energy needed to organize and sustain the collaborative work necessary to combat those attacks largely arises from allied action, that is, different communities recognizing both their mutual predicament as targets of hate and their strength in supporting each other in pursuit of common interests. And as those communities realize connection and compassion and love, they bond and band together and make for change.

Hall has the rhetorical gift to render lively, poignant descriptions of awakening moments, such as the two beautiful vignettes in chapter 6, "Bottomless Creativity: Queering Boredom," where she describes two contemplative practices that she often shares with a significant other: one, regular birdwatching, and two, drawing a picture with a loved one at sundown, taking turns at adding something to the impromptu design in the sketchbook. Both activities are closely tied to nature. But perhaps the most striking scene of the many fine ones in the book – and one of the wonderful little epiphanies in Hall's story – took place in 2015. While working on a film on location near Temescal Canyon in California, Hall routinely hiked a trail that led to an ocean overlook where she enjoyed both the view and the visceral connection with nature. Here is where she had what sounds to this reader like a Fourth-and-Walnut experience with a twist. "It was on that same trail where I experienced an intimate entanglement with my true self and an interconnectivity to everything alive," Hall writes. "As I hiked toward the peak one morning, I unknowingly grabbed my own hand, holding it ever so tenderly. As I realized the affection and love of the moment, I stopped, closed my eyes, and began to weep" (107). And she walked on, holding her own hand.

The ever-changing nature of our nature is a major theme of the book.

Evolution is ongoing, and as generation after generation of human beings traverse the earth, we name and re-name and re-name again the world we see and hear around us. But what all generations seem to have in common is *mystery*. "We are ever evolving, ever becoming, and ever unfolding," Hall writes. "Identity is an ever-moving target, and any conviction that the self is singular or fixed is limiting and often even harmful. . . . Maybe when sexuality and gender forgo binary expectations, they are freer to be alive within us" (98-99). As Hall describes the "rooted contemplative life" (3) early in the book, she uses the metaphor of a plant to illustrate her vision of depth and inter-connection with all that lives, a plant with an extensive root system, separate subsidiary roots that join together at the main root and rise through the material world, find fresh breath and ascend with powerful movement through levels and stratospheres that buoy and bound us even higher to where there is only harmony. Interestingly enough, Hall's formal contemplative journey related here begins and ends with Merton. A Merton essay launches Hall's Trappist tour-de-force and a line from Merton's *The Seven Storey Mountain*[2]– the Latin phrase at the very end that translates into "It is the end of the book, not the end of the searching" (151) – comes near the close of Hall's final chapter, appropriately titled "Everlasting Depths: Queering the Desert," for the desert is among the hallmark symbols of the Christian contemplative tradition's radical response to spiritual seeking. But what wins the day is the unmistakable sincerity of Rev. Hall's voice and her unremitting advocacy for a contemplative way of life based on compassionate, here-in-the-moment action. Cherish the moment, work for justice.

George G. Kehoe

OSGOOD, Libby, CND, ed., *Green Saints for a Green Generation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2024), pp. xxv + 219. ISBN 978-1-62698-590-2 (paper) $30.00.

Green Saints for a Green Generation, edited by Libby Osgood, invites reflection on a diverse constellation of inspired and inspiring figures who have embodied ecospirituality. It simultaneously stimulates a consideration of how we might personally and collectively enflesh eco-spirituality in the present, through our own efforts to imitate the lives of these green saints. Throughout the book, we are prompted to consider the link between an ecologically grounded spirituality – which is attentive, for instance, to the sacramentality of creation, the interdependence of the web of life, and

2. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 423.