

Converging Paths for Spiritual Formation

Review of
*Shaping the Journey:
 Wesley, Merton, Mulholland, and the Spiritual Formation Movement*
 By Daniel Ethan Harris
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Reviewed by **Aaron K. Kerr**

The dust from the Reformation continues to settle. This book is evidence that the deeper sedimentations of a distinctly Christian form of human experience are rooted in the vows of monastic life, a life which is both missionary and solitary. About 130 years before Luther's 1517 protest against the Catholic hierarchy, Geert Groote left his Carthusian monastery, was ordained a deacon and became an itinerant preacher. In 1450, his followers formed The Brethren of the Common Life, and on Sundays would gather after the noon meal for collations: reading and discussion of scripture. This prior reform sought to bridge the divide between solitude and mission while focusing on scripture to authenticate *devotion*. The urgency of apostolic mission and the necessity of the medicine of silence met. Daniel Ethan Harris' research and interpretation of the crucially important Spiritual Formation Movement (SFM) in mid- to late twentieth-century American Protestantism unearths this deep human desire to balance solitude and sociality.

The book is very well researched and presents the reader with plenty of asides and trajectories in the footnotes; this kind of hermeneutic movement, the intellectual gift of acknowledgement, embodies the kind of synthetic thought that gave rise to Robert Mulholland's life and witness of the integration of biblical evangelicalism and contemplative openness. Like Thomas Merton, Mulholland (1936-2015), an influential figure in the Spiritual Formation Movement, stood in that lonely plain between worlds; in Mulholland's case it was between the world of a "sola scriptura" United Methodism (which is no longer United), and the world opened by Thomas Merton, the strange Catholic world of mysticism.

The chapters tell the story of how Mulholland synthesized these worlds. Chapter one describes the development of the SFM. The description provides the reader with a family tree while conveying the difficulties evangelical Protestantism has had with what Harris calls the sanctification gap (28). This is a problem because very often evangelical Protestantism front-loads the conversion experience and fails to provide regular and disciplined practices toward holiness. The author cites

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the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), particularly the Decree on Ecumenism, and its influence on the general tenor of dialogue among Christians. In 1960, Merton had already befriended some faculty from Asbury Theological Seminary (37), where Mulholland arrived in 1979 and where his career as teacher, preacher and prolific author would subsequently flourish.

The second chapter provides the reader with a clear appreciation of John Wesley's creative synthesis in shaping the transformational eighteenth-century revival in England. This Wesleyan "Method" of social holiness entailed an elaborate administrative structure which was the vehicle for sanctification. Harris names this movement the Wesleyan Pietist Synthesis and explains how this social Christianity made sanctification accessible and concrete "with the two-fold means of discipline and mutual relational knowledge" (68). This social dimension is then contrasted with the next chapter, the contribution of Merton's contemplative monasticism to the SFM.

Harris sifts through the possible themes of contemplation and monasticism to interpret Merton's contribution and arrives at solitude as a theme that encapsulates why the SFM was so attracted to Merton's writing (89). He then shows how Methodism's over-reach on the urgency of social life and social work birthed this desire for a more balanced experience of aloneness and togetherness before God. The author does a good job of connecting Merton's pastoral writing for all Christians and Merton's own struggles with solitude and social life. I appreciate especially that Harris discusses Merton's relationship with Catherine de Hueck Doherty to explain the "semi-eremical" source of the SFM's renewal of the discipline of solitude.

Chapter four explains how Wesley's practical divinity of sanctification and Merton's expression of everyday holiness grow out of the experience of God's love, eliciting an active response of love of God and neighbor. The Wesleyan and Mertonian syntheses are premised on their shared wisdom about the problem of quietism, which both refuted (138).

Chapter five provides detailed analysis of the ways in which Mulholland creatively appropriates both Wesley and Merton in his teaching and scholarship. Harris presents Merton's impact on Mulholland and even examines textual editions of Mulholland's works, the later of which have edited out the citations of Merton included in the earlier editions (167). Harris also puts a spotlight on Mulholland's creative development of Merton's teaching on the relation between the active and contemplative life – the problem of solitude and sociality described eloquently in chapter one as the impetus for the SFM.

Mulholland's creative development of Merton's clarion call for laity and clergy alike to embrace contemplative practice is amplified when Mulholland states: "To think of spirituality and 'mission' as separate and discrete aspects of the Christian life is a great mistake. They are the inseparable symbiosis of 'breathing in' [spiritual formation] and breathing out" (mission) (164).

I was intrigued by the way Harris' focused upon language – how it is used (and abused) by religious movements and how certain words symbolize aspects of church history that become off-limits from within a particular denominational or sectarian lens. For example, when Mulholland edited his use of Merton out of his 2001 edition of *Shaped by the Word*, he left this simple phrase out: "Merton speaks of the Word of God meeting us in encounter and event" (167). Encounter and event: these are words that describe worship. And "encounter" has deep resonance in all Catholic teaching, both liturgical and social. Pope Francis continued Pope Benedict XVI's insistence that Catholicism is not a religion of the book, but a religion of Encounter; and, in *Deus Caritas Est*,

Benedict writes: “Faith, worship and ethos are interwoven as a single reality which takes shape in our encounter with God’s agape.” This is communion, the Eucharist as the collective breathing in and out that Mulholland so beautifully expressed above.

A more three-dimensional approach to the problem this book addresses so very well would be to examine the historical liturgical reality thrown alongside our scholarly propensities to pinpoint the heroes of our faith and the magic of their witness. For example, Wesley demanded that part of the “method” indispensable for sanctification was Eucharistic devotion. The Wesleyan revival was a Eucharistic revival, something lost on the American Methodist tradition. Merton’s daily worship regimen as a Cistercian is a sort of trampoline that directs his reflections on solitude and becoming a hermit. The first space of concern for evangelicals, that of contemplation as navel-gazing, and the second space of concern of the SFM, that Evangelicalism fetishizes public testimony and social engagement, must always be enveloped by the third space of liturgy as an expression of love, divine and human.

This is an excellent book. Readers who want to understand what is meant by evangelical Christianity, or even those who want to listen in on the approaches to scripture from within Protestantism to appreciate how strains of Protestantism develop, sometimes within the same denomination (like Methodism), will appreciate this book. For those who want more evidence for the way Thomas Merton impacted mid-century religion, how his influence helped evangelical Protestantism re-define itself, especially in relation to the use of scripture and what Harris calls fundamentalism, this book is particularly apropos.

Throughout, Harris shows that movements and their leaders are creative people who, through their experiences, integrate ostensible oppositional forces into their life with Christ. Wesley, Merton and Mulholland all faced tremendous challenges in their respective social and theological worlds. They broke out of those provincial orbits into larger networks of understanding through their respective callings.