

the Woodpile” (1993), a poem written about the Waco siege. In this poem, Ferlinghetti includes Merton in a litany of “people who might have been able to stop the slaughter that day” (90). Morgan notes that, despite their apparent differences, both Merton and Ferlinghetti sought “purity of heart and clarity of vision. Both tried to find an authentic way of existing in the modern world and each lived a life filled with paradoxes” (91).

Throughout the book, Morgan paints a powerful portrait of the generative relationship between Merton and Ferlinghetti. He shows us that they did not link as mere individuals, but as relational persons inextricable from a wider ecosystem of literary seekers who chased authenticity, embraced paradox and pursued the beatific life.

Jim Robinson

SWEENEY, Jon M., ed., with photographs by Paul Quenon, OCSO, *Awake and Alive: Thomas Merton According to His Novices* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2022), pp. 144. ISBN 978-1-62698-491-2 (cloth) \$22.00.

Teachers often wonder what their students are really learning from their instruction. Learning is a complex process. Learning takes time, and so it is often the case that a student recalls a particular piece of instruction in a different setting at a later date; learning is relational, and so a student’s recollection may center less on content details and more on other factors like a teacher’s personality, comportment or approach; learning occurs situationally, and so it attends to a student’s affect, values and social location. On occasion, a teacher leaves an enduring impact on a student.

This was the case for several of Thomas Merton’s students who share their stories in *Awake and Alive*. Over the course of his time at the Abbey of Gethsemani, Merton served as Master of Scholastics (1951-55) and Master of Novices (1955-65). The publication of audio recordings of Merton’s conferences (along with the twelve published volumes of his teaching notes) attests to the caliber of the content and delivery of his instruction; his journals and letters bear evidence of his own reflection on pedagogy. *Awake and Alive* complements the study of Merton as pedagogue with the perspectives of six monks who studied under Merton in either their novitiate or scholastic formation. The book draws from individual interviews – some conducted by Victor Kramer and others by George A. Kilcourse, Jr. – previously published in *The Merton Annual*. These students’ reflections on Merton as a teacher demonstrate his impact at a critical period not only in the monastery itself, but more specifically, in their monastic formation.

Editor Jon M. Sweeney opens this book with a brief, useful introduction regarding its purpose and the selection criteria for the authors

included. The next section is entitled “Thomas Merton as Known by His Fellow Monks” (13). Six chapters proceed, each containing reflections authored by a former student under Merton. Brother Paul Quenon, whose nature photographs are also featured throughout the book, appears first followed (in order of presentation) by Timothy Kelly, OCSO; Chrysogonus Waddell, OSCO; John Eudes Bamberger, OCSO; Matthew Kelty, OSCO; and Flavian Burns, OCSO. The end matter consists of a glossary, a list of further reading, an acknowledgement, information about each former student and notes. It is worth noting that the book’s subtitle – reinforced by the statement that “all” of the monks included “were novices under Merton’s direction” (10) – is confusing given that some of the monks were novices before Merton assumed the role of Novice Master and studied under him as scholastics.

By design, the book employs the sayings tradition model. For this reason, the book can be read in increments for the reflections of an individual author, or in its entirety for a composite construction by all the contributors. In my first reading, I adopted the latter approach; since then, I’ve deployed the former approach, revisiting a single reflection or cluster of pages. Either way, the book invites readers to consider how the structure of core pedagogical relationships between a mentor and a student create space for learning and training in the monastic life. Here, this familiar structure is made distinct – unlike his contemporary Cistercian brothers and the novices, in this period Merton was increasingly recognized as a monastic writer and thinker around the world. Like the novices in formation, his own monastic identity and societal influence were also evolving.

In this period of growth and development, Merton’s students locate Merton in the ordinary, mundane context and details of the daily life at the monastery in – and beyond – the classroom. He is part of their lived experience of monasticism at Gethsemani, a fellow monk, also grappling with commitments to community, prayer and obedience.

A tapestry of images emerges as these students recount stories of his service as their teacher. Their recollections re-envision Merton’s behaviors and mannerisms, his words and actions. They describe Merton’s consistent care and concern for others, and his particular attentiveness to “marginal” community members; they draw on Merton’s humility, laughter and enthusiasm. They share snapshots of specific moments in which Merton provided support, elicited perceptiveness, engaged empathy and discerned deeply. They consider and assess his interpretations, claims and ideas about theology, spirituality and history. They weigh his moments of disagreement or issues for debate.

In one of his reflections, Brother Paul Quenon observes: “I didn’t do

a whole lot of writing until after he [i.e. Merton] died. A person has to die before you inherit something of that spirit which moves them” (25) – a fitting characterization of the “inheritance” accessible to readers of this book.

Bernadette McNary-Zak

ORBBERSON, David E., *Thomas Merton and the Individual Witness: Kingdom Making in a Post-Christian, Post-Truth World* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2022), ix + 128 pp. ISBN: 978-1-5326-7648-2 (paper) \$21.00.

At the outset of a key chapter of *Thomas Merton and the Individual Witness*, theologian and author David Orberson considers some competing courses of action that Christians might adopt in response to the distinctive conditions of our time. Those conditions include a marked decline in formal religious affiliation, technological developments that have radically reshaped communication and access to information, and the rise of a kind of epistemological populism that takes shape in anti-intellectualism and skepticism of expertise. Orberson’s diagnosis of these conditions is succinct and incisive, though not wholly original: other writers in theology, philosophy or political science have noticed these trends and wrestled with various strategies of response.

The first such response that Orberson considers is the “Benedict Option” touted by commentator Rod Dreher.<sup>1</sup> Dreher’s proposal was a brief phenomenon in the popular press, as he argued that Christians should admit that they have lost the “culture wars” and, rather than accommodate themselves to a corrupt secular world, they should retreat into self-contained communities of Christian virtue, in which the faith could be sustained in hopes of outlasting the prevailing secular trends. On the other polar extreme of the spectrum, Orberson forwards the approach advocated by the priest and former leader of the Italian “Communion and Liberation” movement Julián Carrón.<sup>2</sup> Carrón calls for active and enthusiastic Christian engagement with the world.

Though he does not come out and say it directly, it is clear that Orberson sees Thomas Merton’s sympathies lying much more with Carrón’s attitude of engagement than with Dreher’s defeatist withdrawal. Merton, he writes, “is abundantly clear that Christians should not reflexively reject and turn away from secular culture. Instead, we should look for the good

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1. Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Era* (New York: Sentinel, 2017).

2. Julián Carrón, *Disarming Beauty: Essays on Faith, Truth, and Freedom* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017).