

Merton's desire to recover and deliver an authentic Christian message to the world brought him into conflict with a small section of the Church.

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'Mark my word man there is no uglier species on the face of the earth than progressed Catholics, mean, frivol, ungainly, inarticulate, venomous, and bursting at the seams with progress into the secular cities and the Teilhardian subways.'

Besides these commentaries, there are keen descriptions by the solitaries of their surroundings. Both write about encountering birds and Lax is especially struck by the beauty of the Greek isles, their inhabitants, language and customs. It is worth piecing together the series of clippings Merton sent Lax which he subsequently commented on, from 'The New Yorker' about the antics of a West Coast evangelist, Miss Velma. Friends, classmates, teachers and events at Columbia are frequently recalled. Especially moving are the passages relating the deaths of Ad Reinhardt and Dom John Slate (pp 118 - 25). Also included are poems written by the two friends and Zen drawings by the monk which Lax often requested. These anti-letters, like the anti-biography make fun of the form and its pretences and the result is better for it. Lax addresses Merton, "Dear Doctor Moosehunter" and signs off "Yrs, Sam". Merton's riposte being 'Dear Zmano' and 'Farewell, be prudent, be joyful, up the geraniums, (pp 34 - 7), and so it goes on. There are passages which are possibly too obscure for any outsider to fully understand. This is not the point of course. Reading the book is like gaining access to the world of two soul-mates. This is a welcome re-publication of the collection, (edited by Merton in 1967) which is worth reading for the spontaneous wit, humanity, imagination and profundity of its authors.

John Wright

Peter King. Dark Night Spirituality. (SPCK. London. 1995.) pp85, paper, £8.99. ISBN 0-281-04884-3.

Dark Night Spirituality, the first book from the pen of Peter King a Baptist minister serving in Eynsham, near Oxford, examines the lives and writings of Thomas Merton, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Etty Hillesum and traces in their work a common thread in their approach to contemplation. The author then goes on to develop their thought on contemplation associating it with developments in theology, especially in the second half of this century and, in particular, with the major paradigm shifts that have taken place. This may

sound like an awesome task but it is one Peter King has accomplished with a simplicity which both makes this slim volume very readable and accessible and points to the depths of his knowledge about his subject matter.

For readers of this journal Thomas Merton and his writing on contemplation require no introduction. Many will also have come across the life and work of the Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer especially in this year when the fiftieth anniversary of his execution by the nazis has been commemorated. Fewer will have heard of Etty Hillesum or have read her deeply moving diaries and so a few words of introduction to her here will be of value. Etty was a Dutch Jew with no formal religious affiliation whose diaries written between March 1941 and her death at Auschwitz in November 1943 articulate a "profoundly creative and powerful spirituality" of a fully human person who "lived and loved and ate and loved again." (p36.) For each of these three modern prophets Peter King explores their understanding of contemplation making it clear from their writings that contemplation was not a passive concept for them but one which led them to the reality of their self, the world and God and which demanded of them a commitment to work for the reality of the vision they had glimpsed.

The backgrounds of the three writers examined in this book is diverse; Cistercian, Lutheran and Jewish. Similarly their places of writing differ; monastic hermitage, prison cell and concentration camp. Yet all three face up to the dark night in their own lives and to the dark nights of the twentieth century in such a way as to make that mystical concept relevant to our own time where, in the author's words, with "Auschwitz, Hiroshima the Ozone Layer, and so much else, the 'Dark Night' is no longer the experience of the few." (p.46.) Through their experience of the dark night Merton, Bonhoeffer and Hillesum were each led to a new world view in which they saw the connectedness of all life and for each their response was an all-embracing compassion. Etty Hillesum's response from her place in Auschwitz is the most striking expressing a "real compassion" when faced by the Gestapo and "despite all the suffering and injustice" being unable to "hate others" (39.) disarming evil "by denying its power ultimately to define what life is all about." (59.) Hillesum's experience of the dark night led her to the realisation that "one can live one's life with meaning - or else one can die - in any spot on this earth." (p45.)

After having drawn together the common threads in the writings of Merton, Bonhoeffer and Hillesum Peter King moves on in his final chapter to place the experience of these three writers within the context of the major changes in theology in recent years. He outlines four characteristics which he sees as central to these changes - a change in the way theology is done so that context plays an important role; a change in the content of theology making room for the "experiential and intuitive"; and changes in both the function of theology

and the role of the theologian suggesting that the life and writings of Merton, Bonhoeffer and Hillesum were precursors of these changes and of political and liberation theologies.

In this very clearly and simply written book Peter King shares his enthusiasm for Merton, Bonhoeffer and Hillesum in an infectious way which makes the reader want to explore further the writings of these three figures. It is a challenging book opening up some profound questions whilst pointing to the possibility of a way forward along a way of contemplation which faces up to our modern life with its joys and its hopes, its sorrows and its anxieties, its beauty and its evil. Along this way of contemplation the dark night is transformed from an impasse to a time of kairos which the author encourages us to embrace after the example of Merton, Bonhoeffer and Hillesum.

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