

personal insights to his interpretation of Merton. Occasionally it was not very clear which interviewee Higgins was quoting from and it would have been useful if the quotes from interviews could have been footnoted as was the case with other quotes.

Heretic Blood is about Merton. There is very little information, biographical or literary, about Blake in it which may come as a disappointment to some readers. Similarly very little is made of Merton's life long interest in William Blake. At times I felt that Higgins was stretching his thesis almost to breaking point which was a shame as his interpretation of Merton using Blake's four-fold vision is a unique and valid one, though only one interpretation among many. Each writer on Merton employs their own lens with which to view him and, ultimately all the lenses together are needed to give the total picture of Merton.

1. George Woodcock in his book *Thomas Merton: Monk and Poet* even goes as far as to suggest that these two works were aberrations in Merton's poetic output.

Paul M Pearson

Lawrence S. Cunningham. *Thomas Merton and the Monastic Vision*. pp. xii + 228. Grand Rapids, MI & Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1999. ISBN: 0-8028-0222-2. \$16.00/£9.99.

Lawrence Cunningham of the University of Notre Dame has long been one of the most insightful commentators on Thomas Merton and his work. In this contribution to the Eerdmans "Library of Religious Biography" series (which includes volumes on such disparate figures as Gladstone, Thomas Jefferson, Emily Dickinson and Aimee Semple McPherson), Cunningham states early on that "if this book can be said to have a thesis, it is that one simply cannot understand Thomas Merton if one does not understand him as a monk" (17). While by no means underestimating or undervaluing Merton's contributions as a literary figure or a social/political critic, areas that he treats in detail, he maintains that the "monastic vision" of his title provides the unifying element that makes all of Merton's various interests cohere. Merton's evolving experience of and reflection on the meaning of monastic life in general and of his own life as a Cistercian in particular were the determining factors, according to Cunningham, for "the direction of his writing, the interests he took up, and the styles he pursued" (17). As the first extended biographical treatment of Merton published since the appearance of the complete journals (including the third volume, *A Search for Solitude*, edited by Cunningham himself), the book "reveals a person who deeply imbibed monastic ideas,

refined them through experience, and saw their application in a changing society" (17). It is precisely by examining Merton's monastic life in the context of mid-twentieth-century American culture, and of the struggles of the Roman Catholic Church during the same period, that Cunningham makes his major contribution.

In keeping with his focus, Cunningham covers the first, pre-monastic half of Thomas Merton's life in a brief 18-page Prologue. This is of course the sketchiest part of the book (and its rapid overview lets in a few inaccuracies that an alert editor should have caught: for example, Merton first broached the subject of converting to Catholicism with the pastor of Corpus Christi Church, Fr. George Ford, but he was instructed in the faith not by Fr. Ford but by his assistant Fr. Moore [10]; his period teaching at St. Bonaventure followed rather than preceded his rejection by the Franciscans [13]). Though he avoids retracing the steps made so familiar by *The Seven Storey Mountain* as well as by previous biographies, in some of which he finds a "psychological reductionism" that attempts to locate "keys to explain his later life and spirituality" in traumatic events of Merton's early life (16), he does highlight the major experiences leading to Merton's conversion and decision to enter the monastery, introduced by a helpful comparison of *The Seven Storey Mountain* with Augustine's *Confessions*, including the shrewd and quite relevant comment that both Augustine and Merton "end their spiritual autobiographies just as they begin their lives as public churchmen" (2) (though of course for Merton the monk the "public" character of his vocation is much more paradoxical, as Cunningham will go on to show, than it was for Augustine the bishop).

The six chapters that make up the body of the book, from "The Making of the Monk" through "The Final Years: 1967-1968," carefully examine Merton's prolific literary production in relation to the stages of development of his life as a contemplative monk, emphasizing the second as an indispensable context for properly understanding and appreciating the first. Cunningham explicitly distances himself from those scholars who claim that there were "abrupt and definitive transitions" (17) in Merton's monastic life; while quite attentive to the tensions inherent in Merton's relationship to monasticism, he sees Merton's life at Gethsemani as an evolutionary development, often somewhat dialectical, it is true, rather than a process marked by dramatic (or melodramatic) shifts.

Cunningham is particularly helpful in cutting through the superficial and stereotypical perceptions of monasticism to reach the life as it was actually lived when Merton entered Gethsemani in December 1941. He calls attention to "the many layers of custom, tradition, and what the monks call 'usages' that, like the strata of an archeological dig, were both much more recent and much more ancient" than the standard labeling of monasticism as "medieval."

He points out how the original contemplative focus of the early Cistercians had been largely supplanted by the more penitential emphasis of the seventeenth-century Trappist reform of the Abbé de Rancé, a change in direction that Merton would play a major role in reversing. He notes that as early as 1948 Merton was recommending to the new abbot, James Fox, a curriculum of study for the young monks that would give due attention to monastic sources and tradition, rather than the more generic priestly formation he received, changes he would himself implement as Master of Students and Master of Novices in the 1950s and 60s.

Much of the book consists of brief but incisive discussions of Merton's major writings, with a particular focus on how they illuminate, and are illuminated by, his monastic vocation. This makes the work particularly useful for those discovering Merton for the first time (presumably the principal audience envisioned by the editors of the series, with its footnote-free format), but those long familiar with Merton's work will also benefit from Cunningham's lightly worn but impressive scholarship.

For example Cunningham has important things to say about the generally neglected *Ascent to Truth* (1951), noting Merton's emphasis on an authentic understanding of contemplation as requiring a philosophical and theological framework, so as to guard against both the pseudo-mysticism of various ideologies and an over-reliance on external mystical phenomena (and noting as well Merton's omission of any discussion of John of the Cross's poetry in this book largely devoted to the Spanish mystic, probably a result of his "youthful conviction that poetry was a prelude to but not coterminous with mystical prayer – a view he would later change" [38]).

He calls attention to the genesis of *No Man Is An Island* (1955) in Merton's conferences to his scholastics, as well as to its "striking aphorisms," its "intelligent discrimination between true interiority and the false interiority of false asceticism, psychological rigidity, and casting the ascetic life in the pure negativity of not doing things," and its "stunning chapter" on "remembering God" (50). He discusses Merton's Pentecost prayer from *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* as an articulation of Merton's discovery "in the natural world and its inhabitants [of] the hidden grace of God, the movement of Sophia-Wisdom, and a clear hint of the cosmic redemption of Christ" (71).

He points to the essay "Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude" from *Disputed Questions* as a key text in Merton's expanding understanding of the contemplative life as present beyond the bounds of the monastery, and as revealing in Merton's thinking "a balanced tension between solitude and social responsibility; between insight and illusion; between community and the solitary life," as well as a "prophetic" insight "that only the person who understands and values interior solitude finds the capacity to say 'No' to the

pretensions, ideologies, and slogans of the crowd" (79); (Cunningham goes on to point out that such an essay defies the efforts of those who seek to "box . . . off" Merton's writings into separate categories like social criticism or spiritual writing).

In examining Merton's peace and justice writings, he observes that "the commonplaces discussed about the relationship of social justice and contemplation, found everywhere in the literature and official documents today, were a rarity until a few figures like Thomas Merton raised them in an environment that was at best indifferent and generally hostile to such enterprises" (100).

His discussion of *Contemplative Prayer* highlights the synthesis of traditional and contemporary concerns, for example the "rather convincing rereading of the existentialist concept of 'dread' . . . in the light of Saint John of the Cross's doctrine of the 'night of the senses' and the 'night of faith'" (122). He provides an illuminating comparison of Merton's essay "Rain and the Rhinoceros" with the "Firewatch" epilogue to *The Sign of Jonas*, pointing out that both are deeply monastic but that the later essay "was monastic in the way Merton understood monasticism after a quarter of a century of having lived the life in the midst of tumultuous changes in both church and society" (132). This is just a sampling of Cunningham's observations on Merton's writings, the distillation of years of reading and reflection on these texts.

In the final chapter, "Summing Up a Life," Cunningham shares the "two firm convictions" to which more than twenty years of reading Merton have brought him: first that "part of the allure of Merton is that he wrote everything" – whether poetry or prose, essay or journal, whether the topic was art or monastic history or social justice or interreligious dialogue – "out of a deeply centered life of faith expressed in prayer" (187); second, that "Merton can be understood only if he is understood as a monk who spent twenty-seven years under a monastic rule and within the rich tradition of monastic asceticism, spirituality, and prayer" (190), a way of life rooted in detachment from routines and concerns of worldly existence, in preoccupation with the inner depths of one's life, and in a recognition of the transcendent dimension beyond the ego or empirical self.

The continuing value of Merton's example, as Cunningham sums it up, is that "because Merton not only believed but existentially struggled with experiencing and articulating the foundations of belief and the conversion of consciousness in a life set apart from the world, he was able to express some powerfully authentic words that could speak to others in the world who also sought some sense of the transcendent in their own lives as a source of sustenance for authentic living" (197). One senses in this description the basis of Cunningham's own attraction to Merton's writing, and the source of much of the effectiveness of this fine synthesis. The editors of the "Library of

Religious Biography" describe the series as consisting of books that are "well-written narratives meant to be read and enjoyed as well as studied"; *Thomas Merton and the Monastic Vision* certainly meets these criteria.

Pat O'Connell

Bonnie Thurston: *To Everything a Season - A Spirituality of Time*; Crossroad Publishing Co., NY; 1999; \$14.99, 120pp h/b; ISBN 0 8245 1784 9

This is a timely book. The besetting problem of our generation is the sense of over-commitment, lack of time and sheer busyness, which leaves many of us with the feeling that our lives are out of control. The urgent overwhelms the important. We have become human doings instead of human beings.

One unconvincing response has been the invention of quality time: the precious moments we spend with family or chosen priority have to be emotionally perfect in order to make up for their deficient quantity.

Bonnie Thurston comes at the issue from a different angle. Her contention is that, in creating Time, God made plenty of it. Our problem is that we don't live it. We exist in the present, for sure, but we live in the past or the future, worrying and regretting; or else bending every sinew to achieve some future state of security or prestige in the future. Thus we define ourselves by what we have, or get, or do. Bonnie Thurston sees this as a kind of "works righteousness", our activity lending us a dangerous sense of importance and pride in attainment.

We need more space simply to be, and permission to give that the priority it deserves. She calls it Sabbath-time: opportunities to connect with God and our deepest selves; time apart to avoid the pitfall of becoming our work; space to find out whom I am when I am not doing what I do.

It is a case of opening up some space for God. With some subtle etymology, Bonnie Thurston shows that, in the Gospels, Jesus withdrew to make room for people and situations he would encounter. He withdrew in order to be present. An important part of listening well is being truly present in the moment, a gift important in many jobs and professions, as well as in our personal lives. In turn, listening could be said to be the cornerstone of hospitality.

Reading the book one realises that Bonnie Thurston is a natural teacher, and that her students are fortunate. She develops her points carefully with well chosen illustrations and references, following the time-honoured process of telling us what she's going to say, saying it, and then telling us what she's said. Thomas Merton is quoted frequently. There are questions to encourage reflection, perhaps within a group, and practical advice on how to find and make your own Sabbath time, according to your circumstances. I