

Merton, as his friends knew him, so much closer to us.

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Contemplating God, Changing the World

Mario I. Aguilar

SPCK, London, 2008

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164 + xxiii pages

£12.99

Reviewed by Peter Ellis

The premise of this book is that contemplation and social action belong together and that Christians need to reconnect with the recognition that time spent with God in prayer and meditation makes us aware of his presence and will in the world. With great clarity Aguilar reiterates his basic theme throughout the book: 'prayer and contemplation lead to a political commitment, to a social responsibility and to political action', 'the measure of [our] contemplation is the extension of God's actions through [us] towards the poor', and so on.

The book starts with an exposition of the theme and a review of the relationship of politics and spirituality. Here we learn that Aguilar speaks with the authority of someone who has seen the brute face of the political, for he has experienced what followed the 1973 coup against Allende in Chile. His uncle was executed, members of his family fled, and he himself was

involved in a left wing cell from which people he knew were 'disappeared'.

The main section of the book is a series of thumbnail sketches of six individual lives, illustrating his theme in terms of real lived experience and real events. Merton leads the way followed by Ernesto Cardenal, Daniel Berrigan, Sheila Cassidy, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and Mother Teresa. Each is, of course, quite different, there is no attempt to mould these lives into a hagiographic illustration of a series of points. But each followed a deep contemplative path and from each of them, according to Aguilar, God brought out responses to the world 'they had never thought they wanted to give in the first place'.

This leads on to the real argument of the book – that the work of a contemplative is not to separate spirit from body and to ascend a ladder away from the world, but to hear God's call to action in the world on behalf of the marginalized, the prisoners, the poor. This is open to all of us. When we turn to God in contemplation and prayer we turn our bodies as well as our spirits towards God. 'Contemplative bodies are transformed into bodies of resistance to...power, prestige and possessions'.

And, Aguilar argues, it is precisely in the eucharist that we are given the connection between our bodies and Jesus, between human and divine and between religion and politics. The eucharist is, as the liberation theologians and groups fighting for social justice have experienced it, actually a very real presence of community. In the eucharist the church comes together as a body where personal identity is no longer something to be grasped in distinction *from* other people

but is created anew *with* other people.

These chapters end with a final one that brings us back from politics in the majority world to politics in Britain today. In a moving section Aguilar describes how the 'drunkards, prostitutes and unemployed youth' on Edinburgh's Royal Mile 'represent the face of Christ and ... walk our streets trying to show us the face of God'. He describes how he was sitting on a park bench reading Abbot Jamison's book (the abbot of the T.V. film series *The Monastery*) when a tramp-like stranger sat down, told him that life was beautiful and that reading about spiritual things was good for the world, and then walked on.

An inspiring book, a straightforward and clearly argued book. But I felt something missing from Aguilar's concept of our relationship with the political. Highlighting it is not to argue against greater Christian social commitment but to try and link two separate ways of seeing contemplation. Instead of the political being something we engage with by choice, it seems to me that we are embedded in it from birth and compromised by power from long before our birth. We don't enter politics from outside – as Merton saw we are all always guilty bystanders. Further our inner imaginary worlds and the outer 'real' world are inextricably bound up with and feed off each other – that's what war and oppression are. Aguilar's book is somewhat at odds with the insight into contemplation as therapy that Thomas Keating has given us, where our lives are seen as a gift from God for us to work through our childhood stuff and to emerge as adults. For Keating and others the best political action we can do is to sort ourselves out so that we can then act

fully in the moment not weighed down with illusions.

Saying this should not detract from the call in Aguilar's forceful book for renewed Christian engagement through time spent in prayer and contemplation. Whatever way one looks at the political, what happens as a result of disciplined time with God is a connection with the authentic action that impelled the Samaritan towards the ditch.

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The Contagion of Jesus Doing Theology as if it Mattered

Sebastian Moore

Edited by Stephen McCarthy

Darton, Longman & Todd

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228 pages

£14.95

Reviewed by Teresa Messias

Quite some time has passed since Sebastian Moore O.S.B. published his last book, *Jesus the Liberator of Desire*, (1990). Surprisingly, lucidly, daringly, in his own style, close to his ninetieth birthday, he returns now with *The Contagion of Jesus* with this collection of interesting and reflective essays edited by Stephen McCarthy.

The book is organized into two parts. The first part covers more theoretical