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The Book Reviewer

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MAY 2010

The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything by James Martin, S.J. (Spirituality)

With that bit of merriment in the title, Fr. Martin begins for us an encouraging trek through Ignatian spirituality. While the author holds himself lightly, with humor and humility, he takes his Jesuit Order, with its teachings and its way to find God in everything, very seriously, indeed.

St. Ignatius, founder of the Jesuits, understood grace as being from God, which got him into trouble with the Inquisition because the Church at this time was taking a firm

stand against all of the tenets of the Protestant Reformation. One of the basic beliefs of the reformers was in individual revelation, a one-to-one relationship with God; while Catholic teaching insisted that God speaks to us through His Church. This continues to be an issue today when many people believe that they can be spiritual without being religious—i.e. belonging to a specific religion; and when many others in the church think of mysticism as being all right,

but only for a very few enlightened souls. Fr. Martin agrees with Ignatius that God does speak to individuals, and also through the teachings and rituals of the Church.

With personal anecdotes and many apt stories and quotes from other Jesuits, Fr. Martin guides us through St. Ignatius' Spiritual Exercises with charm and ease, and also with a great love for his subject matter, and ultimately a great love for God.

Reviewed by Clare Dinno

Merton—A Film Biography (DVD)

Thomas Merton is one of the most influential Catholic figures of our time, and this 1984 documentary of his life is a basic introduction to the man, his faith, his convictions and his writing. It begins and ends with excerpts from a famously controversial talk he gave in Bangkok—the only time Merton was ever filmed speaking—after which he tragically met his death.

In between these bookends, we learn about his upbringing and the losses in his early life that started him on the contemplative road. We learn through accounts by friends and colleagues about his congeniality and his gift for writing, as well as his self-indulgent college years at Cambridge.

Upon his transfer to Columbia University in New York City, his spiritual search led him to initiation into the Catholic Church. Within two years he became a Trappist monk, eventually receiving priestly ordination, which he said was “the one great secret for which I had been born.”

His writing career began when his Abbot ordered him to write his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, which upon publication became an immediate bestseller. As testament to his subsequent prolific writing on the subjects of his evolving faith, social justice consciousness, and East-West spirituality, intriguing passages from his books and journals are inter-

persed throughout the film, along with images of Merton and his world.

The scope of Merton's life is necessarily compressed for this video and touches only on the most significant events of his time on earth. For those who know him only by name, that is enough to whet the appetite for further study of this holy man who has been referred to as “the only fully awake person in the twentieth century”. For those who are devotees of Merton, the personal testimonies of friends and colleagues that can be found in the Special Features section of the disc will enrich your awareness of his vibrant, loving spirit.

Reviewed by Susan Triplett



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Radical Amazement by Judy Cannato (Spirituality)

One of the most amazing facts in this book is the sentence with which the author introduces her work: "Thomas Aquinas said that a mistake in our understanding of creation would necessarily cause a mistake in our understanding of God." The understanding about the universe eight centuries ago was certainly very limited, and yet St. Thomas' intuitive understanding of God was immense. Since his 13th century era the church has often "distinguished" itself by obstinately refusing to acknowledge scientific evidence, especially evidence that the earth is not the center of the universe, and of evolution. Scien-

tists also dug in against religion with the 17th and 18th century notion of a mechanistic universe and an uninvolved God.

The author explains advances not only about evolution, but especially about huge advances in mathematics, physics, and technology, following upon Einstein's theory of relativity and his calculations concerning space-time relationships. One radically amazing fact is that God's timing is exquisite: if the Big Bang had occurred one trillionth of a second sooner or later, the whole thing would have been flung uselessly apart due to forces of gravity, centrifuge, and less well understood

forces of dark matter and dark energy. In the past century, writers such as Henri Bergson, P. Teilhard de Chardin, and theologians like the late Karl Rahner have embraced the new science.

Our understanding of God and the universe remains limited, and probably always will. Throughout history, however, it has been the great mystics who have become closest to both. The purpose of this book is to help all of us grow close to a contemplative knowledge of our connectedness to all of creation, with some of the awe and amazement of the mystics and scientists.

Reviewed by Clare Dinno

Christian Zen by William Johnston (Spirituality)

In this brief book published in 1971, the author presents his thoughts on the nexus of Christian contemplation and Zen meditation. His gentle and somewhat tentative approach is refreshing with its sense of discovery and wonder, and you get the feeling that you are a trusted friend with whom Johnston is probing the depths of East-West truth, then formulating ideas and bouncing them off of you.

As a Roman Catholic priest, the author is well-grounded in traditional church teaching and shares insightful knowledge of our scriptures. But having detected a staleness

and lack of depth in the Catholic practices of his time, he seeks to deepen the Christian's intimate oneness with Christ who is God, though he is clear that this must not come at the expense of the historical Christ who redeemed us by his death and resurrection.

Fr. Johnston uses the Buddhist image of the finger pointing at the moon—the finger being the words, images, and practices of our faith and the moon being the risen, cosmic Christ who is "beyond concepts, beyond images, beyond thought, beyond place." He exhorts us to avoid being so

exclusively attached to the "pointing finger" that we don't ever see the "moon" to which we are being directed, let alone experience Him in the very depths of our hearts, which is the fruit of Christian contemplation, as known by the mystics. Johnston proposes that incorporating Zen practice into Christian contemplation is a highly practical and productive path to Samadhi—oneness with Christ—for all seekers.

The latter part of the book has practical pointers for those who are moved to try Christian Zen for themselves.

Reviewed by Susan Triplett