Book Reviews

Paul Koptak, emeritus professor of communication and biblical interpretation, North Park Theological Seminary, Chicago, Illinois

Linda Swanson, Chicago, Illinois

Paul H. de Neui, professor of missiology and intercultural studies, North Park Theological Seminary, Chicago, Illinois

John E. Phelan, emeritus professor of New Testament, North Park Theological Seminary, Chicago, Illinois

Mark Safstrom, associate professor of Scandinavian Studies, Augustana College, Rock Island, Illinois

Nicolas Herman, Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection, *Practice of the Presence,* translated by Carmen Acevedo Butcher (Minneapolis: Broadleaf, 2022), 225 pages, $27.

It's not easy to read the spiritual classics. Monks and nuns of centuries past don't speak the way we're used to, and their thoughts and experiences can seem too strange, too deep. However, reading Brother Lawrence is like easing into the shallow end of the pool. Anyone can identify with his desire to be in conversation with God at work and at rest. His simple practice of thinking of God throughout the day makes it clear and doable.

Translations make a difference too. Carmen Acevedo Butcher's expanded edition of *Practice of the Presence* offers fresh translations of the conversations and letters alongside newly translated spiritual maxims and last words. Readers are now able to read the complete works of Brother Lawrence in a style of English as informal and intimate as the original French. She states her desire to let the translation reflect the beauty, calm,

and inclusivity of the original while observing changes in the language we use today. It makes sense to use plural pronouns "they" and "them" when Brother Lawrence speaks of the triune God. Consulting the original 1692 publication corrected errors in the modern French editions. In some instances, masculine pronouns had been inserted; in another, the misreading of one letter produced "in it," instead of "in faith."

Acevedo Butcher's introductions to the works and their meaning for her life are moving devotional reading as well. She begins with a short autobiographical story. Wandering the streets and highways of rural northwest Georgia in a depressed state, she looked down to find a book with a tire mark on its back flap. "Standing in the red dust on the side of that road, I read words on a random page in that book-likely-whooshed-off-a-distracted-owner's-car-roof, and I knew I'd found a friend" (p. 2).

She hopes a similar experience will come to those who meet Brother Lawrence—the man she calls *Friar d'Amour*—in her new translation of his book. This "Brother of Love" also suffered years of depression and inner turmoil in religious practice before he decided to do all things for the love of God, especially the tasks he disliked in the monastery kitchen. After that, the times of work and prayer hardly seemed different to him.

Conversations with a younger priest recalled his conviction that God is present always: "He said we must act very simply with God, and talk to Love freely, asking them for help with things as life happens" (p. 127). He said the simple practice of turning his thoughts toward God at all times was easy, though hard to make a habit. Acevedo Butcher uses "stumbling" as the best way to convey his word for failure; it speaks of the hope of getting up and going on.

His letters counseled others about suffering, drawing from his own injury that left him lame throughout life and bedridden in his last years. "Love God even in your weakness, offering them your sufferings from time to time, even during your worst pain. . . . I will help you in this with my poor, small prayers" (p. 111).

Acevedo Butcher supplements the translations with a short biography of the war-damaged young soldier who became the wise, serene elder we remember today. Also included are a timeline and eyewitness recollections of the "catastrophic seventeenth century" of war and plague.

I compared the new translation to the brown pages of my paperback and noted a few places where I preferred the old: ". . . let go once and for all of everything we recognize as not tending toward God" (p. 133) in the new translation doesn't sound as urgent to me as ". . . all consists

in one hearty renunciation of everything which we are sensible does not lead to God" (p. 22). But there are not many such places. The warmth and simplicity of the beloved friar distinguishes this translation as well. We are fortunate to have this new reflection of his wisdom.

PAUL KOPTAK

Harriette Shelton Dover, edited by Darleen Fitzpatrick, *Tulalip, From My Heart: An Autobiographical Account of a Reservation Community* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2023), 344 pages, $27.

My father died in 1965, when I was eleven. He was a church planter in rural and remote parts of Washington and Oregon. In my before-school years, dad sometimes subbed for the pastor at a church on the Quinaults Indian Reservation. My first best friend lived across the street from the church. Each time my dad acted as substitute pastor, my little friend and I were inseparable.

She might be the reason I knew there had to be more to the stories I read as a young, avid reader. *The Little House on the Prairie* series and all the books I could find about the Oregon Trail and the beautiful Willamette Valley were told from the pioneers' perspective of facing danger and hardship to settle a new land. That was fascinating to my young imagination, but not satisfying. I knew there had to be more. How had little girls felt when the wagon trains passed their villages, muddied their streams, hunted for game, and depleted their food supply? Were they afraid or worried? Did they want to learn a new language, make some new friends? I wanted to read their voices.

Which leads to why *Tulalip, From My Heart*, by Harriette Shelton Dover, captured my attention. Dover tells the history and stories of her Snohomish people and other Pacific Northwest people in a way that makes me feel we are sitting on her front porch as she gazes into the years gone by. I sometimes feel her gaze turn to me when she has to share a hard truth. I see questions in her prose; "Can you believe this? Will you believe me?"

Dover begins her history with the events particular to Treaty Day, January 22, 1855. From the oral history her family passed down to her,

she relates the years prior to the arrival of the pioneers and after the treaty was signed. Her history becomes more personal after her birth in 1904 and when she began attending the reservation's boarding school as a seven-year-old.

Dover wrote this book with the help of one of her college instructors, who became her project assistant and editor. Darleen Fitzpatrick helped Dover write the story she'd always wanted to tell. They met once a week to tape-record history that had been passed down from great-grandparents to parents, from parents to Dover. Fitzpatrick determined to keep the narrative in Dover's voice so readers can sense Dover speaking directly to them, as if they are her friends.

This is the secret to this book's storytelling success. Sentences sometimes lead to rabbit holes; deep wounds are brought up again. While she is sharing about a topic, one memory may remind her of another. In this style, the logistics of daily life—food, starvation, illness, education, transportation, religion, and relationships—are written about from the depths of her experience and, as the title says, from her heart.

LINDA SWANSON

Carl McColman, *The New Big Book of Christian Mysticism: An Essential Guide to Contemplative Spirituality* (Minneapolis: Broadleaf, 2023), 402 pages, $22.

Don't be put off by the title or the cover (which initially reminded me of books on trucks and trains that I read to my kids during their preschool days). This book is one of those volumes that should be leatherbound with gold lettering and vellum pages. There is rich treasure here that mirrors that of Scripture in its revelatory nature of ancient historical spirituality too long ignored by the self-help devotionality popularly sold today.

Writings about the pursuit of spirituality tends to teeter between the formulaic and the fantastic. This book is neither. What McColman has presented in this updated volume builds on his former work *The Little Book of Christian Mysticism*, expanding its breadth with no pretension as to comprehensiveness. You will not get all your questions answered,

but your inner spiritual appetite will be deepened and aroused in ways perhaps previously unconsidered.

As the author states in his introduction, "mysticism is Christianity's best-kept secret." This is a prescient topic in today's world disillusioned by modernity's linear theologies and systematized spirituality. Recovering the keys to mysticism is to literally step back into an adventurous future whereby the stages of purification (purgation) transform to illumination, ultimately seeking the light of an intimate union with God, in a process all driven by grace (pp. 222–3, 228).

As an instructor who touches on the topic of mysticism as found in all major world religions, I found McColman's explanations of the Christian traditions of mysticism revelatory, inspiring, and challenging. Anyone desiring a spiritual life that opens the door into the deeper mystery of God finds the answer is simple, but the process requires everything. To discover that the essentials for entering into this mystery are readily available now brings eternity into the present.

This book is not for the cloistered community. Indeed, it may surprise many readers to discover that modern mystics such as Howard Thurman found some of his most life-altering encounters with the mysteries of faith not in a monastery but in a train station. "Mysticism isn't about keeping your hands clean and hiding in a separate life or community. Rather it impels you to get those hands dirty—always in the service of love" (p. 5).

The author asserts that each believer is uniquely equipped to be a mystic in the way that she or he is designed by God to be. This is not a one-size-fits-all faith to be copied identically over and over. Instead, several prayer practices are introduced, encouraging all readers to develop their own spiritual life of prayer, meditation, and contemplation.

For those seeking to find a faith deeper than formulas, I recommend this book, particularly the last chapter on "Living a Mystical Life." The three appendices guide a reader through the historical complexity of earlier mystics who wrote metaphorically in genres unfamiliar to us today. This truly is a treasure of resources, re-acquainting the reader in refreshing ways to aspects of the ancient Christian tradition that are desperately needed under today's version of a faith weighed down by postmodern deconstructionism.

PAUL H. DE NEUI

Tim Alberta, *The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory: American Evangelicals in an Age of Extremism* (New York: Harper, 2023), 512 pages, $25.

Tim Alberta was raised in the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. His father was a gifted, learned pastor who had grown his congregation in conservative southwest Michigan from a few hundred to several thousand. Alberta himself was a church brat practically raised in the building, since both his parents served the congregation. He was, and is, a solidly traditional, conservative evangelical who, like many, has struggled to understand what happened to evangelicalism. How is it that a group that had loudly denounced the sins of former President Bill Clinton so willingly supported "a lecherous, impenitent scoundrel" like former President Donald Trump? And this support, he argues, was no longer "nakedly transactional," voting for the "lesser of two evils." It had morphed into a level of passion and enthusiasm that was as perplexing as it was powerful. How could one account for the fact that someone like Eric Metaxas had even professed himself willing to die for Trump?

In 2019 Alberta published *American Carnage: On the Front Lines of the Republican Civil War and the Rise of President Trump*. It was strongly critical of the then president and the movement he had started. While he was being interviewed about the book, he tells us, his beloved father unexpectedly died of a heart attack. Alberta rushed home for the funeral. During the viewing Alberta learned that that very day the book had been attacked by Rush Limbaugh. Standing in line, ostensibly to receive comfort, he was greeted "not primarily with condolences or encouragement or mourning but with commentary about Rush Limbaugh and Donald Trump." Many of his "comforters" were angry, "cold and confrontational. One man questioned whether I was truly a Christian. Another asked if I was still on 'the right side.' All while Dad was in a box a hundred feet away." This set Alberta on a quest to discover what was happening to the evangelicalism he had known and loved.

In subsequent chapters he describes the experiences of the famous and less than famous when they dared to question the received wisdom of right-wing media, both secular and Christian. John Torres, a thoughtful, conservative Evangelical Presbyterian Church pastor was called "woke," a Marxist and socialist, an advocate of "critical race theory" for daring to raise questions of racism in the wake of the murder of George Floyd. Alberta's father's successor saw his congregation melt away when he refused to follow the hard-edged political tack of other churches in his

area. And then there were solid conservative figures like Russell Moore, Tim Keller, and David French. Metaxas called Keller "Hitler's favorite kind of pastor." One John Zmirak called French "a Nazi collaborator." Tucker Carlson attacked Russell Moore as gutless, commenting bizarrely, "Where's Russell Moore and all the other breastfeeding Christians when that happens—as the U.S. government cracks down on Christianity."

It seemed to Alberta that there was a category of Christians longing for persecution, longing to have a reason to rebel, to fight. I was struck with how many right-wing Christians he describes saw COVID-19 as a scam and pandemic restrictions as a plot to destroy American Christianity—a view that perplexed many health care professionals and government officials! Chapter after chapter demonstrated not only how the lunatic fringe had made it into mainstream but how the religious fig leaf was increasingly being removed to show a nakedly aggressive movement determined to bring the government and society to heel, not through the gospel, but by acquiring power to rule. Alberta's book demonstrates that the support of vast numbers of evangelicals for Donald Trump is not an anomaly, not a historical "blip," but at the heart of what it means to be evangelical. It makes clear that evangelicalism is now, and has been for many years, a substantially white, Christian nationalist movement that has distorted or abandoned the traditional theology that once gave the movement its shape.

I cannot finish this review without mentioning two key sections of the book. Alberta takes a long and disturbing look at Jerry Falwell Jr. and Liberty University. This section of the book is well worth a careful read. His discussion of the sexual abuse crisis among the Southern Baptists and the heroism of a young Southern Baptist lawyer named Rachael Denhollander is one of the few bright spots in the book. This is both one of the most compelling and most painful books I have read in years. I highly recommend it.

JOHN E. PHELAN

Marion Goldman and Steven Pfaff, *The Spiritual Virtuoso: Personal Faith and Social Transformation* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 216 pages, $29.

What do Martin Luther, Angelina and Sarah Grimke, and Steve Jobs have to do with one another? According to sociology professors Goldman and Pfaff, the thread that weaves these and other historical figures together is the degree to which they can be understood as "spiritual virtuosi." Whereas a virtuoso in the artistic sense pursues the mastery, refinement, or perfection of an art form, a spiritual virtuoso pursues the mastery of a religious discipline or lifestyle. Expanding on a concept coined by Max Weber a century ago, the authors examine what it means to be a virtuoso and identify how an individual's "personal virtuosity unites with collective action" (p. 1). While a spiritual virtuoso's pursuit of perfection may be, and often is, an individual experience, what is remarkable about the virtuosi in this book is that their pursuit of virtuosity contributed to large-scale cultural transformations: the Reformation (Luther), the anti-slavery movement (the Grimkes), and the Human Potential Movement (Jobs). Goldman and Pfaff's book is an ambitious, sweeping exploration of 500 years of history that seeks to clarify the connection between spiritual activism and social transformation.

This book bears potential relevance to *Quarterly* readers in several ways; for those interested in church history, the authors present Martin Luther in the perspective of comparative-historical sociology, and make passing connections to Pietism, as well. Similarly, the analysis of the Grimkes brings this novel approach to evangelical revival movements and American Protestant church history. For pastors and laypeople engaged in ministry contexts, the book can shed light on how this virtuosity has influenced their own traditions and practices, as well as how trends in contemporary Christian ministries can be related to larger societal trends assumed to be wholly secular.

If evangelical leaders read this with critical self-reflection in mind, this book may also help analyze and deconstruct some of the mythos surrounding megachurch pastors and popular spiritual leaders. One important takeaway from the book is that religious movements succeed not necessarily because of the rightness of their theology, but because of their appeal to individuals looking for authentic self-realization in a given societal context. This may be an unsettling discovery for some, as

it analyzes what charismatic social leaders do, rather than taking their message at face value. Furthermore, while a religious leader may be identified as "charismatic," this term often goes undefined, even by scholars; a person is deemed charismatic because they have charisma. By contrast, the authors seek to remedy this by explaining the kinds of qualities charismatic leaders demonstrate, and what kinds of measurable activities they engage in to connect their own personal convictions to society.

Luther is presented as having been a pioneer in modern spiritual virtuosity, providing patterns of thought that influenced twentieth-century cultural figures like Steve Jobs. The authors explain that, as Luther inspired and equipped "ordinary people [to] reach toward sanctification without focusing their lives on cloistered spiritual perfection" (p. 15), similarly Steve Jobs's message was that "people could discover their authentic selves and their higher purpose through personal technology" (p. 4). While some of the historical virtuosi can be seen as representing conservative values, the authors assert that what unites all their examples is a democratic impulse; "when spiritual virtuosi disrupt official boundaries and challenge institutional authority, they always work for more access to spiritual possibilities and a greater range of religious choices by democratizing spiritual privilege" (p. 3). This democratic impulse often prioritized the conversion of the individual, over and against top-down reforms. The authors claim that "[…] activist spiritual virtuosi have emphatically believed that they should not implement their ideals by means of the kinds of external force that prophetic virtuosi might willingly use. They seek external change through their supporters' interior transformations and their adversaries' wholehearted conversions. […] they feel that they must lead everyone to remake himself or herself […]" (p. 33).

Pietism is identified as a particularly vital outgrowth of the virtuosity of Luther, replicated by countless of his readers on the individual level. "Lutheran virtuosity found its most authentic expression in Pietism, a spiritual movement at the faith's margins. Pietist leaders advocated for active, vital personal religion against the academic orthodoxy and conservatism of the newly established Protestant churches. They published moving appeals, created charitable institutions, and organized devotional networks, but refrained from breaking with the established churches" (p. 93). Educational institutions and mass communication through print were mechanisms that connected virtuosi with large segments of society, gathered people into movements, and directed them toward identifiable goals. For example, Luther's reformation was implemented through print and through the University of Wittenberg, at which an estimated forty

percent of the first generation of European reformers studied (p. 87). This continued into nineteenth-century evangelicalism, as Angelina Grimke and Theodore Dwight Weld effected their abolitionist movement through the "mobilization of professional agents" who worked to start abolition societies at the local level, thus duplicating the work en masse (p. 109).

The authors, as sociologists, focus on the human side of religion and refrain from evaluating the authenticity of the virtuosi's encounter with the divine. Their focus is instead on how these historical figures acted on their ideals, their relationships to ordinary people and to the dominant political order, and their personal practices. These comparisons lead the authors to identify at least four types of virtuosi, for example, ascetic (St. Francis), ethical (Mother Teresa), prophetic (Buddha), and activist (Martin Luther King Jr.). There are also combinations of these, such that a virtuoso may be described as an "ethical prophetic activist," which the authors identify for the case of MLK.

Jobs is identified as an "aspiring" virtuoso in that his interest in pursuing sanctification through Eastern mysticism was ultimately crowded out by myriad other interests. Nevertheless, Jobs "channeled his quest for spiritual perfection into the business world" (p. 20). This resulted in Jobs's association with the so-called Human Potential Movement, which "embraced every spiritual system that enabled individuals to create more vital, meaningful lives on earth and improve the world" (p. 124). This movement began in the 1960s, with groups like the Esalen Institute, and later engaged Jobs and other cultural luminaries, including Oprah and her "Life You Want Weekends." "Oprah's intensive, and expensive, weekends resembled the dramatic revivals and camp meetings that spread from England to the American frontier in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries," albeit with only vague references to God and no references to sin (p. 152).

This book challenges an assumption about modern spirituality, namely that this current age is an increasingly secular one. The authors suggest that religion may be as impactful as ever, despite the decline of formal religious adherence. This is grounded in a distinction between formal religious participation and more diffuse personalization of spiritual practices in everyday life. "It is fairly common to classify congregational faiths as religions and refer to dedicated spiritual practices as spirituality. […] This rigid approach ignores the ways that people bring parts of traditional faiths to collectives…" (p. 11). The authors argue that the decline of formal religion is not synonymous with the decline of spiritual virtuosity, and rather that modern social movements since the 1960s

must be understood as part of a long trajectory stretching back to the Reformation. "Spiritual virtuosity is clearly present today, even if many virtuosi activists no longer claim membership in or inspiration from any established faith" (p. 68).

This is a scholarly book, and the authors make no value judgments about the virtuosi they profile. Their aim is to explain how spiritual virtuosity is connected to collective movements, as well as how seemingly unconnected religious and non-religious movements borrow methods and practices from one another. As such it offers the ecclesiastical reader a valuable and provocative outsider's perspective on how religious leadership functions.

MARK SAFSTROM