

drawing upon world religions in order to introduce his readers to traditions of contemplative practices that help to facilitate spiritual awakening. The literary device Culliford uses to frame and anchor his study is an overarching 'arc of life' that makes visible the process of an evolving spiritual maturity at different stages along a typical life cycle from infancy to old age. He covers six stages of spiritual development: egocentric, conditioning, conformist, individual, integration, and universal. Culliford alludes to interconnections between spiritual inhibitions at an early stage of this life arc and social ills. For example, fundamentalism is explained in terms of the 'egocentric stage' leader and the 'conformist stage' followers (p. 111). In contrast, Culliford equates spiritual maturity with the instinct to participate in the flourishing of others (p. 171).

This book is brimming with ideas about the nature of personhood, but too many are cursively skimmed rather than sifted and refined. That said, however, Culliford's case study approach gives his writing an authenticity and an intimacy making his book a pleasurable read that can be put down and taken up without losing the thread of his argument. The clarity of approach in this book and the implications of the author's ideas for personal and social well-being should attract a readership that includes those seeking insights into their own spiritual life; those with an interest in mental health, spirituality and the human brain; and those with pastoral roles. *Much Ado about Something* is timely and relevant for today's war-weary world wracked by atrocities too frequently misunderstood as being perpetrated as sacred causes.

**James G. R. Cronin**, University College Cork, Ireland. (See James Cronin's article on pages 61-68)

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### **The Way of the Hermit: Interfaith Encounters in Silence and Prayer**

Mario I Aguilar

Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London, 2017

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£16.99

Mario Aguilar is Professor of Religion and Politics in the University of St Andrews and a prolific author. He was born in Chile but had to leave the country after being arrested by the Pinochet regime. He studied in Louvain and went as a Divine Word Missionary to Africa. His academic

interests began with a study of the Oromo people in Kenya. He has written about Liberation Theology and published in 9 volumes *A Social History of the Catholic Church in Chile*. For some time his focus has been on Hinduism and Buddhism. He is directing a ten year study of Religion and Politics in Tibet. Among his recent publications are *Thomas Merton: Contemplation and Political Action* (2011) and *Pope Francis: His Life and Thought* (2014).

He is now a Camaldolese Benedictine Oblate attached to the New Camaldoli Hermitage in Big Sur, California. He is a friend of Pope Francis and has had the Dalai Lama to stay. He has a 'hermitage' in a small flat in Anstruther, along the Fife coast from St Andrews. He supports an institute in Chile which promotes Christian-Buddhist dialogue. He travels regularly to India to support Hindu monastic developments. Like Carlo Carretto he believes the Western emphasis on the power of money to be detrimental to true religion.

The book explores the contribution to modern ideas of hermitage through the lives of a number of 20th century hermits: Charles de Foucauld who was murdered in the Sahara; Sri Ramona Maharishi, described as an Indian spiritual superman; Sadhu Sundar Singh, a Christian convert who disappeared on a journey to Tibet; Swami Abhishiktananda who was the Breton Henri de Saux; and Thomas Merton who spent the last three years of his life in a hermitage in the grounds of his Trappist monastery.

In 1960 Merton wrote a 30 page essay called 'Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude'. Aguilar observes that in this study Merton described the 'tyranny of diversion'. Every human being is solitary, Merton believed, but was impeded by three things: the amazement caused by money, the desire to acquire status; and simple selfishness. Faith restores the sense of solitude. In the 'sea of perils' one can transcend society, treating the world as a womb and knowing the loneliness of the Divine. The hermit, in emptiness, witnesses to the presence of the real God. The spirit of compassion overcomes individualism.

As a writer of so many publications there is inevitably a touch of the scissors and paste by Aguilar in *The Way of the Hermit*. It is recommended as an insight into the way Merton's influence, amongst other like-minded spiritual gurus, is still felt in unexpected ways. The true hermit loves both God and neighbour. It is impressive to see how a busy academic can lend energy to such a dialogue in India by his frequent visits there.

**Willy Slavin** is a priest of the Archdiocese of Glasgow who has retired to a hermitage with an iPad.