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From the insipid to the eternal

by Diane Scharper

HIPSTER CHRISTIANITY: WHEN CHURCH AND COOL COLLIDE

By Brett McCracken

Published by Baker Books, \$15.99

Hipster Christianity is in trouble, according to Brett McCracken. His book, *Hipster Christianity*, offers a fact-filled account of Christian churches that fashion themselves according to the "wants" of their audience. McCracken, contributor to *Christianity Today* as well as *Relevant* magazine, presents a compelling analysis of Christian communities that try so hard to be relevant, they wind up being trendy.

They abandon traditional liturgical music and homilies based on biblical readings in favor of rock music and self-help sermons that focus on the here and now rather than on the hereafter. They discard Christianity's rich intellectual and aesthetic heritage for "high-tech hoo-ha more befitting of a U2 concert than a Sunday service." This includes jumbo screens, service texting, and online campuses. Instead of cassocks, their choirs wear skinny jeans and clothing styles that advertise their efforts to be hip. Their keyword is *self*, not *sacred*. Ultimately, as McCracken argues in this sobering account, they're becoming just another subculture that has settled for the insipid as opposed to the eternal.



MYSTERIES OF THE VIRGIN MARY: LIVING OUR LADY'S GRACES

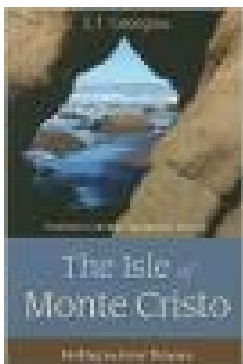
By Fr. Peter John Cameron

Published by Servant Books, \$14.99

Dominican Fr. Peter John Cameron offers a compendium of Mariology in his latest book, *Mysteries of the Virgin Mary*. Cameron, founder of *Magnificat*, writes in the same conversational style -- accessible but punctuated with telling details -- found in his monthly worship aid. What is missing here, though, are the stunning reproductions of religious art that one finds in *Magnificat*.

That said, this latest book contains insightful discussions of specific Marian feasts, from major ones, such as the Immaculate Conception, to minor ones like the Saturday memorials to Mary. Cameron includes references to both the canonical books of the Bible as well as to the apocryphal.

Cameron says he wants to present the "real life" of Mary, as tradition suggests she lived it. Cameron fleshes out his text with personal anecdotes, such as observations from his own prayer relationship with the Virgin, as well as meditations and musings from saints, doctors of the church, popes and even poets. St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Bridget and St. Catherine of Siena join their voices to those of Pope John Paul II, Rainer Maria Rilke, and numerous others. There's something for just about everyone here -- even those whose devotion to Mary may be lukewarm.



THE ISLE OF MONTE CRISTO: FINDING THE INNER TREASURE

By S.T. Georgiou

Published by Novalis, \$24.95

Finding God is much more difficult than it might appear. It's also much simpler, according to S.T. Georgiou. An Orthodox Christian memoirist and mystic, Georgiou looks for God's presence in everyday events as he teaches at San Francisco City College.

His latest book, *The Isle of Monte Cristo*, is part memoir of his encounters with college students (who, if nothing else, keep him from waxing too metaphysical) and part reminiscence of his early adulthood. The book is the third part of a trilogy that includes *The Way of the Dreamcatcher: Spirit Lessons With Robert Lax: Poet, Peacemaker, Sage* and *Mystic Street: Meditations on a Spiritual Path*. Like the previous books, this one is inspired by Georgiou's experiences with Lax on Mount Patmos. Lax, who died in 2000,

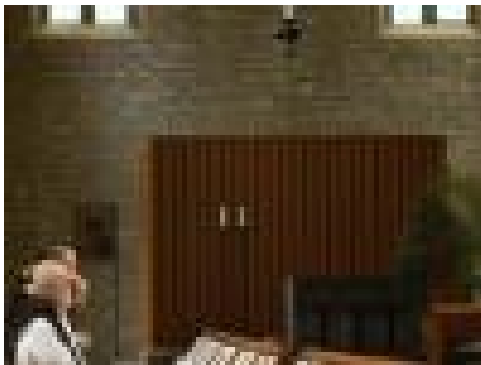
was a poet. He was also Georgiou's mentor and taught him how to live in the present moment. Georgiou, in turn, tries to impart Lax's mysticism to his students. Some grouse that their course is a required one and they want just the basics, which adds a pleasing balance to a book that teeters on the edge of taking itself too seriously. Yet musing on his encounters with everything from a corpse found on the beach to an excerpt from *The Brothers Karamazov*, Georgiou offers numerous Zen-like gems.



IN PURSUIT OF SILENCE: LISTENING FOR MEANING IN A WORLD OF NOISE

By George Prochnik

Published by Doubleday, \$26

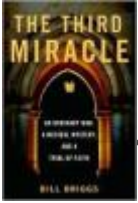


Even though religious vocations are few, visitors coming to make a

retreat at New Melleray Abbey, a Trappist monastery in Iowa, are at an all-time high. As one of the monks explains it, "There's much more hunger [today] for people just looking for quiet." Why? George Prochnik looks for answers in his latest book, *In Pursuit of Silence*. Although the book's scope tends to be wide and the writing somewhat loose, Prochnik is informative and engaging. He treks to city parks, car-audio competitions, Gallaudet University, libraries and shopping malls. He even signs up for a retreat at New Melleray Abbey. His experiences there are worth the price of the book. In the chapel, Prochnik tries to be attentive "to the wonder of the ever-unfolding present moment," but, like the rest of us, gets distracted partly by sounds in the pipes and mostly by the noisy thoughts jangling inside his head.

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On his journey, Prochnik retrieves numerous tidbits of information: Certain musical rhythms piped into stores like Abercrombie & Fitch, for example, induce shoppers to buy. People are programmed for quiet as a survival strategy. Even the shape of the ears promotes quiet; ears are finely tuned to hear the smallest sound. Loud sound can cause blood pressure to spike, pupils to dilate, and hair cells to flatten and twist. It can also damage hearing, to say nothing of people's sense of self.



THE THIRD MIRACLE: AN ORDINARY MAN, A MEDICAL MYSTERY, AND A TRIAL OF FAITH

By Bill Briggs

Published by Broadway Books, \$24

After Phil McCord had cataract surgery, his left eye healed as expected. But his right eye didn't. An engineer turned handyman, McCord worked as a caretaker at St. Mary of the Woods, a Catholic college and convent in Indiana. McCord wasn't a Catholic. But with a risky corneal transplant as his only option, he offered what he called a clumsy prayer to Mother Theodore Guerin, the French nun who in 1840 had founded this convent. When McCord awakened the next morning, his eye was significantly improved.

Doctors couldn't explain the mysterious healing. Was it a miracle or just dumb coincidence? That question informs *The Third Miracle* by journalist Bill Briggs. As Briggs tells McCord's story, he discusses the history of the Sisters of Providence in the United States, miracles in the Old and New Testaments, as well as the painstaking Catholic saint-making process. Briggs' expert pacing, meticulous use of details and cliffhanger chapter endings tell readers just as much as they need to know -- to keep them hooked.

[Diane Scharper teaches at Towson University in Maryland and is the author of several books, including *Radiant*, *Prayer Poems*.]

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