

The Christian CENTURY

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NOVEMBER 16, 1983

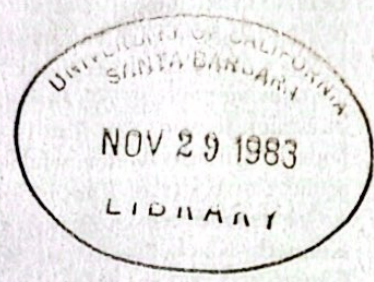
FALL FOCUS ON BOOKS

Listening to My Life: An Interview with Frederick Buechner

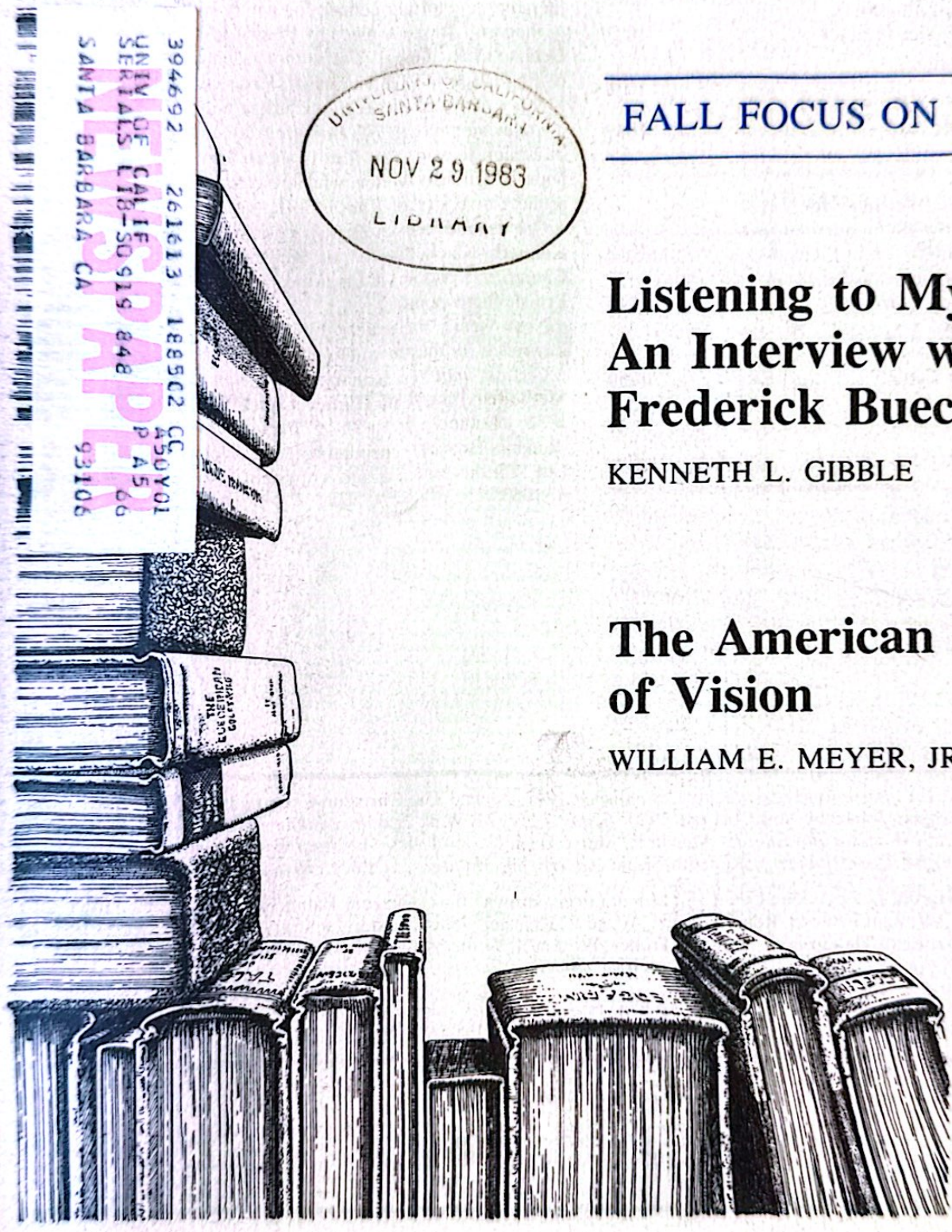
KENNETH L. GIBBLE

The American Religion of Vision

WILLIAM E. MEYER, JR.



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The Christian CENTURY

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WE LEAD OFF our fall focus on books with an interview which Kenneth L. Gibble conducted with the well-known author Frederick Buechner. Dr. Gibble is a Church of the Brethren minister who works as a consultant for parish ministry in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. He is also a free-lance writer whose special interest is the relationship of literary art to theology and preaching.

Also appearing is an article on the "visual bias" in American literature. The author is William E. Meyer, Jr., a humanities instructor at Houston Community College in Houston, Texas. He has written previous articles on this general topic.

IN THIS ISSUE

This week's M.E.M.O column by Martin E. Marty and James M. Wall's lead editorial also deal with books and literature, the former concerning poetry and the latter a classic of modern fiction. A piece by Peter LaSalle discusses "The Decline of Reading." The author teaches in the department of English at the University of Texas in Austin.

Other editorial offerings include a preview of the upcoming television movie *The Day After*, a drama about the results of a nuclear war. The film is set in Lawrence, Kansas, the home of Timothy Miller, who is a lecturer in American studies at the University of Kansas in Lawrence.

Correspondence on British church statistics comes from Kenneth Slack, pastor of Kensington United Reformed Church in London. A longtime journalist, Dr. Slack is our British correspondent.

Next week: an article by Robert Jewett and John S. Lawrence on the destruction of KAL Flight 007.

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Meanwhile, citizens' groups are waking up to the threat. People who believe in free speech, access to information, diversity in programming and local participation are writing to their representatives in Congress about this issue. ■

BOOKS

The Monastic Impulse.

By Walter Capps. Crossroad, 163 pp., \$10.95.

If you know someone who wants or needs to be sold on monasticism, recommend this book. In a journalistic, anecdotal style Walter Capps has made current Christian monasticism appear to be "where it's at." It is hard to imagine a better apologia for monastic life today.

Capps provides small tastes of monastic environments by recounting his visits to Merton's Gethsemane in Kentucky, Taizé in France, and a number of other communities, including California's Redwoods, a convent with an affinity for Jung's thought. In all his reflections he is appreciative of the idealism of monks, admiring the radical nature of their commitment, emphasizing the affirmative character of apparent denial.

The closest Capps comes to a critique of today's monasticism is in entertaining the thesis that it is part of the narcissism of the current decades. But he edges toward an alternative reading of monasticism's individualism by suggesting that it may be instead "a coping mechanism—a way of dealing with the fragmentation of the world," which aims at marking out "a new coherence," "a point of departure free of the bondage to the disappointments" of this era.

Whether it is an alternative to or a creature of the times, the resurgence of contemplative religion is in Capps's view a correlate of a shift of mood and temper in Western society these days. Monks have widened their experience of the world by turning appreciatively to the East; they constitute a kind of counterculture and participate in the green revolution; they use 20th century avenues to self-knowledge and offer the world a deeper usefulness in their retreat than our usual problem-solving busyness affords.

All this is very sweeping and general, of course. One should not look here for details concerning community life or monasticism's historical development. The mix of con-

templative with active vocation in the teaching and serving religious orders is completely ignored. For this book, the monastic impulse and attitude are strictly "mystical" and interior.

It is mildly unsettling, especially in a work that calls for our trust in a new vision, to find silly mistakes. Capps confuses odometer with speedometer and thinks that a pipe organ can be played through earphones. One begins to wonder how many other bits of misinformation one may have missed.

Even if reading *The Monastic Impulse* does not lead to monastic profession, it may awaken or reawaken the delight many have found in visiting or just imagining life "in the house of the Lord forever." Monastic communities have often served the church in protest and provided it with reform. That may be happening (subtly) again.

George Weckman.

Vietnam: A History.

By Stanley Karnow. Viking, 750 pp., \$20.00.

I. F. Stone, editor and publisher of *I. F. Stone's Weekly* and an acerbic critic of our Vietnam involvement, said in a moment of exasperation, "Every government is run by liars. Nothing they say should be believed." There are, of course, a few who attempt to tell the truth or to blow the whistle on governmental skulduggery. Their fate is not generally a happy one. Consider the sad end of Paul Kattenburg, a veteran State Department officer who was thoroughly acquainted with the events leading to the U.S.-sponsored assassination of President Ngo Dinh Diem. At a national security council meeting, as Karnow notes, Kattenburg forecast that the United States would be compelled to leave Vietnam within six months if it continued to back Diem. He went on to say that perhaps it was preferable "for us to make the decision to get out honorably." Rusk and McNamara, ardent proponents of our Vietnam policy, objected. McNamara said (this was in 1963), "We have been winning the war." Lyndon Johnson added, "We should stop playing cops and robbers [and] go about winning the war." Karnow then adds the postscript: "That took care of Kattenburg, who was to terminate his government career at the U.S. embassy in Guyana—not far from Devil's Island."

Reading Karnow's superb account of Vietnam at war, and of the American involvement in it, is a shattering experience, for it underlines once more that those who make the decisions affecting our lives are all too human, are frequently ignorant, are more often than not motivated by self-aggrandizement, and are bewitched by the trappings of power. On page after page, Karnow points out the messianic complex obsessing past generations of

American politicians. Here is Ambassador Lodge as he planned the coup leading to Diem's murder: "My general view is that the United States is trying to bring this medieval country into the twentieth century. . . . We must bring them into the twentieth century politically."

As Karnow shows, the Americans either did not know of or overlooked Vietnam's 2,000 years of hostility to the Chinese. Nor did they heed the experience of the French, who for some two centuries had attempted to make Vietnam a crown jewel in their empire. The French dominance collapsed in 1954 at Dien-bienphu. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles allegedly said at the time that three well-placed nuclear bombs could wipe out General Giap's Vietnamese forces. Then followed the convoluted story of the Geneva peace talks, with the Soviet Union and China giving the shaft to Vietnam. The Chinese communists preferred a divided Vietnam because a split nation would pose no ultimate threat.

How did the United States become involved in this Asian quagmire? Dulles had an obsessive fear of communism. Neither Republicans nor Democrats wanted to be accused of losing Vietnam. And yet the U.S. joint chiefs of staff argued that Vietnam was "devoid of decisive military objectives." The army's chief of staff, General Matthew Ridgway, felt that Vietnam was the wrong war in the wrong place. President Eisenhower was reluctant about heavy involvement. President Kennedy, perhaps fearing accusations of being soft on communism, sent more military advisers and study commissions. President Johnson and his "wise men" manufactured facts and figures and pushed through the Gulf of Tonkin resolution, giving the president a free hand. It was just a matter of time before American troops were flooded into South Vietnam, and from 1965 into the '70s the carnage went on. Johnson gave up his presidency. President Nixon and Henry Kissinger thought they had the key to victory, but the account of their domestic and diplomatic double-dealing and the secret bombing and invasion of Cambodia does not make a pretty or honorable story. Karnow's narrative, buttressed by personal interviews with participants on both sides and by hitherto unavailable documents, underlines the folly of war.

Who won the war? Certainly not the United States. For North Vietnam it remains a paper victory. Karnow has revisited the country several times since the war's end. What he has found is a people who are disillusioned with the communist vision and who suffer from food shortages, corrupt government functionaries and a nation subservient to Soviet Russia, which cares little for Vietnam except insofar as it is a buttress against China.

This is a long book, but it is worth the