

The Journal of Social Encounters

Volume 7
Issue 2 *Exploring the Various Dimensions and
Manifestations of Solidarity*

Article 17

2023

The Life of an American Catholic Radical: Review of Christian Anarchist, Ammon Hennacy, A Life on the Catholic Left

William L. Portier
University of Dayton/Mount St. Mary's University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/social_encounters



Part of the American Studies Commons, Catholic Studies Commons, Christianity Commons, International Relations Commons, Peace and Conflict Studies Commons, Philosophy Commons, Politics and Social Change Commons, Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons, Social History Commons, and the United States History Commons

Recommended Citation

Portier, William L. (2023) "The Life of an American Catholic Radical: Review of Christian Anarchist, Ammon Hennacy, A Life on the Catholic Left," *The Journal of Social Encounters*: Vol. 7: Iss. 2, 227-237. Available at: https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/social_encounters/vol7/iss2/17

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Journal of Social Encounters by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@csbsju.edu.

Review Essay: The Life of an American Catholic Radical

Christian Anarchist, Ammon Hennacy, A Life on the Catholic Left. William Marling. New York: New York University Press, 2022, hardcover 318 pp., ISBN 987654321.

William L. Portier
Professor Emeritus, University of Dayton
Theologian in Residence, Mount St. Mary's University, MD

Keywords: American Catholicism, pacifism, anarchism, Dorothy Day, Catholic Worker

Introduction

Shortly after his election in 2013, Pope Francis sent religion writers around the world scurrying to find out what the Greek word *parrhesia* meant. It appears more than thirty times in the New Testament, notably in Acts 4:13, where it refers to the “boldness” of uneducated rustics Peter and John in preaching the Gospel. Joining the New Testament to the likes of Plato and Foucault, William Marling finds in *parrhesia*, “the power of speaking fearlessly,” the key to Ammon Hennacy’s (1893-1970) life (pp. 262-63; Brown 2019).

“Ammon Hennacy,” Marling writes, “was about speech.” Invoking Foucault, Marling describes Hennacy’s speech as characterized by “freedom and chosen frankness” over persuasion (p. 262). For Hennacy, however, as Marling makes clear, speech was not just about talking. Rather, it was a form of performance art honed by leafleting, picketing, selling radical papers, and talking with people, on the streets of Columbus, Milwaukee, eventually New York City, and finally Salt Lake City. In many ways, Hennacy’s biography is the story of the self-fashioning of an eclectic U.S. original for whom *parrhesia* eventually came to embody, along with his prodigious physical energy, a unique synthesis of anarchism, Christian pacifism, and personalism that he called the “one-man revolution,” the title of his last book, published posthumously the year he died.

Hennacy suffered a heart attack as he walked home from picketing at the state capitol in Salt Lake City and died about a week later on January 14, 1970. By that time, he had become “one of twentieth-century America’s most important pacifist/anarchist voices” (p. 254). But this does not make his name a household word nor is he someone that U.S. high school students learn about in standard social studies and history courses. This is why Marling’s book is important. Engagingly written, with a deeply sympathetic, though not uncritical, portrayal of its subject, it is the “first scholarly biography of this iconic Christian anarchist ...” (p. 1).

Marling describes Hennacy as a “a great self-mythologizer” (p. 9). His life story is one of classic American eclectic self-invention. For this review’s purposes, Hennacy’s life divides itself into two main parts. The first includes his youth and the years between the world wars to the end of World War II. Marling covers them in his first five chapters. In these chapters, the reader encounters the varied elements from which Hennacy fashioned his public self. These include socialism, selling cornflakes and Fuller Brushes door to door, anarchism, the Sermon on the Mount, Tolstoy’s Christian pacifism and personalism, self-sufficient agrarian homesteading, life-long leafleting and protesting, Christian Science, farm labor in the Southwest, the Hopi, war tax resistance, Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker, Catholicism, atomic weapons protests, and the Mormons of Utah.

The second half of his life, Chapters 6-8, begins around 1947 when Hennacy moves to Arizona as a migrant worker. Marling entitles Chapter 6 “Becoming ‘Ammon Hennacy’” and refers to Arizona as “the place where he would finish creating his public persona” (p. 153). During the second half of his life, he fine-tuned this public persona in three pieces of autobiographical writing: *Autobiography of a Catholic Radical* (1954), edited and published by Dorothy Day, *The Book of Ammon* (1964), and *The One-Man Revolution* (1970). Historian James Fisher characterized Hennacy’s autobiographical writing as exhibiting “a flair for self-promotion and the rock-ribbed individualism of his Ohio Protestant origins.” He described Hennacy’s 1954 *Autobiography of a Catholic Anarchist* as “totally bereft of a sense of interiority” (1989, pp. 251-52).

Hennacy’s connection with the Catholic Worker and Dorothy Day, which began already in the 1930s, is at the heart of this second part of his life. In its final chapter, he leaves New York in 1961 to return to the far west, this time to Utah, where he founded Joe Hill House of Hospitality and St. Joseph Refuge, usually known as Joe Hill House. He married Joan Thomas in 1965. By the time of his death in Salt Lake City, he had left his mark on the imagination of Utah. The *Salt Lake Tribune* eulogized him as AN AMERICAN LEGEND (p. 253).

Making Ammon Hennacy: 1913-1947

The twentieth century’s two brutally devastating world wars played a central role in Hennacy’s self-fashioning as a pacifist Christian anarchist. On the landscape of northeastern Ohio, south of Youngstown and near the Pennsylvania border, where Hennacy grew up, socialism was a live option. In high school, while working at a ceramics plant, Hennacy joined the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) or “Wobblies” (p. 19). His college years, 1913 at Hiram College, 1914 at Wisconsin Madison, and 1915 at Ohio State, saw the beginning of the Great War. Socialist icon Eugene Debs (1855-1926), from nearby Indiana, was active in presidential politics. In 1916 Debs got 6% of the vote. It was in Canton, OH, that Debs gave the antiwar speech that landed him in jail. He ran for president from jail in 1920 and still got 3.5 % of the vote.

Hennacy was an active socialist during his college years, writing and speaking on behalf of socialist causes. But most socialists didn’t share Debs’s antiwar position, and Hennacy would eventually turn to anarchism. Writing years later, Dorothy Day said, “It would take too long to explain his ‘anarchism,’ which was an individual brand. What he is really fighting is the modern state, and war, which many consider ‘the health of the state,’ to use Randolph Bourne’s phrase” (1983, pp. 109-10). Bourne, of course, was one of Hennacy’s heroes.

Both Kellogg and Fuller Brush had aspects of worker participation that appealed to Hennacy’s socialist sympathies. He spent much time traveling the country selling cornflakes door to door and, later, Fuller brushes. Selling cornflakes occasioned his first meeting with Selma Melms, his future wife. Her father was the socialist sheriff of Milwaukee (pp. 30ff). Eventually they married, but not before Hennacy spent two years in jail for draft resistance.

In 1917 Hennacy’s campaign against the military draft landed him for two years in Atlanta Penitentiary at age 24 with the Bible the only available book. In solitary confinement for organizing a food strike, and on the verge of suicide, he had what he later described as a life-changing experience, centered on the Sermon on the Mount. He emerged as a Christian pacifist (pp. 51-2). He had resigned from the Socialist party, rejecting taxes and voting. He found his

center in individual Christian pacifism, influenced by his post-prison reading of Tolstoy, Gandhi, Thoreau, and Dostoevsky. Marling describes Hennacy's Christian anarchy around 1920 as "syncretistic in the best American fashion" (p. 61).

After his release from prison in spring 1919, Hennacy struck Melms as "damaged goods," appearing "extremely nervous, quick to judge, and unable to sit still" (pp. 59-60). She left for New York City and the socialist Rand School of Social Science without telling him. But Hennacy did not relent. He followed her to New York, and they were married in December 1919. After both graduated from the Rand School, they set off in June 1921 on what they called the "Big Hike" traversing the United States, walking and hitching rides, (for Hennacy's map of the hike, see p. 74). The Big Hike, broken up into four parts, lasted from 1921 to 1925. Hennacy sold Fuller brushes, they encountered Christian Science, the single tax community inspired by Henry George in Fairhope, AL, and most importantly for Melms, the I AM movement. Eventually she joined this religious group. Marling calls it a "sect" whose "Ascended Masters," dead leaders, were preparing a new race "to lead the world out of chaos" (pp. 85-6, 109). Eventually I AM would offer Melms and their two daughters a refuge from Hennacy's chaotic and unpredictable lifestyle. By July 1925 they were back in Milwaukee, Melms's hometown.

At the Rand School, they had met radical economist Scott Nearing (1883-1983), a "Tolstoian" ascetic, whose homesteading ideal of "integrating pacifism and individual anarchism with self-sufficiency" (p. 89) inspired them to start their own farm. They bought ten acres in Waukesha County and called it Bisanakee. By September 1925, Hennacy had built a house on the land. In addition to farming, he still sold Fuller brushes. They had two daughters, Carmen and Sharon and Hennacy withdrew from political concerns. However, the Great Depression rendered their farm unsustainable. They had to move back to Milwaukee where Hennacy worked as a county social worker, determining the eligibility of families for aid. His supervisor had been one of his professors at the Rand School (p. 98).

In 1933 they were still in Milwaukee. Melms had become a devotee of Christian Science and had secretly joined the I AM movement. The Great Depression drew Hennacy's energies back to politics. He sold radical papers at the library and some of his friends introduced him to the *Catholic Worker*, which had just begun publishing on May 1, 1933 (pp. 100-101). As Hennacy became more involved in politics, Melms, fearing Hennacy would go to jail again, announced she was taking their daughters to New York. Hennacy felt abandoned, "office bound" with "unsatisfying work, no family, and no sense of mission" (p. 102). Forty years old, he was taking stock of his life. He wrote his first letter to the *Catholic Worker* in the fall of 1936. "My anarchist comrades," he wrote, "generally think they have to be atheists in order to be radicals, and my church friends are generally afraid to take the absolutist stand against war and to turn the other cheek in daily life – it's lots of fun" (p. 103).

Marling describes the *Catholic Worker* as a "lifeline" for Hennacy at this time. He sold the paper outside churches. At the same time, he was trying to convince Melms to return to Milwaukee. Dorothy Day spoke in Milwaukee in 1937 and Hennacy met her briefly (p. 169). Melms returned in April 1937. Hennacy talked so much about Dorothy Day that Melms believed he had "fallen for her." Melms would later claim that "Dorothy Day destroyed my marriage" (p. 106). Finally, she left for good and took their daughters to Fairhope, AL, with Hennacy's approval. Marling

thinks Hennacy's attempts to save their marriage slowed his approach to the *Catholic Worker* (p. 105).

As World War II approached, Melms moved with the girls from Fairhope to New York City, to Los Angeles, Santa Fe, and Denver, places where she could find I AM support. Hennacy remained in Milwaukee, where he earned the money he sent to contribute to their support. Visiting Melms and their daughters in 1940, he heard Peter Maurin (1877-1949) speak. Maurin had founded the *Catholic Worker* with Day in 1933. Maurin moved Hennacy so much that he ranked him as "a man of stature," along with anarchist Alexander Berkman, who had inspired the young Hennacy in Atlanta Penitentiary (p. 112).

By 1941, as sentiment for U.S. entry into the war heated up, Hennacy's supervisor forbade him to hand out pacifist literature. President Roosevelt's new "Victory Tax" presented him with the dilemma of paying for the war with his taxes, and, of course, another draft to negotiate (pp. 113-14). Around this time, he began corresponding with Dorothy Day. His story would help the *Catholic Worker* put a human face on conscientious objection. Day told his life story in the *Catholic Worker* in December 1941 (p. 170). In that same month, he sold pacifist papers at an American Legion convention in Milwaukee and wrote a provocative letter to the district attorney. He wanted to be arrested. He resigned his job in March 1942 and publicly refused to register for the draft. Frustrated at being released at trial, he set out for Denver where Melms had taken their daughters.

Melms moved from Denver to Santa Fe. Hennacy followed her but eventually found his way to Albuquerque, where he worked in a dairy and engaged in "compensatory self-taxing" (p. 123). He was beginning to accept the reality that, despite his long-distance attempts to financially support his family, he was now "effectively divorced" (p. 128). His public refusal to pay war taxes got him fired from his dairy job. His new job, further out from the city, put him in daily touch with the New Mexican landscape. He began to write about it for the *Catholic Worker*. Here he met the Hopis and began to write about them as well.

Marling describes this writing, much of it in the *Catholic Worker*, as representing his "new persona, the literary face of Christian anarchism and voluntary poverty" and revealing "a modern threadbare Thoreau in the making" (pp. 130-31). In many of these pieces, Marling sees an anticipation of later "nature writers" such as Annie Dillard (p. 134). Based on the simplicity of Hennacy's life on the land, as both theme and technique: "The best of his *Catholic Worker* columns came as the war raged, from the orchards, possibly because of the need to use the resources at hand as the canvas for an abstract message to be read by a distant audience" (p. 135). "Aside from Dorothy Day," Marling writes, "who no doubt edited these pieces, there was no other voice on the Catholic left, so rural and folksy or so western in 1945. There were few other agrarian, ecological pacifists at all" (p. 141).

Spring of 1946 found Hennacy entering "an intensely Catholic phase" (p. 146). Marling likens Hennacy's experience to that of his friend, poet and novelist Claude McKay, who came to New Mexico at this time. Hennacy also spent much time among the Hopi, whose way of life he tended to idealize. His writing led to the importance of the Hopi for the 1960s counterculture (p. 147). "It is fair to say," concludes Marling, "that in New Mexico Ammon learned, like Claude McKay

in Spain, ‘the full significance of Catholicism as a way of life and bedrock for an entire civilization’” (pp. 148, 143).

Making Ammon Hennacy: 1947-1970

In 1947, at 54 years of age, Hennacy left his New Mexico orchard farm for the life of a migrant laborer in Arizona, near Phoenix. “It was the place,” Marling writes, “where he would finish creating his public persona” (p. 153). Learning “gravity fed irrigation” from the Mexican laborers he worked with (p. 163), he had found a life as a laborer, but with no taxes. Marling identifies four components of Hennacy’s self-fashioning in Arizona.

First is the Hopis, whose conscientious objectors he idealized as a “Gandhian ‘embodiment’” of pacifist anarchism (pp. 147, 158). Second, is fasting while picketing. This was part of his “innate performativity” (p. 161) and allowed him to synthesize religion and political protest in a kind of penitential practice, especially for the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. He came to associate fasting with Catholicism and his fasts helped to prove himself “worthy of Catholicism and of Day” (p. 161). Third is his writing about his work in the fields, his personal approach, “living anarchism” (p. 165) apart from government and taxes. His ability to work hard earned him the respect of many unlikely friends, such as Lin Orme, the “Old Pioneer,” who owned the farm where Hennacy worked and became a close friend. The final piece is Dorothy Day, “the person around whom the new Arizona Ammon coalesced” (p. 168).

Though Day was four years younger than Hennacy, they were at different points in their lives. Hennacy and Melms had not yet divorced, but Hennacy had finally accepted that Melms no longer wanted him in her life. He was lonely. He idealized Day. Marling effectively contrasts Day’s New York City savvy with Hennacy’s naivete: “She was more worldly and knew about the vagaries of idealistic men. She used her charisma to foster cooperation, whereas Hennacy was a prickly iconoclast, an ideologue in all things.” (p. 169). Introducing his collection of Day’s letters, which includes twenty letters to Hennacy between 1949 and 1959, Robert Ellsberg describes their correspondence: “In writing to Ammon Hennacy, a swashbuckling radical who was inspired by Dorothy’s example to become a Catholic, we see her admiring his courage and principles, while deflecting his romantic intentions and admonishing his tendency to hero worship” (2010, p. xxvi).

Day was genuinely in awe of Hennacy’s prodigious sacrifices in the cause of peace. He was an inspiring figure for whom she had true affection. But, as Marling put it, “she held him at an affectionate distance” (p. 172). In 1944, when Hennacy talked of becoming a Catholic, Day wrote him: “It makes me so queasy when you say you are going to become a Catholic for love of me But your eyes should be on Christ, not me” (p. 171). In December 1949, Day visited Hennacy in Arizona. After she left, she wrote to him that he was “only in love with your idea of me, not really me. How can you be when you’ve seen so little of me, a few days?” She closed the letter, “Remember always, I love you and pray for you, and I count on your prayers” (p. 176).

In Phoenix, by his August 1950 protest of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Hennacy had developed a new approach to protest, which Marling describes as the “crystallization of Ammon Hennacy the public figure” (p. 177). It began with Mass each morning “out of love and respect for Dorothy.” He requested permits, noting that he’d be there whether he got them or not, and provided authorities with copies of his writings, interviews and arrest sheet. Marling places him “squarely in a long

line of anarchists and libertarians who held that the one and only modus operandi of government is coercion and force.” Day’s 1952 *Long Loneliness* portrayed Hennacy as a “man of action” (p. 177). His interviews and articles, his trip to Washington with the Hopis in 1950, and especially his protests made him a public figure.

On November 17, 1952, in Hutchinson, MN, Hennacy was baptized and received into the Catholic Church by Fr. Marion Casey, a “draft resisting priest,” (p. 185) with Day as his sponsor in absentia (p. 179). He wrote to Day that “in my heart I have decided that the Church is the home that I need” (p. 180). Day put his name on the *Catholic Worker* masthead as an associate editor. His first job was to help answer letters to the editor. Marling concludes from his correspondence at this time that Hennacy was “living in a unity of the spiritual, emotional, and physical that was extraordinary” (p. 181). It could not last.

He remained in Phoenix to care for Lin Orme, in Orme’s last illness. Joan Thomas described Hennacy as “so very much on fire with Dorothy Day, the *Catholic Worker* and, yes, I venture at this time with the Catholic Church” (p. 182). With Orme’s death, he was free to leave Phoenix. In August 1953, after his annual protests were done, he left for New York. As Marling concludes, “He took the bus to New York City as a fully fledged public figure, very different from the field worker who had arrived six years earlier” (p. 182).

Hennacy began work at the *Catholic Worker* on August 30, 1953. Marling describes the early 1950s as “a low point for the *Catholic Worker*” (p. 183). They had moved from Mott Street to Chrystie Street. Day’s staunch commitment to pacifism meant that the *Worker* emerged from World War II widely viewed as unpatriotic. The paper’s circulation was down by two thirds, Day’s speaking invitations were drying up, and only a few *Worker* houses remained around the country. Peter Maurin had died in 1949. As Ellsberg put it, the *Worker*’s “emphasis on voluntary poverty, peace, and social justice ran against the mood of postwar prosperity and Cold War patriotism. The arrival of Ammon Hennacy on the *Catholic Worker* scene initiated a new era of non-violent witness.” The end of Hennacy’s near decade at the *Worker* would see a new “mood of idealism and protest” (2010, p. xxiv) which, in many ways he embodied and foreshadowed.

The *Worker* house revolved around its two main activities. Someone had to make the soup and get the soup line going every day. Someone had to get out a monthly paper. Marling, perhaps with some hyperbole, calls it “the model of a self-organizing collective” (p. 187). He describes Hennacy, who had lived alone in the Southwest, as “warm[ing] to the chaos of Chrystie Street. If this was pacifist anarchism, he was amenable” (p. 189). But his new life was not without tensions, some brought on by his blunt, often prickly, personal style: “I was not yet sold on the advisability of majoring in ‘feeding the bums,’ I was for more and more propaganda.” He envisioned more street corner advocacy modeled on the Sermon on the Mount, the words that sustained him through solitary in the Atlanta Penitentiary (p. 183).

The house was divided between Peter Maurin’s personalism, which focused on individual action, and the more collective distributism of G.K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc. Maurin’s death had left Day “without an ideological interlocutor.” As Marling puts it, Hennacy’s arrival “marked not a Maurin replacement but a different type of male energy in the *Catholic Worker* offices.” Eventually he replaced Robert Ludlow, whom he dismissed as an “office anarchist,” in articulating

Worker positions (p. 184). He had trouble taking Ivy Leaguer Michael Harrington seriously as a socialist (p. 187). He distrusted the distributists on economics and just wars, but, for the present, believed urban presence, rather than Maurin's rural ideal, was more conducive to social change. He "aspired to be the new fire breather" (p. 184).

Hennacy's weekly routine of street activism included selling the paper at Cooper Union, where hundreds came to hear free lectures; Pine and Nassau in the financial district; the New School for Social Research; the gate to Fordham University's Bronx campus; 14th and Broadway; and 43rd and Lexington near Grand Central Station, his favorite spot. Of course, selling *Catholic Workers* was for Hennacy much more performance art than a transaction, "energy unbounded, propaganda in person," as one young Catholic Worker later recalled (p. 189).

On October 9, 1954, he was arrested at 43rd & Lexington for peddling without a license and spent five days in jail, the first time in thirty-five years, he noted. Murray Kempton of the *New York Post* interviewed him and his companion and wrote that Hennacy seemed "altogether the least lonely man on earth." In the spring of 1954, Catholic Worker Books published Hennacy's *The Autobiography of a Catholic Radical*, edited by Day, to positive reviews. His celebrity meant positive publicity for the Worker. As Marling puts it, "These actions and publicity made Hennacy invaluable to the CW as it recovered its stature after World War II" (p. 193).

Despite Murray Kempton to the contrary, however, Hennacy was becoming lonely again. He had not realized what it took to be the face of the Catholic Worker, edit and write for the paper, travel to the farms, retreats, and now more frequent speaking engagements. He had anticipated spending more time with Day. Their relations became "testy." Hennacy's "blunt, matter of fact style" often conflicted with Day's "ladylike habits" (p. 195).

Then came President Eisenhower's expanded nuclear weapons policy and the mandatory evacuations to fallout shelters during the air raid drills of the mid-1950s. Hennacy saw the drills as an attempt to "normalize nuclear war" (p. 196). This chance for public protest brought Hennacy and Day together in a common work. They were arrested on June 15, 1954, for not evacuating during the drill. This public protest caused a "media sensation," (p. 197) covered by the *Nation* and other journals, as well as the national press in major cities. Hennacy and Day were found guilty, but their sentences were suspended. His fellow Workers, perhaps annoyed by his penchant for performance, needed Hennacy for failing to get jail time.

Hennacy was jailed for five days the next year for failing to evacuate. The last drill was in 1959, but Hennacy's sentence was suspended. The government was dialing back the drills and Hennacy's protests were now old news. Around 1958, he decided that, rather than isolated individual test sites, picketing the Atomic Energy Commission's main offices in Las Vegas would draw more publicity (p. 203). Marling describes this as "perhaps his most successful picketing, and the coverage could hardly have worked out better" (p. 204). He would go on to protest nuclear weapons in Omaha in 1959, for which he served four months in Minnesota's Sandstone Prison, (p. 211); at Cape Canaveral (now Cape Kennedy) in Florida, and in Washington, DC. In June 1960, he protested the launching of the Polaris atomic submarine in Connecticut (p. 215).

But Hennacy's persona increasingly grated on Day. Her 1963 *Loaves and Fishes*, published shortly after his departure from New York, devotes a chapter to Hennacy and provides her public perspective on their difficulties at this time (1983, Chapter 10, "Picture of a Prophet"). For his part, Hennacy felt unappreciated and asked to have his name removed from the masthead (p. 206). By 1959 Marling notes that in Hennacy's correspondence, Day appeared more as a "business associate" (p. 214).

By contrast, young women at the Worker, such as Mary Lathrop, were attracted to Hennacy as a celebrity (p. 216). He told Day he and Lathrop were going to get married. Hennacy was forty years older than Lathrop and still legally married. Day took a "grim view" of their relationship and tried to steer Lathrop away from it. Hennacy left New York for Utah on January 2, 1961. He returned to New York in the spring and eventually convinced Lathrop to join him in Utah, where he wanted to open a Worker House. She agreed, as long as there were "no shenanigans" (pp. 216-219). Hennacy, Marling concludes, "had made a huge impact on the Catholic Worker, raising it from its World War II doldrums, and he left as a legend" (p. 220).

Salt Lake City provides the stage for Hennacy's final performance. Hennacy and Lathrop lived separately and by the fall of 1961, they had, with the help of many donations, established Joe Hill House of Hospitality and St. Joseph's Refuge. Joe Hill was an early IWW organizer executed in Utah. Lathrop painted a mural of Joe Hill and Jesus (p. 227) and insisted on adding St. Joseph's Refuge. At this time, Hennacy still considered himself a Catholic Worker and received regular support for his work from Day. Day likened the relationship between Hennacy and Lathrop to a "Gandhi-and-Mira situation" (1983, p. 116), which she felt "was not generally understood" (p. 225). By the end of 1961, Lathrop left Salt Lake City, leaving Hennacy to run Joe Hill House by himself. Hennacy blamed this on Day's interference (p. 229). Hennacy still went to daily Mass but his relations with the local bishop were tense. As a minority in Mormon country, the bishop wanted Catholics to be safe and respectable.

No alcohol was allowed in the house and Hennacy sent the few women who came to a nearby hotel where he paid for them to stay (p. 233; see Day's description of the house, 1983, pp. 116-17). Hennacy continued to write for the *Catholic Worker* and was pleased at the space Day gave him in *Loaves and Fishes*. He was revising *The Book of Ammon*, published in 1964, where he explained his reasons for leaving the Catholic Church, though he still considered himself a Christian. During the winter of 1963-64, Hennacy and various volunteers picketed at Dugway, a military base 85 miles from Salt Lake City that tested biological and chemical weapons, endangering the sheep of Utah farmers (p. 237).

Joan Thomas, who had met Hennacy briefly at the Catholic Worker in 1960, arrived in Salt Lake City in September 1963 to work with Hennacy. At this time the local Health Department was issuing citations to Joe Hill House. By February 9, 1964, Hennacy had to close the house. He promised Thomas he would get a legal divorce from Melms and they would marry. The divorce came through in the fall of 1964 and Thomas and Hennacy were married in Elko, Nevada on April 12, 1965 (p. 243). They soon opened a new Joe Hill House, but the neighbors complained, and the Health Department shut it down on August 8, 1965.

By summer of 1965, Hennacy was in his 70s and his “energy was flagging” (p. 245). Labor organizer and folk singer Bruce “Utah” Phillips (1935-2008) was a constant help to Hennacy in trying to keep the Houses going. *The Book of Ammon’s* revised edition was now published, and Thomas urged him to write a book about “his favorite American radicals” to be called *The One-Man Revolution*. In between Joe Hill Houses, Hennacy did a lot of speaking engagements. The third Joe Hill House closed in May 1968 (p. 247). They moved to Phoenix and then back to Salt Lake in August 1969, but Hennacy was seventy-six and slowing down. His heart attack came on January 5, 1970, on his way home from picketing, and he died in a hospital on January 14, 1970.

He received the last rites of the church before he died. His funeral was held at Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Church in Salt Lake City. But he was cremated, and his ashes scattered over the graves of the Haymarket anarchists in Chicago. His relationship to Catholicism remained complicated. Though he had left the church, he continued to attend Mass. Day eulogized him in the February 1970 *Catholic Worker* as a “Non-Church Christian.”

Assessment

The word *persona* that recurs throughout the book tends to support James Fisher’s assessment of *Autobiography of a Catholic Radical* (1954) as “totally bereft of a sense of interiority” (Fisher 1989, pp. 251-52). The self Hennacy invented and carefully fine-tuned over the course of a lifetime seems to have been primarily performance-oriented, a spectacle to be admired. This tended to reduce others to similar spectacles. Hennacy idealized a few, such as Dorothy Day for a time, or the radical figures in *The One-Man Revolution* (1970). The rest, such as Michael Harrington, Robert Ludlow, and other “pipsqueaks” at the New York *Catholic Worker*, he tended to disdain. Thomas Merton wrote to Hennacy to confess to him that he was “not radical enough” (p. 240).

The dynamic of spectacles for admiration or disdain, and what Marling describes as his “patriarchal manner,” (p. 242) made it difficult for Hennacy to sustain long-term, in-depth relationships. This tended to make Hennacy a lonely figure. At various points in the narrative, Marling uses the word *lonely* to describe Hennacy’s life. He sought the companionship of attractive women such as his first wife Selma Melms, Dorothy Day, or, later, younger Catholic Workers, such as Mary Lathrop and Joan Thomas. Despite their thirty-five-year age difference, he was married to Thomas for the last five years of his life. Even this, however, was a role. As Thomas told it, she didn’t think of Hennacy as a “husband,” but as “her own Mark Twain, confident and funny” (p. 243). At his request, she continued biographical writing about him. In 1993, she published *The Years of Grief and Laughter: A Biography of Ammon Hennacy* (reprinted by Wipf and Stock in 2012). Marling’s biography relies heavily on Thomas, whom he interviewed.

Here is the pathos of Hennacy’s life. On the one hand is his prodigious energy and hard work in the cause of good. As Marling put it, “No one on the pacifist left – not Dorothy Day, his colleague Dave Dellinger, or his friend Claude McKay – sacrificed personal freedom as Hennacy did” (p. 1). In 1952, Day wrote to Hennacy comparing him to desert monk Charles de Foucauld. “And you,” she wrote, “with your one-man-revolution, have done more to point to the spiritual way of manual labor, hard work, care of your fellows, by an immediate practice of the works of mercy, by prayer and fasting, by voluntary poverty --- Oh, Ammon, you do not know how I wish we had more like you. You too are alone, but you are having your effect” (2010, p. 267). On the other hand, is his

inability to treat most people as other than spectacles of themselves. Few could be good enough for very long.

Within a decade, Day saw Hennacy as a “lone wolf.” She wrote to a colleague expressing her deep concern about Hennacy’s relationship with Mary Lathrop and Hennacy’s strong desire “to be a lone wolf.” She continued: “He considers himself, Mary [Lathrop], and Jack Baker, an elite, and includes me because I am editor. No one else in the CW is important. His arrogance, his desire to fight the world *and* the church are a madness. All the applause he gets feeds this. He has such great personal charm that people are deceived. I cannot tell you how I am worrying about this” (2010, 352). In reading Marling, it is impossible not to stand in awe at the sheer magnitude of what Hennacy did and what he suffered in the service of peace. It is equally impossible not to feel the hurt of his loneliness, nor to imagine how downright irksome he must have been to those who lived with him.

The last word, however, must go to Marling. He devotes his final chapter to the question of why Hennacy endures. He turns to the posthumously published *The One-Man Revolution* for answers. Marling finds the key to his final assessment of Hennacy in *parrhesia*, his “humor and fearlessness of speech as a daily practice.” While *The One-Man Revolution* might at first sight appear as an account that traces “the development of an indigenous American anarchist tradition,” its subtheme is *parrhesia*. In considering *parrhesia* as the key to Hennacy’s lasting significance, Marling asks readers to lay aside “suspicions about his feuds, disputes, and patriarchal attitudes, while recovering the deeper meaning of his humor and ‘fearless speech’ as a daily practice” (p. 255).

He begins his treatment of *The One-Man Revolution* at the conclusion with Hennacy questioning his motives “in a sort of Devil’s Advocate process,” the kind of interiority Fisher found wanting in Hennacy’s 1954 autobiography. Marling describes this as “self-examination in the manner of Socrates and Thoreau.” Here fearless speech is “the ability to come out from behind your social mask and daily social practice” (p. 255). This is what Hennacy’s book’s array of radical figures, from the Quaker John Woolman to Malcolm X, have in common. In Marling’s reading, Hennacy’s last book “becomes a meditation on the power of *parrhesia*, or fearless speech” (p. 259). Is Marling asking the reader to believe that in this book Hennacy actually questions his carefully crafted persona and comes out on the other side? Apparently so.

Marling goes on to ask how the practice of *parrhesia* can unite anarchism, Christian pacifism, and personalism. He asks if this last book reveals Hennacy’s “final version of anarchism/pacifism” and responds with a qualified “yes.” “He does not give blueprints, but he indicates the direction that he and others ... had figured out. Just as important as a plan is a focus on the purity of the protest and the practice of ‘fearless speech.’ Does *parrhesia* change things? Sometimes – look at Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. – but not always The important thing is that it exists and that one embraces it. It is a radical affirmation of ‘the Good, or God,’ as Ammon liked to say” (p. 263). Marling thinks Hennacy “came out” of himself daily, urging others to do likewise.

Marling concludes with Hennacy’s “increasing stature in the 1960’s” with the Vietnam generation: “He became more personalist than anarchist.” Much more than a government to protest, having discovered “Christ in you,” Hennacy needed “an audience to activate”. As a testimony to Hennacy’s witness, Marling gives the last word to war resister James Forest who wrote from prison

for his role in a 1968 draft board raid. Forest entitled his eulogy for Hennacy, “Men Acted Differently according to Whether They Had Met Him or Not.” Forest called Hennacy “the saint as prophet: the one who, with his life, widens the frontiers of imagination for others” (p. 264). From his intensive care bed three days before he died, Hennacy said: “All that I’m trying to do is to go a bit farther like Christ did – that those without sin cast the first stone” (p. 265).

As a reader, I often wished Marling had attended more closely to chronology, perhaps including a one-page chronology of Hennacy’s life for the reader’s reference. Nevertheless, such minor criticisms cannot detract from the fact that Marling’s biography succeeds in bringing Ammon Hennacy to life in all his personal and historical complexity. In the process, he offers a telling glimpse into the near-forgotten history of the pre-World War II American left. Marling writes with smooth flowing prose and deep insight into his subject.

References

- Brown, B.K. (2019, September 30). What does Pope Francis mean when he calls for ‘parrhesia.’ *The Dialog*. <http://thediolog.org/catechetical-corner/what-does-pope-francis-mean-when-he-calls-for-parrhesia/>.
- Day, D. (1983, original 1963). *Loaves and Fishes, The Story of the Catholic Worker Movement*. Introduction by Robert Coles. Harper & Row.
- Ellsberg, R. Editor. (2010). *All the Way to Heaven: The Selected Letters of Dorothy Day*. Image.
- Fisher, J.T. (1989). *The Catholic Counterculture in America, 1933-1962*. University of North Carolina Press.