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Friendship, Mysticism, and Resistance: Review of Kindred Spirits: Friendship and Resistance at the Edges of Modern Catholicism

William J. Collinge
Mount St. Mary's University, MD, collinge@msmary.edu

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Review Essay: Friendship, Mysticism, and Resistance.

***Kindred Spirits: Friendship and Resistance at the Edges of Modern Catholicism.* Brenna Moore. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021, paper, 322 pp., ISBN: 978-0-226-78701-5.**

William J. Collinge
Mount St. Mary's University, MD
collinge@msmary.edu

Think of the role friendship has played in your intellectual and spiritual life. You may work out your thoughts alone in your study or an archive or test them alone in your lab, but what set you upon your lines of inquiry? Was it a conversation with a friend over lunch, at a conference, or aboard a plane? If a prayer or a practice is important to your spiritual life, does it still sometimes call to mind the friend who introduced you to it?

A recent upsurge of friendship studies in intellectual and religious history reinforces this line of thought. Philip and Carol Zaleski's *The Fellowship: Literary Lives of the Inklings* (2015) portrays how the friendships among C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, Charles Williams, Owen Barfield, and others sparked their literary creativity. In *Magnificent Rebels* (2022), Andrea Wulf examines the "Jena set" of early nineteenth century German Romantics, from Goethe to Hegel, and how their thought was inseparable from their friendships and rivalries. Negatively, William Portier's *Divided Friends* (2013) depicts how friends who once took part together in currents of thought came to be at odds after those currents gave rise to controversies.

Brenna Moore's *Kindred Spirits* concentrates on a particular kind of friendship, spiritual friendship, among groups of intellectuals who were Catholic or close to Catholicism and who lived and worked in France between World War I and the Second Vatican Council. They were often at odds with official Catholicism, whose traditional "holy lights" of clergy and sacraments seemed to have grown dark (pp. 1–2). But they were not drawn to atheistic existentialism and still less to forms of modern positivism that regarded religious questions as meaningless. In spiritual friendship, "People saw in human beings of flesh and bone flickers of something divine, a holiness that was contagious, spread between people" (p. 2). As Moore's subtitle suggests, her story is not only a story of personal relationships but a story of how her subjects responded to and shaped the religious and political worlds of their day.

The relationships Moore examines were a diverse lot. If her paradigm case is a pair of intimate "soul friends," her scope extends to include relationships with the recently dead and even to spiritual kinship between a scholar and a long-dead author. They did not conform to a single pattern, but we might borrow from Wittgenstein to say that a "family resemblance" prevailed among them. She begins with the relationship between the philosopher Jacques Maritain (1882–1973) and his wife, the poet Raïssa Maritain (1883–1960), and the circles of their friends, focusing especially on the Chilean poet Gabriela Mistral (1889–1957). Moore's second chapter concerns the scholar of Islamic mysticism Louis Massignon (1883–1962) and his friends, especially the Egyptian Christian philanthropist Mary Kahil (1889–1979). Two chapters are devoted to Marie-Magdeleine Davy (1903–1998), a scholar of mysticism who was active in the French resistance to

fascism. Moore dwells on Davy's relationship to the philosopher and mystic Simone Weil (1909–1943), whom Davy knew personally only in passing but with whose writings she became absorbed after Weil's death. Moore concludes by examining the Jamaican-American poet Claude McKay (1890–1948), who lived in France in the 1920s, and his circles of friends in Paris and the United States, notably the African American writer Ellen Tarry (1906–2008).[1]

Religious and Political Context

The intellectual developments Moore traces took place outside of the official Catholic channels of the seminaries and university theological faculties, which were dominated by neoscholasticism. A rigorously systematic descendant of the theology of St. Thomas Aquinas, as read through the eyes of sixteenth and seventeenth-century commentators, neoscholasticism attained semi-official status in Rome as a bulwark against modern philosophy. In his 1907 encyclical *Pascendi Dominici Gregis*, Pope Pius X systematized and condemned under the name of Modernism what had been a loose grouping of more experiential and historically-minded theological tendencies, with the result that all theology other than neoscholasticism came to be eyed with suspicion or hostility. Among Moore's subjects, only Jacques Maritain and Marie-Magdeleine Davy had any relationship with neoscholasticism. Maritain studied under the leading neoscholastic theologian of the day, Dominican Father Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, and remained friends with him even as Maritain developed his own form of Thomism and came to differ sharply with his mentor over fascism. Davy studied neoscholastic theology in the theological faculty of the Institut Catholique, the equivalent of a Catholic university in Paris, but found it stultifying and left when its director informed her that as a woman she would be ineligible for a degree.

Davy was not alone in finding neoscholasticism overly confining, and in the 1930s a movement that was later labeled *ressourcement* was under way, chiefly among Dominican and Jesuit clergy. *Ressourcement* sought to "return to the sources"—in the Bible, liturgy, and early Christian writers—of Christian thought "in its periods of explosive vitality," in the words of one of its leading proponents, Jesuit theologian Henri de Lubac (quoted, p. 131). Among Moore's subjects, Davy was closest to this movement, but even she, as a lay woman, remained on its periphery. According to Moore, "Davy watched in horror throughout the 1940s and 1950s as the *ressourcement* theologians were silenced and excommunicated (later to be rehabilitated at Vatican II)" (p. 125), but to the best of my knowledge, though they were indeed silenced in many ways, none were excommunicated.

According to historian Bernard McGinn, "The attention given to mysticism in France in the 1920s and 1930s was truly remarkable. . . . There is perhaps no other period in the [twentieth] century that has seen such intense concern with mysticism and that has contributed so many significant studies" (1994, p. 280) McGinn quotes the Jesuit historian Michel de Certeau:

> Since the sixteenth or seventeenth century one no longer designates as mystical the kind of "wisdom" elevated to the recognition of a mystery already lived and proclaimed in common beliefs, but an experimental knowledge which has slowly detached itself from traditional theology or Church institutions and which characterizes itself through the consciousness, acquired or received, of a gratified passivity where the self is lost in God. (quoted, 1994, pp. 310–312)[2]

Even the neoscholastics wrote extensively of mysticism, concentrating on Thomas Aquinas and St. John of the Cross, and Jacques Maritain, who "was fascinated with mysticism throughout his life" (p. 305), retained their focus while developing their lines of thought. Maritain remained close to the clerical hierarchy, but Moore's other subjects looked to the mystics for alternatives to the accepted "holy lights." Davy's return to the sources took her to Christian mystics prior to thirteenth-century scholasticism, especially Bernard of Clairvaux and Guillaume of St. Thierry. She and especially Massignon were among the first Catholics to expand the field and draw on non-Christian mysticism.

Moore's subjects were deeply involved in the political movements of the time, especially the resistance to fascism and colonialism. Jacques Maritain was a leading anti-fascist political theorist, whose thought later influenced the United Nations, the European Union, and the Christian Democratic parties of Europe and Latin America, while Raïssa's Jewish origins put her in danger and led the Maritains to seek asylum in the United States. Davy and Weil were active in the French resistance to the Nazi occupation and the Vichy government. Massignon marched and protested in Paris against French rule over Algeria and joined efforts to assist Muslims victimized in the Algerian War. McKay, though he did not formally become Catholic until 1944, became part of a Catholic wing of *internationalisme noir* and its successors endeavoring to "counter . . . nationalism, European imperialism, and white bigotry" (p. 173).

The Kindred Spirits

Jacques and Raïssa Maritain, who were the subjects of Moore's previous book (2013), were noteworthy for their extensive networks of spiritual friends. Their house at Meudon, on the outskirts of Paris, was something like Elrond's house in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, where "Merely to be there was a cure for weariness, fear, and sadness" (2004, p. 225)."At Meudon, something transcendent was sensed by seekers to come *directly* 'through [the] body' and transformed their friends. … The Maritains did not point to holy power; they were carriers of it." (p. 48). "Ignited by one another, the Maritains somehow kindled the religious lives of countless men and women who came to their home" (p. 47).

A friendship can bear a charism, like that given to the founders of a religious order, and, as in an order, that charism can spread to friends and friends of friends across space and time.[3] Central to the spread of the Maritains' order was Gabriela Mistral. Then living in Paris, she met the Maritains in 1935 and was drawn especially to Jacques for his combination of "antifascism, internationalism, a mystically attuned faith, and a focus on friendship," which made him an "ideal match" for her (p. 43). Concerned about the rising influence of fascism in Latin America, Mistral spread what she labeled *maritenisme* as an alternative through her many friends there, who included the Argentine writer Victoria Ocampo, the Uruguayan poet Esther de Cáceres, and Eduardo Frei Montalvo, who became president of Chile. Frei kept a sort of shrine in his study, with framed photos of Jacques Maritain and Mistral flanking a large bronze crucifix (p. 57).

Louis Massignon's circle of spiritual friendship was narrower than the Maritains' but more intense: "Both his vocation as an Islamicist and his spirituality were guided by a handful of extraordinary men and women who left 'luminous spiritual traces,' as he called them, on his own soul. Massignon believed passionately in God's presence in specific, special people who passed on a palpable sense of the divine to others" (p. 75). Moore begins with Massignon's relationship with the Sufi mystic

Husayn ibn Mansur al-Hallaj (d. 922). Al-Hallaj was the principal subject of Massignon's scholarship, but he was far more than an object of a scholar's attention; rather, Massignon felt that al-Hallaj's love reached out to him and "probed *his* heart" (p. 82), and that al-Hallaj even saved his life once when Massignon was imprisoned. Next Moore examines Massignon's friendship with Jean Muhammad Abd-el-Jalil, a young Moroccan who converted to Catholicism under Massingon's influence and became his godson and later a Franciscan priest but as a result was permanently estranged from his family. They carried on an emotionally intense correspondence for thirty-five years; as Abd-el-Jalil put it, "God has imposed on our souls a secret, deep tie" (p. 89). Massignon's most intense relationship was with Mary Kahil. In 1934 they took a joint vow—approved by no less than Pope Pius XII—to dedicate their lives to the service of Muslims. Their correspondence comprised 1,488 letters over twenty-eight years. Each saw in the other the human face of God, much as the Sufi mystic Jalal al-Din Rumi saw the face of God in Shams of Tabriz and praised them at once in his poetry. "God was made real for Massignon and Kahil through one another," Moore asserts. As in mystical experience the boundaries between the mystic and God disappear or at least attenuate, so did the boundaries between Massignon and Kahil: "When Massignon and Kahil are at their most sensual and their most religious … , their language centers on the dissolution and transformation of the self before God *and* before one another" (p. 101).

Moore sensitively examines the complexity of the relationship between Massignon and Kahil. She finds their language sometimes disturbing, but, in a statement reflective of the incarnational emphasis of Catholic spirituality, she writes, "We have to resist the binary logic of God *or* sex, sacred *or* sexual, heterosexual *or* homosexual, platonic love *or* erotic love and situate their relationship in a rich matrix of desires that swirled among Massignon, his spiritual friends, and God" (p. 100). At the same time, she is alert to the harm done to those outside the immediate relationships, for instance to Abd el-Jalil's parents and to Massignon's wife and children. During the entire period under study, Massignon was married, but he found family life an impediment to his spirituality and his mission, and he admitted to Abd el-Jalil that he found himself nibbled to death by family matters, like a torture victim being gnawed by rats (p. 90). We know little of Mme. Massignon's opinions, but Moore reports, "It is said that [she] never allowed the name of Mary Kahil to be uttered in her presence" (p. 76).

The mysticism of Massignon and Kahil, like that of many mystics though unlike a popular image of mysticism, did not lead them to withdraw from the world to be absorbed in God but rather to engage more fully with the world in loving service, in their case to carrying out their vow to serve Muslims. In Cairo they founded Al Badaliyah—the name means something like "exchange" or "standing in another's place"—to foster Christian solidarity with Muslims through prayer. An outgrowth was the Dar-el-Salam center, which Kahil founded to promote Christian-Muslim dialogue through conferences, lecture courses, and discussions. Massignon became increasingly focused on French colonial violence against Muslims, especially in Algeria. He devoted his energies to night classes for Muslim immigrants in Paris and to political activity on behalf of Muslims in French territories, such as marching in protests (which led to his arrest in 1957) and agitating for amnesty for political prisoners.

Marie-Magdeleine Davy professed to have been "seduced" by the Maritains (p. 118) and experienced Massignon as "the man in whom God comes alive" (p. 141). Like Jacques Maritain, she had a wide and extraordinarily diverse range of friends from all points on the religious and

political spectra (p. 169). Yet unlike the Maritains and Massignon, she left no record of close, intimate friendships, no intense exchanges of letters. In fact, she remained in an important sense solitary all her life. "Davy confessed in her memoir that she 'married solitude, as others take a spouse,' and detailed her belief that there was an invisible fence that enclosed her soul and God with one another, letting no one else in" (p. 166).

Even so, "Friendship was the key to her approach to medieval Christianity *and* to her experiences outside it" (p. 117). Because Davy is less well-known than Moore's other main figures, Moore spends more time on biography in profiling her. Davy first made her mark as a scholar of medieval mysticism, particularly the twelfth-century Cistercians St. Bernard of Clairvaux and Guillaume of St. Thierry, and she came to recognize both of them as friends (pp. 120–121). In 1940 she joined the French resistance against the Nazis and the Vichy regime, while continuing her academic work. There was some continuity between these two sides of her life, as she resisted the romantic medievalism of the Nazis and other right-wing movements and thinkers, inside and outside of Catholicism, worked to improve relations among Christians and Jews, and emphasized the Jewish roots of Christianity and Jewish influence on medieval Christian thought. For Davy, mystical texts could nurture the "inner voice that can guide and support" people in times such as hers (quoted, p. 136).

Such texts could communicate a sense of divine presence. But living persons could also convey the "living presence" of God (p. 155). Massignon was one. Of another, Davy wrote, "I can think of none whose inner self seemed as wide open to the transcendent as Nicholas Berdyaev," the Russian philosopher and theologian. "His presence alone brought one beyond one's normal limits, bringing new dynamism to the spirit and changing time's rhythm" (p. 140). Foremost among them, however, was Simone Weil. "For me," Davy wrote, "the word 'God' corresponds to flashes of living presence, generating a certainty. … Only someone who has become 'alive' can communicate a 'living' sense of God." She specifies, "No character of our age has created such an intensity of spiritual radiance as Simone Weil" (p. 155). Davy and Weil met only a few times and did not conduct a correspondence. Davy's bond with her developed only through study of Weil's writings after Weil's death. Far from seeking a personal friendship, Davy was drawn to Weil's "impersonalism." Weil coined this term as a contrast to the political "personalism" advocated by Maritain and others; it meant the effort to set one's ego aside in order to give full attention to those who are suffering or are rejected by society, "putting ourselves in the place of a being whose soul is mutilated by affliction" (quoted, p. 160). Davy was drawn not only to Weil's ideas but to the way that she lived them—"so wonderful, so pure, so powerful that it *had* to be close to God" (p. 170). More generally, Moore holds, Davy was drawn to special friends less as people than "as powerful vehicles of the transcendent that could become passed on, person to person," of "the holiness shining *through* them, from afar" (p. 168).

Moore's last subject, Claude McKay, at first seems an outlier in the group. He was not a scholar of religion, he was Catholic for only the last four years of his life, and he was reticent about his personal and spiritual life, including his friendships. "Religion and the intimacies in his life (both platonic and sexual) were linked in complex ways, and he was reluctant to disclose any details of these relationships, at least in a way that scholars can access today" (p. 175). Nevertheless, McKay greatly valued his friends, who "transformed his inner life" (p. 216). Though McKay was briefly married, networks of friends and lovers, male and female, supplanted family in his life.

Born in Jamaica, McKay emigrated in 1912 to the United States, where he gained a reputation as a poet. His "If We Must Die" has been called the "symbolic manifesto of the spirit of the Harlem Renaissance" (p. 184). Like many other Black artists, he left for Europe to escape American racism. He settled in Paris in 1922 and lived there, and later in Marseilles, until 1929. In France he, of colonial origins himself, was drawn to immigrants from the French colonies, many of them Catholic. Among the Catholics were Paulette and Jane Nardal, sisters from Martinique, who maintained a salon at Clamart, near Paris. They were leading figures in the movement of *internationalisme noir* (a predecessor of the Négritude movement), which sought solidarity among people of the African diaspora, especially French and English speakers. McKay, who had a "nearly lifelong interest in religion," especially its "mystical strain," was drawn to the Catholicism of the Nardals and their friends. This attraction was strengthened in Spain, where he moved in 1929 and, in his own words, "fell in love with Catholicism" (quoted, p. 199).

Returning to Harlem in 1934, McKay became friends in 1935 with Ellen Tarry, who had become Catholic while at a boarding school operated by the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, an order founded by Mother Katherine Drexel and promoting a mystical form of Catholicism (pp. 200–201). In 1938, Tarry became involved in Friendship House, a lay Catholic group founded by Russian émigrée Catherine de Hueck to promote interracial solidarity and fight discrimination. Members sought, not always successfully, to practice a celibate friendship. Tarry helped an ailing McKay find lodging at the Harlem Friendship House in 1940. Since McKay said little on the subject, Moore can only speculate on what might have appealed to him about Friendship House, noting "its anti-Protestantism, anticommunism, and antiracism, as well as its privacy on matters of sex and anti-family values, European aesthetics and culture, and attention to mystical possibilities of friendship" (pp. 209–210).

Tarry moved to Chicago, where in 1942 she became co-director of a Friendship House there. McKay followed in 1943, after another woman associated with Friendship House found him a job there. He was baptized in Chicago in 1944. "'I'll have to say,' he wrote to Tarry, 'I owe my conversion to you'" (p. 216). He became friends with a circle of Catholic activists, including Bishop Bernard Sheil, Ed Marciniak, and Ammon Hennacy. He died in Chicago in 1948.

Reflections

Claude McKay's one profession of faith that Moore records is "I do believe in the mystery of the symbol of the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ, through which all of humanity may be united in brotherhood" (p. 211). This theology unites McKay's French and American years. It was important to Paulette Nardal (p. 223). It was also the spiritual "weapon of choice" for [Friendship House] Catholics—"like our Bible," one said—"in which people of all races were understood to be connected as members of Christ's body" (p. 211). Moore mentions the Mystical Body explicitly only in connection with McKay, but the idea might have a broader bearing on her subjects. A passage Moore quotes from Massignon offers a theological framework for the idea of merger at once with friends and with God: in their "communion of friendship," he and Kahil are "at the very roots of the evangelical and Pauline teaching of solidarity in Jesus Christ" (p. 98). The Dominican theologian Yves Congar remarked that the 1930s saw a "veritable 'craze' for the doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ" (Shortall 2021, p. 78).[4] Might Moore's subjects have found in friendship the entrée to the Mystical Body that the *ressourcement* theologians found in liturgy? The idea

would be worth exploring. (Simone Weil, however, identified "the importance given to [the Mystical Body of Christ] today as one of the most serious signs of our degeneration" [1973, p. 36]; identification with Christ was fine with her, but merger with others was too collectivistic.)

Moore's labeling of McKay as "anti-family" instantiates a theme that runs throughout Moore's book. For McKay, friendship supplanted conventional family life. He has little to do with his family of origin, he was married briefly but never saw the daughter who resulted from the marriage, and he had affairs with both men and women. Tarry also was married briefly, but, unlike McKay, she raised her daughter.[5] None of Moore's subjects exactly followed the standard Catholic "states of life" of procreative marriage or celibacy as clergy or vowed or professed religious. The Maritains took a vow of celibacy eight years into their marriage. Moore repeats speculation that Jacques was gay. Like most scholars, she treats Doris Dana, with whom Mistral lived in her last years, as Mistral's lover (though Dana denied it). Massignon had at least one homosexual relationship before marrying, and he felt spiritually constricted by his marriage and family life. Davy seems to have remained celibate, as did Weil, whom Davy admired partly for assuming typically masculine social roles and clothing. Moore speaks of the "unambiguously anti-family sensibility in this community" of her subjects (p. 241), but this is too strong a term. Her subjects rejected conventional family life for themselves but did not condemn those who chose it.

Moore admires her subjects' willingness to transgress prevailing norms of gender and sexuality, but she exhibits some ambivalence in her judgment of their relationships with their families; "They routinely and troublingly shook off the kids they brought into the world, their perplexed elderly parents, and their spouses" (p. 235). She deplores Vatican leaders' "depressing and dull vision of gender and human intimacy" (p. 241), yet her effusive praise of her own husband and children (pp. 259–260) suggests her family might well win the admiration of those leaders. What is unmistakable, however, is that her subjects do not conform to the "paternal Catholic modernism" that, according to James Chappell, dominated Catholic social thought in the 1930s (and much of it since then). This was "modernist" not in the theological sense of *Pascendi Dominici Gregis*, but in that it "accepted that the old era of throne-and-altar fusion was never coming back, and that the Church would have to find a way to make do in a world of secular states and church-state separation" (2018, p. 60). Chappell explains, "The main Catholic response to the 1930s was to theorize a form of Catholic modernism in which powerful, centralized, and secular states would protect the welfare, property, and rights of religious families. I will call this strategy 'paternal Catholic modernism,' referring to its gendered and hierarchical account of the private sphere" (p. 66). Moore's subjects represent an alternative outlook that Chappell calls "*fraternal* Catholic modernism, modeled less on the authoritarian role of the father than on the relationships of solidarity and cooperation found between brothers" (p. 110). According to Chappell, the "clearest statement of fraternal Catholicism" was Jacques Maritain's *Integral Humanism* (1936) (p. 111).

Moore's book makes an important contribution to French and international Catholic intellectual history in the twentieth century, in particular by focusing on personal connections beyond the institutional and clerical frameworks on which most historians of Catholicism concentrate. She highlights the often-neglected role of women and people from the Global South in mid-century Catholic thought. Of wider importance is the richness with which she explores the role of friendship in intellectual and spiritual life. Philosophers in our time, especially Linda Zagzebski (1996), have put forward a "virtue epistemology," and if Aristotle is right that friendship is a virtue

(*Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 8), then Moore may point the way to a friendship epistemology. "Truth" is etymologically connected to "trust," and when we encounter friends who manifest trustworthiness, they become for us guides in seeking and finding truth. Theologically, Moore contributes to the study of the political bearing of mysticism and offers new perspectives for a revived concept of the Mystical Body. Most important, however, is that she draws our attention to those special friends, whether they are sent into our lives or just turn up there, who embody, as Davy put it, "flashes of the living presence" of God.

Endnotes

[1] Moore (p. 243) gives a date of 1990 for Tarry's death, but she in fact died on September 23, 2008, three days shy of her 102nd birthday. See Gale Literature, "Ellen Tarry" (2020). I owe this reference to Mount St. Mary's University librarian Emily Holland, who confirmed the date from Social Security records: "United States Social Security Death Index," database, *FamilySearch*, https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:VQM9-RJX : 12 January 2021, Ellen Tarry, 23 Sep 2008; citing U.S. Social Security Administration, *Death Master File*, database (Alexandria, Virginia: National Technical Information Service, ongoing).

[2] McGinn quotes an unpublished translation by Paul Lachance and George York of de Certeau, "Mystique," *Encyclopaedia universalis* (Paris: Encyclopaedia universalis de France, 1968).

[3] I owe this insight to Elizabeth Watts, and this essay reflects our decades-long friendship as well as our conversations about Moore's book.

[4] Gabrielli (2017) traces the development of the "French stream" of mystical body theology (pp. 29–47, 125–151). There were also distinct Roman and German streams. He cites a bibliographical study that pinpoints 1937 as the "crest" of mystical body studies (p. 90).

[5] Asked why she did not marry her good friend McKay, she replied, "Reason number one is: I'm not ready to go to jail for killing a distinguished Negro poet!" (p. 221)

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