Book Review. Histoire de Taizé, by Jean-Claude Escaffit and Moïz Rasiwala. Reviews in Religion & Theology

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Numerous books have been written about the ecumenical monastery of Taizé since its foundation shortly after the Second World War, but few, if any, are as comprehensive as the present book. Previous books have focussed on the spirituality of the community or on its charismatic founder. In contrast, the authors of this book have chosen a different approach: contextualising the community, highlighting its influence locally and beyond, and describing its numerous and various activities around the globe. Above all, this book is a work of history, as its title implies; its contents are arranged chronologically with a strong narrative thrust. Escaffit and Rasiwala tell the story in a balanced and sympathetic manner, both being long acquainted with the community, as is evident from the photographs in the book.

_Histoire de Taizé_ begins and ends by seeking the significance of this community, this place. The predominant image or idea is that Taizé is a bridge and that the brothers are bridge-builders, building a bridge 'between nations, between faiths, between cultures and generations, between the North and the South, the East and the West' (p. 11). Geographically Taizé is near the Swiss border, and, during WWII, on the border between occupied and free France. Although originally founded by Swiss Protestants, the community is now a mixture of Protestants and Catholics, numbering more than one hundred and representing thirty countries (p. 12). The community is now led by a Catholic, Br Alois, who succeeded Br Roger on the latter's death in 2005. It currently numbers four priests among its brothers (p. 161, n. 1), notwithstanding the late Max Thurian, one of the original Protestant members of the community who latterly converted to Catholicism and was 'secretly' ordained to the priesthood on 3 May 1987 in Naples (pp. 157-59). Moreover, the community's age range has also grown in diversity, with approximately one-third under the age of forty, one-third between forty and sixty, and the remaining one-third over sixty (p. 181).

Chapter 1 begins with the story of Roger Schutz's early life. One learns, for example, that among the books that his grandmother read to him was the story of Angélique Arnauld, abbess of
Port-Royal (pp. 15-16). Additionally, Br Roger was influenced by the piety of the Protestant Awakening in nineteenth century France. The authors include many other diverse influences, from the Danish pastor Nicolai Grundtvig (1783-1872) and the Tübingen theologian Johann Adam Möhler (1796-1838) to the revival of religious life in the Church of England. Chapter 2 relates some of the monastic influences on Br Roger's conception of the Taizé community. Not surprisingly, the community was influenced by the ancient abbeys of Cluny and Citeaux, between which it lies; in fact, the Taizé community was originally named Cluny in 1941 (p. 29). Lesser known influences were the deaconesses of Reuilly, founded in 1841, and the third order of Veilleurs, founded in 1929, both of which represented Protestant forms of religious life in France (pp. 24-25). A surer guide to his own early conception of the monastic life is Roger's thesis, 'The Monastic Ideal up to the Time of St Benedict and its Conformity with the Gospel', written as part of his theological studies in Geneva; unfortunately, this remains unpublished. Following shortly after this was Roger's first book *Introduction to Community Life* (1944), which showed strong Franciscan inspiration.

Chapter 3 continues by enlarging the book's scope to include the beginnings of the Taizé community. While that story is fairly well-known, there are hidden surprises, such as the fact that the community used to have vigils in the middle of the night, in addition to its three prayer services during the day (p. 41). And while the community's distinctive style of chant can be heard all over the world, it initially chanted the psalms in plain Huguenot fashion, then used the psalms tones of Joseph Gélineau, before finally settling on the simple melodic lines of Jacques Berthier (p. 43). The community's ecumenical involvement began early on with participation in the Dombes group, founded in 1937; there Roger Schutz and Max Thurian met Henri de Lubac (p. 51). In the 1950s, the community became acquainted with Pope John XIII and Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras (pp. 56-59), culminating in Roger's and Max's attendance with other non-Catholic observers at the Second Vatican Council. During the Council the brothers occupied an apartment in Rome, where they entertained numerous bishops from all over the world, including Cardinal Ottaviani, Prefect of
the Holy Office, and Karol Wojtyla, the future Pope John Paul II (pp. 66-68). In 1966, Roger and Max published a commentary on the conciliar document *Dei verbum*, which carried a preface written by de Lubac (p. 74). It is surprising, however, that given the community's ecumenical activities, the only other conciliar documents mentioned in the book are *Gaudium et spes* and *Lumen gentium*, but not the Decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis redintegratio*.

Because of the community's increasing proximity to the Catholic Church, Chapters 7 and 12 show that the community's relations with the Reformed churches of France was rendered more problematic. Protestant fears were heightened with the conversion and ordination of Max Thurian, who had originally been a Protestant pastor and was the most theologically-minded of the brethren. Moreover, suspicions still linger over whether Br Roger himself had secretly become a Catholic. When the authors pursued this line of questioning with Br Alois, they were told that 'Br Roger never formally converted to Catholicism. If he had done it, he would have said so, because he never hid anything about his development' (p. 160). Chapter 6 introduces the changes wrought by and in the community during the 1960s, which are then taken up in more detail in the following chapters. Chapter 8 describes the increasing numbers of young people who came to visit Taizé. Chapter 9 chronicles the temporary communities of brothers sent abroad to Africa, Asia, and Latin America beginning in 1951. Chapter 10 tells of the opening up of eastern Europe during the 1980s, while Chapter 11 tells of the European meetings, begun in 1978, which take place annually between Christmas and New Year's Day, attracting tens of thousands of young people to one of Europe's major cities. 'And if you do not go to Taizé, Taizé will go to you' (p. 148). Chapter 13 explores what it is that attracts young people to Taizé and everything that it stands for. The authors rightly suggest that it is listening and prayer. Chapter 14 briefly relates that even non-believers are attracted to Taizé, such as former President François Mitterand and the actresses Juliette Binoche and Audrey Tautou.

*Histoire de Taizé* is a welcome addition to the ever-growing literature on this most unique and influential of contemporary monastic communities. No book on contemporary monasticism,
the post-war spiritual revival of Europe, youth movements, or ecumenism is complete without reference to Taizé. The masses of young people who travel there every year and attend its European meetings show no sign of diminishing. And the community of brothers shows no decline in vocations. Although Taizé has built numerous bridges in its short history, its work is by no means complete.