

Reviews

MERTON, Thomas, *An Introduction to Christian Mysticism: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition 3*, edited with an Introduction by Patrick F. O'Connell, Preface by Lawrence S. Cunningham, Monastic Wisdom Series 13 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2008), pp. lviii + 416. ISBN 978-0-87907-013-7 (paper) \$39.95.

The third and much-awaited volume of Thomas Merton's conference notebooks, an introductory survey of Christian mysticism, has been worth waiting for. Unlike the preceding two works in this series, we are privileged this time to step into the teaching mind of Merton as he prepares a course of study for monastic priests, not novices. The course was intended for priests interested in pastoral theology, particularly a foundation in ascetical and mystical theology fitting for superiors responsible for spiritual direction. Merton's notebook for the course is basically entitled: "Ascetical and Mystical Theology." The course began on March 1, 1961 and semi-ended on May 19, 1961, the original projected end of the course as planned. Twenty-two lectures in eleven weeks was the plan. Merton, however, extended the course into the summer, prolonged and justified by popular demand.

In his Foreword to the work, Merton admits his notes are imperfect, incomplete and possibly erroneous in places as he sought to adopt a broad, historical perspective of mystical theology in a monastic context. The work is, indeed, sketchy in places; for example, left out of the survey are sustained treatments of various key mystics and much of the Orthodox or Byzantine mystical tradition. Merton simply realized the impossibility of commenting on everyone and everything under the mystical sun. His aim was not to inspect every flower, but to glimpse the whole field itself. "The main task," he writes, "will be to *situate* the subject properly in our life" as a perspective radiating from the center of one's being (15). Thus this work is not a survey of individual mystics nor an outline of theological lineage, but rather an exploration of the history of Christian mysticism as it has informed spiritual counsel and direction. There is great value in adopting and learning such a perspective, thus this work has tremendous relevance today and

offers many benefits to readers, mystics and spiritual guides in the twenty-first century.

Merton made a concerted effort to be systematic in a subject area where too few had worked. Between two other landmark systematic presentations in the twentieth century—Evelyn Underhill near the beginning and Bernard McGinn near the end—stands Merton's 1961 effort to ignite a living, mystical fire for living a deeper life. In fact, Merton uses the words of Underhill as the "guiding principle" of his own course: "The essence of mysticism being not a doctrine but a way of life, its interests require {the existence of} groups of persons who put its principles into effect" (3). Merton's emphasis throughout this work, therefore, is focused on a tradition that must be lived to be understood, not merely talked about. Although the work is thick, ordered, structured and systematic, it is never dryly academic or abstract. The intellect is guarded by the heart here.

The guiding assumption behind the work is that the mystical tradition is not, and cannot be, separated from the dogmatic and moral dimensions of Christian theology. One can sense the excitement that the priests taking this course under Merton must have felt when, in light of his stressing the fundamental mystical dimension of theology, they realized Merton's genuine desire was "to help us to do what we must really do: live our *theology*. Some think it is sufficient to come to the monastery to live the *Rule*. More is required—we must live our theology, fully, deeply, in its totality. Without this, there is no sanctity. The separation of theology from 'spirituality' is a disaster" (16).

Merton recognized that the subject of asceticism in a monastery was not likely to be resisted or misunderstood; here, he knew, we are on familiar and common ground. Mysticism, however, is a different matter, even in a monastery, for as Merton acknowledges early on: "Here we are on more difficult ground. Nowhere is it more important to define your terms and show where you really stand" (23). Merton provides a sampling of historic and then-current approaches to the study of mysticism, noting the growth of intellectual interest by religious and nonreligious thinkers, rich and varied literature on the subject. Merton argues that it is an unfortunate modern misunderstanding and error to separate asceticism from mysticism, but that there have been many hearty efforts of late to realize their interconnections and value for spiritual rebirth and revival, "not the spurious and superficial supposed

'religious revival' that has driven people to church since the atomic bomb, but the deeper revival, the awakening of the basic need of man for God" (35).

The deeper revival. This is what Merton was always working on, and it is clearly the basis for these conferences on ascetical and mystical theology that also reject any division between theology and spirituality. Thus Merton strongly affirms early on in the text that

this study we are about to undertake is absolutely *vital to our vocation*. In a sense we will be trying to face "THE" questions which are at the very heart of our spiritual life. We are here looking at a spiritual movement of which we form a part, and not a negligible part. However, it is not merely a matter of study and reading. We must become *fully impregnated in our mystical tradition*. (35)

He goes on to emphasize that "[t]his tradition *forms and affects the whole man*: intellect, memory, will, emotions, body, skills (arts)—all must be under the sway of the Holy Spirit" (35-36). I have spent time highlighting Merton's initial framing of the course because I think his rationale permeates the entire text and illuminates a characteristic of Merton that makes him so readable, so influential and relevant still to this day: his burning desire to cut through all that is superficial to get to what is most vital, most alive, most real. Much like St. Paul, Merton is always emphatic in his encouragement to his listeners and readers to press on to what is higher and deeper. What perhaps makes this book extraordinarily valuable is that he is prodding spiritual guides to do the same for others; the priests must be spiritually alive to enliven those seeking living counsel. For Merton, this is the defining mark of a real theologian.

After Merton's introductory framing and rationale for the course, he begins the actual survey with a brief reminder of the scriptural basis for Christian mysticism, focusing on St. John's Gospel, Paul's epistles and the Book of Acts. He then moves to discuss the martyrs and Gnostics in relations to emerging explanations of the mystical life. This is followed by a more substantial section under the heading "Divinization and Mysticism" in which Merton discusses *theosis*, *theoria mystike*, the Cappadocian Fathers, and the spiritual senses. Gregory of Nyssa is especially featured here. Next, Merton spends considerable time on Evagrius Ponticus, the problems, the life and the teachings of a rediscovered and very

important Christian mystic. (In terms of individual mystics figuring prominently in this course, Evagrius is first; others to receive individualized attention are Augustine, Dionysius, Eckhart and Teresa of Avila).

After the section on Evagrius, Merton turns to contemplation and the cosmos, *theoria physike*. He then moves to treat Dionysius and the Dionysian tradition before backing up to survey the Augustinian tradition under the heading of "Western Mysticism." In presenting both traditions, Merton covers various questions, figures and syntheses between the fourth and twelfth centuries that shed light on the maturing relationship between asceticism and mystical theology especially as it affects the monastic life.

The fourteenth century stands out in history for Merton as a golden age. We know that on a number of other occasions in his writings, Merton has declared himself to be a fourteenth-century man, and we see clearly in this text a special focus on the fourteenth-century thought of lay spiritual movements and Rhineland mystics as it strengthened and developed conceptions of the mystical core of a life of faith. This section is followed by a presentation on "Spanish Mysticism" dominated by St. Teresa. The emphasis here, as throughout the book, is on how mysticism informs spiritual guidance. One might be surprised that John of the Cross is not featured heavily here, but Merton returns to conclude the course by drawing from his writings and example in particular.

After Teresa, Merton delves into the heart of the course in the final two sections: "Spiritual Direction of Contemplatives" and "Direction and Therapy." The relationship between mysticism and spiritual guidance has woven Merton's various historical forays thematically, but here in the final 100 pages Merton hits the target right in the middle. He answers questions concerning the nature and necessity of spiritual direction; the authority, functions and characteristics of a good director; the distinction between spiritual direction and counseling, psychoanalysis, as well as the distinction between spiritual and vocational crises. Merton concludes by extracting the wisdom of St. John of the Cross on the dark night of the soul as exemplary of what one needs to know as a spiritual director. Finally, Merton recommends, in an appendix, Guigo the Carthusian's *Ladder for Monks* as "a first-class example of the medieval approach to *lectio, meditatio, oratio, contemplatio*" (332).

This series of Merton's teaching notebooks is the most exciting and significant collection to appear since the publication of

Merton's personal journals. Merton was a teacher's teacher, and reading the volumes in this series is a real education. We can be especially grateful that the series is edited by Pat O'Connell, an editor's editor. O'Connell's editing of Merton's manuscripts is expert, pristine, professional; his notes on the text and various explanations are extremely helpful to any reader desiring more information. O'Connell senses the reader's questions before they are raised. His own introduction to each work in the series is substantial, eloquent, insightful and especially helpful in placing Merton's work in various contexts for better understanding and appreciation. We can be grateful that O'Connell has more work to do, that there are more teaching notebooks by Merton to appear, a veritable curriculum forthcoming!

My final thought in review of this book is that it convinces me that a fervent desire for the mystical dimension of reality, the mystical core of a life of faith, the heart of Christianity itself, is not misplaced, that mysticism itself should no longer be banished to the margins but should be seen as the foundation it is. Merton's life and writings have done so much to resurrect the meaning of contemplation. May this book further the rescue of the language and meaning of Christian mysticism and contribute to an undaunted, unflinching intellectual-spiritual basis for declaring: "Yes, I am a mystic."

Gray Matthews

BURTON, Patricia A., *More Than Silence: A Bibliography of Thomas Merton*, ATLA Series No. 55 (Lanham, MD; Toronto; Plymouth, UK and American Theological Library Association: The Scarecrow Press, 2008), pp. xxiv + 210. ISBN 0810860953 (cloth) \$66.00.

The year 2008 finally saw the publication of a new major bibliography about the writings of Thomas Merton. Patricia Burton continues her diligent work of documenting the legacy of Merton. She has provided several earlier works (*Index to the Published Letters of Thomas Merton*, *Merton Vade Mecum* (two editions) and *'About Merton': Secondary Sources*) that catalog various important aspects of the Merton canon. The series editor, R. Justin Harkins, clearly characterizes the author when he notes in his Foreword, "Burton's enthusiasm for this subject – coupled with the depth of the bibliography itself – makes this an indispensable resource for scholars interested in Merton."