

these additions are Merton's own *Peace in the Post-Christian Era* (Orbis, 2004), *Cassian and the Fathers: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition* (Cistercian Publications, 2005) and *In the Dark before Dawn: New Selected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New Directions, 2005).

This book is without a doubt a necessary addition to anyone's Merton library. Unlike some revised texts that offer only aesthetic and minor changes, thereby rendering the new book's purchase unnecessary, owners of the 1991 edition of this book will find "upgrading" to the revised edition an investment well worth making. Forest's revised *Living with Wisdom* will continue to be a reliable introduction to Merton's life even as additional biographies and studies are published. While this book is perfect for those just getting acquainted with the monk from Gethsemani, it is also a refreshing "biographical booster shot" for those of us deeply enmeshed in the particularities of Merton scholarship.

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HARMLESS, William, SJ, *Mystics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. xvii + 350. ISBN 978-0-19-530038-3 (cloth) \$125.00; 978-0-19-530039-0 (paper) \$18.95.

Unlike his previous book, the splendid *Desert Christians*, an intensive examination of the entire body of fourth- and fifth-century desert father literature, *Mystics*, the most recent work of William Harmless, ranges widely but selectively over the whole course of the Christian era, but has in common with its predecessor a depth of insight and clarity of presentation that make it a superb introduction to the varieties of mystical experience and expression within and even beyond the Christian tradition.

After an introductory chapter providing a preliminary orientation to the meaning and significance of mysticism, the author examines eight particular figures whom he considers representative mystics, six Christians, a Muslim and a Buddhist, and concludes with an extensive summary chapter that draws together into a more systematic exposition the insights provided by the lives and writings of his chosen examples. Thus the major focus, as the title indicates, is on mystics rather than mysticism, on specific persons rather than on abstract theory, but in his final synthesis Fr. Harmless does provide a clear and balanced evaluation of various recent approaches to mysticism, and a satisfying and convincing discussion of its essential elements.

The rather brief opening chapter, "A Theology Called Mystical" (3-18), first distinguishes authentic mysticism from various forms of the paranormal or occult popularly labeled "mystical," then considers two influential theoreticians of mysticism, the early fifteenth-century theologian Jean Gerson and the early twentieth-century psychologist and philosopher William James. Both authors emphasize experience, but Harmless shows how the traditional perspective of Gerson, which regards the mystic's experience of the Divine as an integral dimension of a broader religious life as a member of a believing community, provides a necessary check on James' highly individualistic conception of mysticism, detached from corporate worship and theological content and tending to claim that all mystics' experience, as distinguished from its articulation, is identical.

The body of the book then features "case studies" of the author's eight representative mystics, evidently drawn from the much larger group that are included in the classes on the mystics that Harmless regularly teaches at Creighton University (xi). In each instance he first situates the person's teaching in the context of his or her life and of the specific period and location in which that life took place, then provides a detailed reading of a significant work or works typifying the characteristic approach of the figure being examined. It is initially somewhat disconcerting, but pedagogically effective, that the chapters move backward from the contemporary period to the middle ages to the patristic era, before moving beyond the boundaries of Christianity.

Thus the author's first example, the "Mystic as Fire Watcher" (19-40), is none other than Thomas Merton, who Harmless states "had a knack for getting the mystical to speak to the modern" (19). Harmless visits familiar ground here, stopping at Fourth and Walnut and Polonnarua, quoting from *New Seeds of Contemplation*, the passage from *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* about "contain[ing] all divided worlds in ourselves" (25), *Day of a Stranger*, the famous letter to Abdul Aziz that is the most revealing description of Merton's own practice of prayer, and the conclusion to *The Sign of Jonas* that provides the chapter's title. But the discussion is not merely warmed-over material: it might seem quite unlikely that at this point anyone could provide new insights on Merton's "Louisville epiphany," but Harmless makes the suggestive observation (32-33) that a comparison of the original journal passage from March 1958 with the final version in *Conjectures* provides evidence of a

deepening over time of Merton's own understanding of the significance of this experience, a process he likens to that of Julian of Norwich (an aspect of Julian's teaching that Merton himself notes [see *Conjectures*, 191-92], though Harmless makes no explicit reference to this). Some attention could have been given to the profoundly paschal orientation of Merton's approach to mysticism as a participation in Christ's death, resurrection and return to the Father, but otherwise this is a sensitive, perceptive introduction to Merton's "mystical spirituality" (30).

The four medieval figures Harmless discusses (in proper chronological order) are evidently chosen to provide a broad spectrum of approaches to mystical experience: the affective, cataphatic interpreter of scripture Bernard of Clairvaux ("Mystic as Experienced Exegete": 41-58); Hildegard of Bingen the visionary, polymath and prophetic reformer ("Mystic as Multimedia Artist": 59-78); Bonaventure, the highly organized systematic theologian and profoundly Christocentric follower of St. Francis ("Mystic as Cartographer": 79-105); and Meister Eckhart, the apophatic preacher creating a language of paradox that reveals the limits of language to describe union with the infinite Ground of all reality ("Mystic as Mystagogue": 107-34). (In the process he manages to include both a Cistercian and a Benedictine, both a Franciscan and a Dominican!) Harmless then moves back to the fourth-century Egyptian desert, his area of particular expertise, to consider Evagrius Ponticus, "The Mystic as Desert Calligrapher" (135-57), the highly influential "psychologist of the spirit" (136) and analyst of the stages of spiritual development whose contributions were obscured for centuries because of his controversial Origenist theology. The two final figures Harmless examines represent non-Christian religious traditions: Rumi, the thirteenth-century Persian Sufi whose mystical poetry has become remarkably popular in the West in recent decades (159-88), and his contemporary, Eihei Dōgen, the founder of the Soto school of Zen Buddhism in Japan (189-223). In these chapters, the author provides not only a thorough discussion of the life and work of the two individuals, but a brief yet incisive introduction to the religious tradition each represents.

This eclectic group of spiritual adepts and teachers may seem to constitute a rather arbitrary selection, and it is certainly true, as the author himself acknowledges (xi), that the figures are not evenly distributed across time and space. There are no mystics considered between the early fourteenth and the twentieth centuries,

not even the great sixteenth-century Carmelites, Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, who are deliberately passed over because of the common tendency to use them as the standard against which other figures are measured (xi); and while there are four medieval mystics studied, only a single representative of the patristic period is included; only a single woman appears in the group; and of course no Jewish or Hindu or Taoist mystic is considered along with the Muslim Rumi and the Buddhist Dōgen. The discussions of the figures that are included are so uniformly excellent that one would have liked to see, had space permitted, additional chapters on Teresa or Julian or Gregory of Nyssa or Ramakrishna or one of the great Hasidic masters.

But it is important to note that the author has not merely made his selection at random, or simply for the sake of the very real intrinsic interest each of his figures possesses. Each of the central chapters can stand on its own as a penetrating analysis of a particular mystic, but they also serve to provide empirical evidence for the synthesis Harmless undertakes in his final chapter, "Reading Mystics: Text, Community, Experience" (225-69), in which he endeavors "to bring readers to the doorway of a many-sided, long-standing, and ongoing scholarly conversation on the nature of mysticism" (225) by developing a three-fold frame of reference. In considering the variety of genres in mystical writing, the normative role of the scriptures, the tension between articulation and the ineffable mystery of encounter with the Divine, Harmless highlights the importance of mystical texts. In pointing out the importance of the transmission of spiritual insight from master to disciple, as well as the relationship of personal contemplative prayer to public worship and corporate life, he emphasizes the context of community as central to mystical realization. In presenting the heights of mystical experience as continuous with the entire journey of the spiritual life he warns against isolating mysticism from the rest of human existence. By situating mystical experience in this three-fold framework Harmless counters the tendency represented by William James and other modern psychologically-oriented theorists to consider mysticism largely or exclusively as a subjective state of an individual essentially removed from his or her own time, place, religious tradition and ordinary experience. He rejects the idea that all mysticisms are basically identical, and that differences in description are merely due to different intellectual and doctrinal frameworks, while at the same time refusing to go to the opposite

extreme of recognizing little or no common elements across times and religious traditions. Thus the variety of individual lives and testimonies that Harmless provides for his readers in the central chapters of his book are indeed "case studies" that support his contention that both within and beyond specific religious traditions, "points of convergence are real; so too are the points of divergence; both are illuminating, but should not be overdrawn" (264).

The book is finally not just a collection of separate essays on remarkable individuals, but a process of exploration that leads to an understanding of mysticism as "a domain of religion that deals with the search for and the attainment of a profound experiential knowledge of God or of ultimate reality [which] takes its literary form in mystical texts, its organizational form in mystical communities, and its practical form in the remarkable experiences and the broader lives of individual mystics" (263). The book as a whole provides concrete evidence that "mystics matter" because, in Karl Rahner's formulation, their experiences of the transcendent "are not discontinuous from our own" (268) but constitute a heightened realization of the human capacity for the divine present in all. "They are pioneers who explore the frontiers and limits of being human" (268), a description that echoes, not by chance, Thomas Merton, whose image as the fire watcher, "stand[ing] vigil at night in a lonely belfry" (268), aware both of the darkness of human personal and social sin and of the luminous darkness of divine love, provides a final paradigm of the "night vision" of the mystics, who "have learned to peer into the divine darkness long and hard enough to see a God-drenched world" and who "remind us that we too have eyes to see those fragile ephemeral beauties where drops of dew glisten like sapphires for a few fleeting moments in an inbreaking dawnlight through which most of us routinely sleep" (269). This very fine book is itself a wake-up call that encourages us to see and shows us where to look.

Patrick F. O'Connell

THURSTON, Bonnie B., *The Spiritual Landscape of Mark* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2008), pp. 84. ISBN 978-0-8146-1864-6 (paper) \$12.95.

Can you remember your experience of an excellent retreat? Did the retreat experience have a transforming effect on your life? Would you like to rekindle this spirit? Thurston's book, based on her