Reviews

MERTON, Thomas, *A Course in Christian Mysticism: Thirteen Sessions with the Famous Trappist Monk*, edited by Jon M. Sweeney, Foreword by Michael N. McGregor (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2017), pp. vii + 235. ISBN: 978-0-8146-4508-6 (paper) $19.95.

This book consists of a series of lectures (thirteen to be exact – though this arrangement does not correspond precisely to the actual conferences as presented) that Thomas Merton delivered to a group of young monks at the Abbey of Gethsemani. Collectively, they provide a broad overview of the (primarily Western) Christian mystical tradition, beginning with the mystical theology present in the Gospel of John and concluding with the sixteenth-century Spanish mystic John of the Cross. As such, this book is primarily helpful to those readers seeking knowledge about mysticism rather than Merton's own mystical theology, though his lectures cannot help but be informed by his own theological views, and the book can thus be of some help for those looking for insight into Merton himself.

As an introduction to Christian mysticism, this book would be most helpful to readers who have some level of familiarity with the tradition. As is the case with many introductions, its scope is broad, but its depth is limited. This is most evident when the lectures selected for this volume discuss certain aspects of mysticism and assume knowledge on the part of the audience. For instance, on the first page of his lecture on the Gospel of John, Merton writes the following: "The Word, the true light, in whom all things are made, comes into the world to enlighten it (John 1:1-5). He enlightens those who, receiving him by faith, are reborn as sons of God in a spiritual transformation (the basis for the doctrine of 'divinization' in the Greek Fathers)" (12). For those who have spent some time studying mysticism, the term "divinization" is not problematic. But I wonder about the impact of using this word without explanation on someone who picks up this book as a first look into mystical theology. This is not surprising, however, for Merton's original audience was comprised of persons called to the monastic life who had already dedicated their lives to examining the interior life. And, this book only contains thirteen lectures from the time Merton served as novice master.[1]

1. Merton was appointed Master of Scholastics in 1951. He volunteered for and was

Moreover, the combination of the book's breadth and assumption of knowledge on the part of the reader leads to a secondary limitation of the book. Those individuals who have enough of a theological background to understand the terms and concepts addressed by this book may have (probably?) already studied the mystics whose theology is presented here. Lecture seven (79-87) addresses the Dionysian tradition, which is an important component of Christian mysticism, but I am willing to hazard a guess that the majority of readers of this journal have read more on it than the 8+ pages that appear in this book. As such, the book is limited because it is stuck between presuming a level of knowledge on the part of its readers and not going into great detail in its presentation of the Christian mystical tradition.

Perhaps the greatest contribution of this book as a series of lectures on Christian mysticism is that it can point its readers to aspects of the tradition to which they had not previously given much, if any, thought. Personally, I must admit that I haven't given much attention to the thought of Maximus Confessor recently. As I read Merton's lecture six (71-78), on Maximus's *theoria physike*, I became intrigued. According to Merton, *theoria physike* is "a contemplation according to nature (*physis*). It is also a contemplation of God in and through nature, in and through things he has created, in history" (71). Such contemplation leads to an appreciation of the *logoi* of things, not their materiality. Such appreciation is not only the pinnacle of the interior life, but is also "necessary to complete the moral purification effected by the active life" (72). As someone interested in the connection between mysticism and justice, I now have an additional avenue for my future research. Given my response to his lecture on Maximus, I was glad to see Merton's last sentence of the book, which is also the last sentence of his lecture on John of the Cross's *Dark Night of the Soul*: "[But] these too brief notes may be enough to enable some to enter upon a personal study of this classic" (208). Merton's course on Christian mysticism can be an inspiration to its readers to engage the tradition more deeply.

One does not have to use this book solely as an introduction to Chris-

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appointed to the position of Novice Master in 1955, a position he held until he moved into the hermitage in 1965. Cistercian Publications, as part of their Monastic Wisdom Series, has published eight volumes of Merton's conferences under the sub-series heading "Initiation into the Monastic Tradition" (a ninth will appear in spring 2019). Each of the volumes has been edited and meticulously annotated by Patrick F. O'Connell. Unlike the rest of these published conference volumes, most of the material included in this volume was actually presented to recently ordained priests rather than to novices: see Thomas Merton, *An Introduction to Christian Mysticism: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition* 3, ed. Patrick F. O'Connell (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2008) xi-xxii.

tian mysticism, however, for in its pages we can learn something about Merton as well. The first lecture, "The Aim of This Course" (1-11) is most helpful in this regard. In it we find Merton's assertion that theology must be lived. As he is addressing monks, Merton focuses most closely on the spiritual life. He asserts that mysticism and asceticism are inextricably linked (see 6); one cannot be present without the other, and mysticism must always be connected to prayer and the tradition (see 10-11). Without such guardrails, mysticism falls into a vague over-simplification of human beings' desire for God, and people are left without any direction as to how to pursue the contemplative life.

When I moved on to the lectures detailing the history of the mystical tradition, I was struck by two things – Merton's charity and his insistence on the importance of tradition. Merton's charity is evident throughout the book. When dealing with controversial figures such as Evagrius, the Béguines or Meister Eckhart, Merton asks his reader to take into consideration the context in which these individuals lived and to consider whether their problems arose from the mystics themselves or their later interpreters. For instance, while noting that Evagrius comes close to such errors as considering human beings as "potentially pure spirit" and that he "tends to separate off the contemplative life and isolate it from the wholeness of the Christian's life in the Spirit" (69), readers must always keep in mind that Evagrius balances those strains by elsewhere emphasizing the unity of the Christian life in the mystical Christ and the action of the Holy Spirit (see 69-70). Thus, Merton claims that we should give Evagrius the benefit of the doubt and recognize that he did not have the theological language to make his positions completely clear. This charity is also evident when Merton claims that in the Béguine tradition "there were grave dangers and abuses, but the fact is that there were even greater benefits for those thousands of devout souls who were not able to live in convents and who thus had a life of prayer and simplicity opened to them, and attained sanctity" (143). Finally, Merton writes of Eckhart's works that they can be beneficial, but that they must be paired with a level of theological training in order to avoid falling into the errors of which Eckhart's critics accuse him (see 155).

Secondly, Merton's insistence on the role of tradition is evident throughout this book. In lecture two, for instance, Merton writes about gnosticism in the work of St. Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria and claims that within the bounds of the Church's teachings, gnosticism is not necessarily heretical. Rather, for Irenaeus, Christian gnosis is enlightenment by the Holy Spirit in the midst of the Church (see 29). It is only when individuals claim an esoteric understanding of gnosis in which knowledge

is limited to a select few (and usually paired with other problematic positions such as the evilness of the body), Merton claims, that Gnosticism becomes heretical. Likewise, for Clement, "Gnosticism equals mystical contemplation" (30). Similarly, regarding the controversial figure of Origen, Merton writes that his understanding of martyrdom consists of the "idea of union with the Logos through union in love and suffering with Christ, the Word Incarnate" and that this is "the most fundamental idea in all Christian mystical theology" (38). Though I have only included examples from one lecture, Merton's concern for tradition runs through the book, and it points contemplatives to a foundation that can both keep them from falling into error and serve as a resource as they explore the mystical tradition of the Church.

The final aspect of this book I wish to mention in this review is the additional material that follows Merton's thirteen lectures – an identification of texts that are relevant to the lectures themselves and questions designed to guide group discussions of the lectures. Both of these sections can help readers as they pursue greater understanding of Christian mysticism. As mentioned previously, Merton hoped that these lectures could inspire others to further study, and by supplying both sources and lines of questioning the editor puts readers in a better position to do so than if they relied on the lectures alone.

In summary, this book can be useful in two ways. First, it can provide the reader with directions for further study. It is not (and does not claim to be) a comprehensive course on Christian mysticism, but it does a good job of presenting an introduction to the theologies of important figures in the tradition that can be used as a springboard into further study and reflection. Secondly, it gives a window into the mind of Merton. His charity and appreciation for the Christian tradition are evident throughout and thus may be of use to Merton scholars as well as those interested in mysticism in general. Its only limitation is that it represents only a small selection of Merton's work on Christian mysticism and is thus broad, but not very deep. Overall, however, its benefits outweigh its shortcomings, and I recommend this book to those interested in both Merton and Christian mysticism in general.

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MERTON, Thomas and Ernesto Cardenal, *From the Monastery to the World: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Ernesto Cardenal*, translated and edited by Jessie Sandoval with notes and translations by Jeffrey Neilson and Introduction by Robert Hass (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2017), pp. xxx + 321. ISBN 978-1-61902-901-9 (cloth) $30.00.