

AWARENESS FOR SEARCHERS

Review of

William H. Shannon

SILENCE ON FIRE: THE PRAYER OF AWARENESS

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Reviewed by **Mary Luke Tobin, S.L.**

If one has followed the earlier works of William H. Shannon, particularly *Thomas Merton's Dark Path* and *Seeking the Face of God*, one will discover that there is an ascending spiral of insight and expressed experience of prayer reaching new heights in Shannon's latest, *Silence on Fire: The Prayer of Awareness*. In a season of self-help books on every topic under heaven, it is refreshing to come across an intelligent guide to developing one's own prayer life, written by a skillful contemporary master. Shannon is a serious Merton scholar, who not only draws on Merton's work, but invites study of other gifted teachers of prayer in Eastern and Western traditions.

Contemplation, writes Shannon, implies a transformation of consciousness which can be achieved by the practitioner of awareness — not a trick, not a virtue, but an arrival at a new state of reality. We are all nascent contemplatives, but we don't know it and don't discover it, although, if we did, it would change our lives significantly.

The text is enlivened by many stories, poems, and personal experiences related with unassuming charm. After one has been introduced to the spirited fables of Sufi spirituality, for example, one is delighted to find refreshing connectives to the treasury of stories in the Christian tradition. Shannon never hesitates to clarify as he sketches out the steps to be followed along the path to awareness. Awareness, indeed, is properly a subtitle for this book. Awareness? It all sounds so simple, but before the beginner has taken two steps along the path, perplexing roadblocks show up. So now what? In this area one needs an experienced and practical guide. Here is where the author's gentle warnings and encouragements prompt the reader along the way.

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MARY LUKE TOBIN
Caricature by Leo Dodd

"Living in the presence of God" leads to "experiencing the joy of God's presence." But where do people and works come into all this faith life? Here again, the author points out that one moves steadily from awareness of God to awareness of people. "If I allow contemplation to set my sights and create my vision, I will know there are better possibilities. I will believe that we can create a human unity that will recognize our solidarity and communion with one another . . . but at a depth that we seldom reach."

Shannon draws us toward the specific peacefulness of such a world. "Perhaps we can create a world where people do not climb over one another to get ahead. A world in which there is no manipulation of people, a world in which poverty and cruelty and terrorism and conflict and war become dimming memories of an abandoned past, not experienced realities of the present." This is an ideal, of course, and a Gospel-oriented goal demands action beyond the dream: practical means. And Shannon doesn't leave the searcher without naming the needed resources that make for such a peaceful world. He develops his suggested resources: dialogue, compassion, and nonviolence. Obstacles to awareness are searched out — obstacles in our culture, in our personality traits, in our busy-ness, and in our addiction to efficiency. But helps to awareness are also spelled out — letting go, waiting, accepting. "The meaning is in the waiting," as the Welsh poet R. S. Thomas tells us.

For those of us who are spontaneously attracted to the words of Thomas Merton, it is a pleasure to note that Shannon shares generously from his own study and reflection on Merton's writings. For this reader, the chapter on "Who Am I?", filled with Merton insights and teaching, is invaluable.

I admire Shannon's willingness to plunge into the difficult task of explaining that way of prayer called the apophatic way. Perhaps such expressions as *apophatic* and *kataphatic* are off-putting for the uninitiated seeker for a deeper prayer life. But in a climate like today's, where everything about contemplative prayer is of interest to so many, such explanations are useful and necessary. The discussion of finding the "true self," an important concept in Merton, proceeds with clarity. The book concludes with two fine illustrations of awareness — that of "Jesus the Christ" and of the church, "the community of those who are aware." A beautiful conclusion is this last theme, "A Wider Understanding of the Church," leads the author to affirm that the goal of all true spirituality is to achieve an awareness of our oneness with God and with all God's creation.

Shannon has introduced us to this theme of awareness with a beautiful Sufi story which demonstrates subtly how the spirituality of devotion differs from a spirituality of contemplation. In the course of his book, he demonstrates the value of the second approach. He draws on Merton who answers the question, "How can we best help people to attain union with God?" by saying, "We must tell them that they are already united with God. We must love God as our other self, that is our truer and deeper self."

I am grateful for the careful study of the ways of awareness. I commend this book to every searcher for a genuine prayer life, and I know it will assist those who seek a way to the peace and wholeness our world so greatly needs. I intend to keep this book on my shelf as a Shannon classic — maybe his best.