

Mining Mystical Riches

Review of

An Introduction to Christian Mysticism: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition 3

By Thomas Merton

Edited with an Introduction by Patrick F. O'Connell

Preface by Lawrence S. Cunningham

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Reviewed by **Keith J. Egan**

Thomas Merton, as in so other many endeavors, was a pioneer when he taught the newly ordained priest monks at Gethsemani Abbey a course entitled “An Introduction to Christian Mysticism.” This course consisted of twenty-two lectures given during March, April and May of 1961, with extra classes added “by popular demand” – seemingly into September. Merton intended these lectures on mysticism to prepare recently ordained monks to become well-informed spiritual directors as well as spiritually wise superiors. Vatican II was more than a year away, and the Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church with its universal call to holiness was not enacted until November of 1964. More to the point, the teaching of mysticism had not yet emerged from neo-scholastic manuals like Adolphe Tanqueray’s *The Spiritual Life: A Treatise on Ascetical and Mystical Theology* (2nd ed. 1932), a book that was used in numerous novitiates and seminaries throughout North America. One recalls with difficulty the days when there was little interest in mysticism and contemplation. That was not so for Merton, whose *The Seven Storey Mountain* already revealed a keen interest in the encounter with the hidden God. His *Seeds of Contemplation* (1949), in a sense, “democratized” contemplation and mysticism for a public who presumed that mysticism and contemplation were the exotic experience of the precious few. Note that *New Seeds of Contemplation* appeared in the year after this 1961 course on mysticism.

Thomas Merton possessed an uncommonly curious mind that was relentless in getting to the heart of what interested him. Moreover, his facility in French made it possible for him to mine the riches of works not yet accessible to English speakers. He relied heavily on articles from the *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, of which only four of the eventual seventeen tomes had been published at the time of this course on mysticism, and he scoured other recently published French sources such as the two available volumes of the new *Histoire de Spiritualité*. The students in this course were the beneficiaries of Merton’s intense interest in mysticism that was shaped by first-rate scholarship imported from Europe. These Trappist priests were, in fact, nearly a decade ahead of the introduction of courses on spirituality and mysticism that began to appear in the curricula of North American colleges and universities during the late sixties and early seventies. How interesting it would be to hear from the priests in this course who are still living to what degree this course and others that Merton taught prepared them for the onslaught of spirituality that emerged in the years following Vatican II. Did this intense exposure to the mystical tradition prepare them to be more adept as spiritual directors and, we may ask, did some

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of them become wiser superiors? More importantly, were these young priests better prepared to become full and eager participants in the contemplative life that Merton had discovered had been hidden since the seventeenth century in the shadows even of religious life? If they were not, it was not for any lack of energetic commitment by Father Louis, who saw the pursuit of the contemplative life as a Christian birthright. Their teacher was convinced that the mystical life is “absolutely *vital to our vocation*” and that “[we] must become *fully impregnated in our mystical tradition*” (35).

These conferences show Merton to be a master teacher who prepared meticulously for the courses that he taught. He did not talk down to his students. Rather he challenged them to think deeply about issues raised by his lectures, and he sent them to study selections from primary sources. Moreover, Merton exposed his students to major issues and themes that arise in a serious inquiry into the nature of profound human experiences of the divine. Thus Merton was much taken with the challenge to integrate mysticism and theology, with the Trinitarian and Incarnational reality of mystical experience, the normalcy of mystical experience, the possibility of acquired contemplation, the sacramental (baptismal) foundation of the mystical, scriptural and patristic roots of mysticism. Their teacher alerted these monks to the mostly forgotten tradition of the spiritual senses, the neglected theme in Western Christianity of divinization, to the relationship of the apophatic to the cataphatic character of mysticism, the dark night experience, the interpretation of *apatheia* and to the recovery of the wisdom of figures like Evagrius of Pontus and Gregory of Nyssa.

His listeners can hardly have missed the importance of a theme that came naturally to Merton’s artistic nature, what he called *theoria physike* (natural contemplation), that is, the human capacity to see the divine in all that God has created. Merton anticipated for the English-speaking world the present interest in the sacredness of the cosmos, and he argued for a deep reverence for creation as a revelation of God’s presence. Merton passionately wanted his student monks to discover the reflection of the divine in authentic artistic expression. Thomas Merton’s enthusiasm for *theoria physike* was more than an artistic conceit; rather, it was a deeply held theological conviction, one that still seeks a fuller and more nuanced reception in contemporary theology and spirituality. *Theoria physike* is the foundation for what I would call the development of a contemplative disposition. This disposition readies one for the kind of prayer that God may turn into a loving inflow into the soul of God’s very self (cf. John of the Cross, *Dark Night*, 2.5.1). This loving attention to God’s presence in all things and in one’s neighbor precludes the devilish dualism that Merton saw as a “*constant temptation* all through Christian history” (50).

Merton struggled with what Teresa of Avila meant by (active) recollection which she saw as a fitting prelude to passive recollection and to the prayer of quiet. Merton quite rightly saw as mistaken the penchant of modern commentators on Teresa of Avila’s writings to draw and to emphasize endless distinctions about progress in prayer. As they had been for years, Teresa and John of the Cross remained for Merton standard referents for issues about mystical prayer. I am surprised, as I have written elsewhere, that Merton did not urge on his students the primacy of the poetry of John of the Cross. I would also argue that Merton would have done well to call John of the Cross an apophatic mystic only with certain reservation, that is, with a recognition that the apophatic is the other side of the cataphatic.

Merton’s lectures, as he left them, were far from ready for publication; these lectures/conferences were in the unfinished state that most lecture notes find themselves. They needed considerable attention before they could be published. In addition, much research has been done on important themes in mysticism since Merton offered his pioneer course in 1961. A diligent, devoted and long-suffering editor was needed before Merton’s work could be offered to the public. To the rescue came Patrick O’Connell,

a Merton scholar well known for his judicious and painstaking editing of Mertoniana. Readers will recall O'Connell's editions of two previous sets of Merton's conferences, *Cassian and the Fathers* (Cistercian Publications, 2005), volume one in the Monastic Wisdom Series, and *Pre-Benedictine Monasticism* (Cistercian Publications 2006), volume nine in this series. Volume 13 in this series is *An Introduction to Christian Mysticism*, edited so meticulously by O'Connell.

Besides providing corrections and the completion of ellipses in Merton's text, O'Connell has translated quotations and added helpful supplementary information. His detailed introduction is an excellent preparation for the study of Merton's text. Appendix A contains additions and alterations to the text made by Merton as he prepared to deliver his conferences, while Appendix B contains suggestions for further readings, from Merton and others, on figures mentioned in the text. The extensive index makes it possible to access quickly the large variety of issues which Father Louis addressed as he introduced the priest-monks of Gethsemani to Christianity's mystical tradition.

Fortunately for us, we have what Merton did not have at his disposal: the first four volumes of Bernard McGinn's *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1991, 1994, 1998, 2005). McGinn's prodigious undertaking is an excellent companion for the reader of Thomas Merton's *An Introduction to Christian Mysticism*.