

Models for Global Pilgrimage

Review of

Mystics, Sages, and Saints: Archetypes of Spiritual Excellence

By Kenneth Rose (12 lectures on 4 CDs)

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Reviewed by **David J. Belcastro**

“Yogis and Christian contemplatives both exist,
and there is every reason why they should compare notes.”

Thomas Merton

Preface to *In Search of a Yogi*

by Dom Denys Rutledge

Dr. Kenneth Rose, Senior Research Fellow at the Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, California, and emeritus professor of philosophy and religion at Christopher Newport University in Virginia, teaches and publishes in the areas of comparative religion, comparative mysticism, religious pluralism and the philosophy of meditation. Merton readers will find this set of lectures by Dr. Rose of interest for two reasons. He suggests we listen to the lectures as a kind of *audible lectio*. In another place he says they can be considered as *satsang*, a practice whereby one sits with an enlightened person listening to talks regarding spiritual formation that raise questions for conversation. Both descriptions indicate that there are two dimensions to the lectures. On the one hand, they provide *academic information* that situates Merton in a community of contemplatives that spans not only the globe but also history and thereby informs our understanding and appreciation for his life and work in the twentieth century at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky. On the other hand, these lectures remind us as well that Merton and other Roman Catholics initiated a significant movement that opened the contemplative way of life to laypersons, thereby providing a more holistic approach to spiritual formation. In other words, these lectures are about *spiritual formation*. Dr. Rose, like Merton, offers us an opportunity to benefit from the “compared notes” of mystics, sages and saints as we strive in our days for purity of heart and mind in our pilgrimages to union with God.

The first lecture clarifies the focus of the series with definitions of mystic, sage and saint, the use of archetype as a way of understanding the eleven lives to be examined, and a formula for those interested in the disciplines, insights and life offered by men and women who reveal what

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it means to be human and to live at a deep level of experience and awareness grounded in the Sacred. The second lecture focuses on Thomas Merton. The placement of Merton in the series is significant. Here Rose acknowledges Merton's influence that eventually led to his own academic and personal interest in mysticism and religious pluralism. He describes Merton as a *globalizing mystic* who constructed inter-religious bridges for future generations to cross. This lecture serves as a preface to what is to follow.

The next ten lectures bring together men and women from various philosophical and religious traditions. The group is subdivided into East and West. Plotinus is presented as the forerunner of the Western mystics, sages and saints: Dionysius the Areopagite, Meister Eckhart, Abhishiktananda (Henri Le Saux) and Marguerite Porete. Buddha is likewise presented as the forerunner to the Eastern mystics, sages and saints: Swami Vivekananda, Neem Karoli Baba, Anandamayi Ma and Ramana Maharshi. This division of East and West, however, is difficult to maintain, as in the case of Henri Le Saux, also known as Abhishiktananda. As the two names indicate, he integrated within himself East and West. This French Benedictine monk became a swami who lived at the intersection of Christianity and Hinduism. While this is true to a lesser extent for the others, he has clearly gone further and deeper into interfaith exploration.

Listening to the lectures, the opposites of East and West begin to converge, revealing a complex and pluralistic spirituality. This is not relativism. Consider seeing the talks as a Cubist composition whereby various perspectives are honored and maintained while viewed in relation to one another. Dr. Rose's pluralistic approach reveals common ground of these eleven mystics, sages and saints. Throughout the lectures, three aspects of the contemplative life recur and are considered from different life-experiences: entering silence, achieving non-dual awareness and proceeding along the path of the *via negativa*. Merton readers will recognize all three as essential to his approach to spiritual formation. Consequently, these lectures will provide valuable background for understanding and appreciating Merton's life and work. It should be noted that a few of the persons considered in these lectures, Merton included, have been considered by some as heretics, most notably Marguerite Porete, who was burned at the stake along with her book by the Inquisition in 1310. So a concluding word on the importance of heretics. They reopen old ways that have been forgotten and thereby restore the health and well-being of religious traditions and communities.