

## Reviews

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MERTON, Thomas, *The Inner Experience—Notes on Contemplation*. Edited [and introduced] by William H. Shannon (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003), pp. xvi + 176. ISBN 0-06-053928-3 (hardcover). \$22.95.

As readers of *The Merton Annual* undoubtedly know, *The Inner Experience—Notes on Contemplation* is the recent publication in book form of Thomas Merton's last work: a major revision and expansion of *What is Contemplation?*, originally released in 1948, that was still in progress at the time of his death in 1968. Many Merton aficionados will in fact already have purchased and read *The Inner Experience* by the time this review is published. So what is there left to say now, in these pages?

Merton himself, as a practitioner of contemplation, would probably have recommended silence. For mystics, fewer words and more quiet are always the preferred option. Since that is not practicable here, however, allow me to offer a few personal reflections on *The Inner Experience* that may help put this work into context.

Context is particularly important with this book because it quite definitely is not a unified and complete literary product. For writers, this gives *The Inner Experience* a peculiar charm: editor William Shannon's excellent endnotes and the use of three different fonts—for the 1948 original, the 1959 additions, and the 1968 revisions—allow us to follow Merton's creative process at work over the course of twenty years. But if that were all there is to this book, it would perhaps be only of limited interest, a scholarly curiosity to be filleted by earnest graduate students and a few fellow authors.

I would like to see *The Inner Experience* rescued from that fate and placed in a broader context, however. What The Merton Trust, HarperSanFrancisco and William Shannon have given us here is in fact a unique kind of almost personal spiritual journal: not a sequential, chronological record of Merton's inner development, but a continual overlaying of one evolutionary stage upon the other. Instead of looking at the staircase of his soul's journey from the side, step-by-step, as it were, we see it top-down, with the steps

telescoped into and sometimes on top of one another. Those strata of Merton's growth, revealed through Shannon's three fonts, show us how Merton kept refining his answer to the central question of his life, the question he posed at the very beginning of his literary career: just what is contemplation?

In some ways, there is no one set answer to that question, which undoubtedly is why Merton did not want to see *The Inner Experience* published. But I think the fact that he loaned the manuscript of this work-in-progress to a convent of Carmelite nuns just before his death gives a clue on how to approach these unfinished pages, now that they have been released as a book. Those nuns were fellow pilgrims on the long journey into the inner desert, after all, and it is surely significant that Merton chose them as confidants in this matter. Who would better understand the indeterminate nature of these *Notes on Contemplation*—the manuscript's subtitle—than other practitioners of silent prayer?

Perhaps, then, *The Inner Experience* is best read as a fireside monologue by a brother hermit whose path we have crossed on our own sojourn into the Sahara of the soul. Among the sand dunes and scorpions, we rejoice in each other's company for one night and listen to a Bedouin's musings on where to find Living Water, burning bushes and manna. He gives us no maps or GPS-coordinates, of course, but the wisdom of his own experiences, some general directions, and much needed encouragement. Even he, after all these years, is still seeking God's face in the desert—holy man, crazy man, seeking, always seeking. *What is contemplation? What is it?*

Just how many of us pilgrims there are who ask this question alongside Merton is a subject he takes up toward the end of *The Inner Experience* in a section particularly meaningful to me. Elsewhere in the book, earlier in his own development, he suggests that contemplation should only be attempted by an especially gifted elite living in cloistered communities; but on page 137, he suggests the formation of a "contemplative Third Order, connected with the Cistercians or the Carthusians" that "could provide [its] members with books, conferences, directions and perhaps a quiet place in the country where they could go for a few days of meditation and prayer."

This is, of course, precisely the kind of ministry practiced by Fr. Thomas Keating's Contemplative Outreach, Ltd., since the 1970's, joined in more recent years by Fr. Richard Rohr's Center

for Action and Contemplation. Thanks to the work of these men and their associates, the kind of prayer Thomas Merton wrote of so eloquently has now been made accessible even to the unlikeliest subjects. That, in turn, has created a much broader readership for Merton's books than, for example, the little convent of nuns to whom he passed the manuscript of *The Inner Experience* in 1968. Everywhere, the seeds of contemplation are finding fertile soil; everywhere, great trees of silent prayer are growing, giving rest to all kinds of different birds—even jailbirds like me!

What is contemplation? Perhaps it is not just an *inner* experience, but a shared experience by contemplatives across the world, across the ages. Perhaps contemplation will eventually become the blood that feeds the body of Christ everywhere—not inner but outer, not invisible but visible, not incorporeal but incarnate. Perhaps that would have been the next step on Merton's journey—the one that, sadly, he was not able to take.

Jens Söring

MERTON, Thomas, *Seeking Paradise: The Spirit of the Shakers*. Edited and introduced by Paul M. Pearson (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), pp. 125. ISBN 1-57075-501-9 (hardcover). \$24.00.

The opening words, "This book is a celebration of Merton's love of the Shakers," begin the preface by Paul M. Pearson (9). This work collects together in one volume several disparate pieces of Merton's thought: excerpts from his article on the Shaker Village at Pleasant Hill (1964); the introduction Merton wrote for Edward Deming Andrews's book *Religion in Wood: A Book of Shaker Furniture* (1964); "Work and the Shakers: A Transcript of a Conference Given by Thomas Merton at the Abbey of Gethsemani on July 22, 1964"; and "Selected Correspondence" from Merton to the Shaker scholar Edward Deming Andrews, Ralph McCallister – Executive Director of the Pleasant Hill project of restoration, and Mary Childs Black, convener for a discussion on the influence of religion on American folk art. In addition to these chapters, there is one entitled, "Pleasant Hill: A Shaker Village in Kentucky," which draws on material from Edward Deming Andrews's books, *Shaker Furniture* and *The People Called Shakers*.

One of the delights of the book is its many photographs of Shaker houses and furniture, most of which were taken by Merton himself. The clear simple lines of architecture and craftsmanship