

Introductions West and East

Review of

On Christian Contemplation

By Thomas Merton, edited by Paul M. Pearson
and *On Eastern Meditation*

By Thomas Merton, edited by Bonnie Thurston
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Reviewed by **Meghan J. Robinson**

Both Paul M. Pearson and Bonnie Thurston have done a remarkable job of extracting some of Merton's finest reflections on the contemplative life. These two small volumes of excerpts are packed full of insights and truths, which are the fruits of a life of prayer. Someone searching for techniques for meditation will not find them in either, but one open to witnessing the rich experience of Merton's relationship with God will be drawn in by the selections – and if read in a meditative way – will be lead into prayer.

While the editors have chosen Merton's words of wisdom from different times of his life, many of them come from his later years. In fact, included are some of Merton's final words, just weeks before his death. Whether one is a Merton scholar or a first-time reader of Merton, one can appreciate that these are reflections of a person with a mature spiritual life, a man who had come to know the hidden depths of the Unknowable One, and because of this, embraced the world and fell in love with the life which surrounded him.

On Christian Contemplation

Pearson begins with a section entitled “Merton's Call to Contemplation” and with Merton's timeless advice that “contemplation must be possible if man is to remain human. If contemplation is no longer possible, then man's life has lost the spiritual orientation upon which everything else – order, peace, happiness, sanity – must depend” (5). This charge weaves together the ultimate value of contemplation and the fruits birthed from this intimate encounter with God. What a powerful way to begin, as beneath all the layers of illusion, the deepest part of us longs to be known – the place where our identity rests. From this call, Pearson goes on to arrange Merton's reflections, poems, and social commentary in a way that allows us to encounter Merton's experience of contemplation – and from it how Merton understands prayer, suffering, identity, forgiveness, grace, responsibility and love.

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Paraphrasing Merton, Pearson eloquently describes the essence of contemplation: “In finding God through contemplation we discover our true self and that God is at the deepest core of our being. . . . [T]he God we have discovered is love. . . . In love, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, each of us is transformed so that we become another Christ So our life of union with God through contemplation demands a life of more perfect and more loving actions” (xi-xii).

Through this beautiful description, we can gain some insight as to how Pearson structured the volume. The writings are arranged under subheadings such as “A Theology of Prayer,” “Discovering the True Self,” “Silence,” “Difficulties and Distractions” and “Contemplation and Action.” Journeying through the volume, we are reminded that suffering can hold us captive if we stay bound in our illusions, or we can begin to be liberated from suffering, if we are open enough to let God in. One is brought to a place by Merton’s writings which reminds one that through contemplation “Christ . . . becomes so interiorized in me that He and I are one and my prayer is therefore His prayer” (20). As we come to know that we are deeply loved by God, we come to know our true selves, our identity in God. From this, we are continually called to respond to Christ. Pearson appropriately provides a section on silence where Merton’s words refresh the soul and remind us that “being” is one of the most beautiful ways to glorify God.

What was most helpful in this volume is that Pearson masterfully creates a rhythm by alternating Merton’s reflections on a particular “tool of contemplation” with a poem that embodies that particular tool. This innate rhythm invites the reader into prayer. Even the pages following each poem that are blank contribute to drawing us into silence and encouraging us to be, to breathe.

On Eastern Meditation

Thurston, while admitting that extracting quotations from their proper context can conceal or even misrepresent what is being conveyed, does an outstanding job selecting an array of excerpts that help us to discover the breadth and depth of Merton’s exploration and embrace of Eastern religions. For those who are beginning their journey into understanding religions of the East, Thurston has compiled a valuable glossary of terms and has also included some terminology from the Christian tradition, as well.

She prefaces the selections by reminding readers that Merton did not come to know Buddhism, Hinduism or Taoism by rejecting his Catholic roots, but instead by his deep desire to embrace Reality. Through this he was able to affirm many similarities between Christianity and the East, going beyond doctrinal differences and entering into the religious experience. On a broad level, through her chosen excerpts, Thurston portrays the insights from Western spiritual classics that resonate with what Merton found in the East. Merton scholar William H. Shannon identifies these as: “(1) the priority of experience over speculation; (2) the inadequacy of words to articulate religious experience; (3) the fundamental oneness of all reality; (4) the realization that the goal of all spiritual discipline is transformation of consciousness; and (5) ‘purity of heart’. . . liberation from attachment” (xiv).

Throughout we also bear witness to the effects of that genuine dialogue – which Merton has had in writing and receiving numerous letters to and from gurus of Eastern religions – has had upon him. It becomes clear how imperative dialogue is in order for us to embrace non-violence, or *ahimsa*.

Thurston organizes the selections with a short section on landscape and two larger headings on “Teaching (*Dharma*)” and “Practice/Skillful Means.” Beginning with the selections on landscape

sets the tone, some of which are from the *Asian Journal* where readers can come to grasp how the exterior Asian geography led Merton into the interior life and realization of the oneness of all. Under the “Teaching” category, Thurston arranges subsections on “*Dharma*,” “teachers/*guru*,” “self,” “*Zen*,” “emptiness/*sunyata*,” and “enlightenment/*satori*.” Some of the themes that emerge include illusion of self/Reality, suffering, self-emptying, detachment, inner unity, awareness and liberation. When reflecting upon the section “Practice/Skillful Means,” Thurston develops the following categories: “skillful means,” “contemplative life,” “solitude,” “fasting,” “possessions,” “prayers/praying,” “meditation,” “non-violence/*ahimsa*” and “compassion.” A seasoned reader of Merton is fully aware that he has been reflecting upon and growing into living these themes all along; however what comes forth through these selections of quotations is a man aware that these are the predominant themes in the world religions and that as he delves deeper into understanding Eastern religions, his commitment to the aforementioned categories is enlivened and strengthened, and his appreciation of them is all the more rich.

These passages Thurston has chosen are excerpted from longer reflections, poems, songs and short sentences that could be thought of as Zen koans. The shorter passages, most especially, can lead one into prayer. Through many of Merton’s reflections, we can find what Merton has been saying all along, but in a way that represents even more the vastness and grandeur of God, so intimately known to him. For Merton – the master of words – continues to find ways to express the Inexpressible One.

Conclusion

The strength of these little volumes is that the editors chose excerpts that make the point clearly with not too much repetition. I believe they are the perfect size to keep one from overanalyzing what it means to be a contemplative and lead one to prayer instead. These books are accessible for a first-time reader of Merton, and can also serve those steeped in spirituality of Thomas Merton as well, reminding them of some of his finest reflections on the interior life. Those who are new to Merton and who may not immediately desire to plumb the depths of Merton’s journals, letters and books will be able to get a taste of Merton, which may lead them to take the initiative to discover more of Merton’s works.

With their small size (4.2" x 6.2"), they are the perfect books to pack on a trip or pull out of your bag at the park, the dentist’s office, or in the middle of a hectic day. After all, it is Merton that encourages us to dismantle the notion that reflection and prayer are only one part of a highly compartmentalized life.