

Meeting Merton among the Mystics

Review of
Modern Mystics: An Introduction
 by Bernard McGinn
 New York: Crossroad, 2023
 viii + 340 pages / \$49.95 cloth

Reviewed by **Daniel P. Horan, OFM**

It is difficult, if not impossible, to overstate the significance of Bernard McGinn's work as a scholar and historian of Christian mysticism. The Naomi Shenstone Donnelley Professor Emeritus at the University of Chicago Divinity School, McGinn's prolific writing, influential scholarship and mentorship of generations of graduate students have shaped the field of the academic study of spirituality. Among the most impressive of his scholarly contributions has been the publication of his magisterial seven-volume (in nine books, because volume six is published in three parts) *The Presence of God*, a comprehensive history of Christian mysticism. The project took thirty years to complete – the seventh and final volume was published in 2021 – and weighs in at more than 5,000 pages in total. It is a chronological study of the origins, development and varieties of Christian spirituality and mystical experience. But the project ends in the seventeenth century with a study of the emergence of quietism in Catholic Spain, Italy and France, showcasing the beginning of what McGinn argues is the decline of mysticism in the Catholic Church for at least two centuries.

Those of us who are interested in contemporary Christian spirituality, and especially the twentieth-century revival of what we might call quotidian mysticism, as reflected in the work of theologians like Jesuit Karl Rahner and the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, have long hoped that McGinn might apply his historical brilliance and vast knowledge of Christian mysticism to the present day. Delightfully, McGinn has gifted us with a substantive volume that does precisely this. His *Modern Mystics: An Introduction* collects a series of essays that McGinn began writing during the Covid-19 pandemic after he had completed *The Presence of God* series and found himself more or less still trapped at home with little access to physical libraries due to the pandemic restrictions. He explains in the preface: "I turned to thinking about writing something on materials I had mostly on hand, that is, the writings of some modern mystics, figures from the twentieth century who had made notable contributions to the tradition of Christian mysticism. I had been reading some of these people for many decades, as well as collecting their writings. Perhaps I could try to gather my thoughts about *some* of those who had attracted me" (vii). McGinn is careful to note that

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the essays in this book are not meant to be “full studies” of the figures he surveys, but instead “they testify to what I have found important in them” (vii). He also explains that he originally intended to write about as many as fifteen or twenty contemporary mystics (he includes a list of more than 40 such figures in his introduction), but in the end settled on ten significant mystics.

The ten chosen mystics featured are, in chronological order by birth, Charles de Foucauld (1858-1916), Thérèse of Lisieux (1873-1897), Elizabeth of the Trinity (1880-1906), Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955), Edith Stein (1891-1942), Dag Hammarskjöld (1905-1963), Simone Weil (1909-1943), Henri Le Saux (known as Swami Abhishiktananda) (1910-1973), Etty Hillesum (1914-1943) and, of course, Thomas Merton (1915-1968). Each of the chapters includes rich scholarly endnotes as well as a substantial bibliography that includes listings of primary source material in both the original languages of the mystics and available translations in English, and a helpful set of secondary sources and studies. McGinn follows a similar format for each figure he introduces, which typically includes opening with a survey of the mystic’s life and writings, one or more sections examining their distinctive thought or contributions, and some contextualization and assessment of the figure’s views and experience of mysticism. It is a testament to his skillful writing and ability to encapsulate so much of a person’s life in such a small space that the reader leaves each chapter with a meaningful sense of the mystic. Although there is much to say about every chapter in this excellent book, given the target audience of this journal, I want to focus my attention on McGinn’s chapter on Merton while commending the rest of the book to the readers.

But before turning to McGinn’s engagement with Merton, I would like to say a few things about the introduction of the book (1-31). The introductory chapter is a crash course on the meaning, history and context of mysticism, which accomplishes the impressive feat of reviewing the origins of the modern notion of mysticism (tracing the rather recent term back through its preceding analogs such as “contemplation”), summarizing the twentieth-century revival of interest in mysticism as a subject of study and inspiration and outlining what McGinn recognizes as some common themes in modern mysticism – all in about thirty pages! Of particular note is the way that McGinn himself refers back to his decades-long study of the nature of mysticism as a helpful hermeneutic in approaching contemporary mystics. He writes: “Naturally, there will be differences between the mystics of old and the modern mystics, but I believe that, however different some of the modern mystics may be from their forebears, they still can be viewed according to the general heuristic understanding of mysticism I set out in my series *The Presence of God*” (10). In naming working criteria for what constitutes mysticism, McGinn identifies six “aspects of mysticism.” These include: that mysticism is a part (not the whole) of concrete religious traditions; that mysticism is a process rather than a discrete moment or singular encounter; that mysticism involves some kind of consciousness of the encounter with God; that this consciousness is “direct or in some way *immediate*” (12); that mysticism involves the presence of God (that can also be articulated as “absence” in some experiences); and that mysticism according to McGinn requires mediation that is expressed and communicated. Accordingly, the life and work of Thomas Merton bears these markers in demonstrably clear ways, which leads McGinn to include him among his modern mystics.

The final chapter, “Thomas Merton (1915-1968) and the Renewal of Contemplation: A Reflection” (287-326), resembles the other chapters in many ways, both in structure and in content. McGinn opens with an anecdote about a time he was lecturing at the Abbey of Gethsemani and assisted a visitor seeking to visit Merton’s grave, an episode McGinn found ironic in that he believed

Merton would not like to be the object of just “holy person” celebrity. McGinn also defends Merton against his critics, especially those who seek to dismiss Merton because of his prolific writing and the inevitable unevenness of some of his work. “In spite of some ephemera, it is hard to deny that as a spiritual writer, social critic, and man of letters, Thomas Merton not only had real genius, but also has had an immense effect on many readers” (298). McGinn explains that, while there is so much to engage in Merton’s life and legacy, his interest in this chapter is to make the case that Merton is legitimately a modern mystic. And in this regard, McGinn succeeds.

Despite his understandable acknowledgement that he has not “totally read” all of Merton’s corpus, McGinn nevertheless engages an impressive range of both Merton’s well-known and lesser-known texts, letters, journals and conferences. However, as is to be expected from someone outside Merton Studies as such, there are some minor errors in dates and details here and there (e.g., the mention that the “Fourth and Walnut” epiphany occurred in 1964, when it was actually 1958, etc.). McGinn generally follows the well-established demarcation of Merton’s life and writings, distinguishing the so-called early years, focused on the interior life of contemplation, and the “turn to the world” of his later years, pointing out, as Merton scholars like William Shannon and others have previously done, that Merton became something of a “lightning rod for criticism because of his prophetic stance against racism, nuclear war, and other social evils” (301) during the last decade of his life. He also acknowledges the *ad intra* critique of Merton in some Catholic circles for his unabashed ecumenism and commitment to interreligious dialogue.

Unlike some of the previous chapters that segregate the respective mystic’s biography to an early chapter subsection, the Merton chapter weaves his biography into the analysis of his writings and mystical experiences. He covers Merton’s most famous mystical experiences, explores many of the sources and influences on his thinking about contemplation and mysticism, and summarizes several recurring themes in Merton’s oeuvre under the headings “Silence and Solitude: The Desert” (312-13), “Mystical Contemplation” (313-18) and “Concomitants of Contemplation” (318-21). The chapter ends with a brief conclusion in which McGinn acknowledges the complexity and even paradox of Merton’s multivalent identity and interests: “Merton was not one man but many – perhaps not all of them in harmony” (321). And while he doesn’t attempt to resolve or simplify this point, he believes Merton was both a genius and a mystic worthy of continued engagement.