

Ecotheology Engages the Mystics

Review of

The Role of Nature Mysticism in Building Ecological Theology and Ethics

by Rachel M. Knight-Messenger

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Reviewed by **Kathleen Deignan, CND**

It is heartening to see emerging theologians continue the challenging work that their senior colleagues pioneered. We all stand on each other's shoulders, inherit each other's investigations, and try to go deeper or further in the task of meaning-making than our predecessors. Those of us attempting to add to the development of understanding the divine-human experience are particularly challenged, given the elusive and shape-shifting horizon of Mystery we face in our efforts, the poverty of language to articulate what we can only know "darkly." Yet we try. And sometimes those efforts are activated by more than the fascination with tremendous Mystery, but by an existential urgency to signal a survival impulse to perceive more rightly the reality in which we abide.

At this moment of human evolution and planetary history, anyone attempting to consider a mystical/ethical interface in response to the natural world must know this. Such a scholar takes up this task at this time as a sacred work to awaken human consciousness to the perils that are now upon us in this era of ecological derangement and to offer pathways to recovery. Therefore, we welcome a new study of *The Role of Nature Mysticism in Building Ecological Theology and Ethics* by Canadian scholar Rachel M. Knight-Messenger, with its proposal to return to the source of theological concern, namely the actual experience of the divine-human encounter in the incarnate realm. More explicitly, Knight-Messenger's presentation rightly identifies mystical literature and testimony as a necessary source – indeed, as a primary source – for the rectification and revitalization of the theological enterprise, if it is to serve us now in a critical moment of evolutionary history.

We have seen many "turns" in theology in the last centuries, each responding to some crisis for which the human community seeks clarity and guidance. We have witnessed theological developments focused on the crises of human violence and war, systems of political and economic oppression, racism, capitalism, consumerism, sexism, slavery, and lately, artificial intelligence. We have seen the radical revival of Catholic theology, especially in the "turn to the subject" articulated so cogently by giants like Karl Rahner. His twentieth-century anthropological turn insists that any

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theological endeavor start with the human experience of divinity. Now we see a new turn – more radical and urgent still – the turn to “ecology” embedded in the turn to an unfolding “cosmology,” as the fundamental context for comprehending the Christian intuition of divinity’s self-manifestation in an ongoing process of incarnational cosmo-genesis.

With gratitude to the author, I see her work as standing in and contributing to this lineage of contemporary theological reflection on the cosmology of the incarnation and the ecological immanence of that divine revelatory mystery where the human originally and sensately encounters the Divine Creator. I also salute her for insisting that the testimonies of nature mystics are a primary source for a robust and relevant revival of the contemporary theology of the natural world and a consequent ethic of repair, reverence and care.

Toward this task, *The Role of Nature Mysticism in Building Ecological Theology and Ethics* unfolds in several chapters that make the author’s case for such an urgent theological season, since the work to which it summons us will be of long duration. Knight-Messenger’s Introduction (3-11) is a clear statement of her insight and intention: the environmental crisis resulting from human abuse of Earth’s living systems is a manifestation of a “spiritual malaise” that summons Christian communities to respond to this spiritual and ethical crisis. More originally, Knight-Messenger calls for the integration of mystical testimony and its elaboration to activate and inspire a more transformative ecological spirituality and ethics, noting how historically, mystical movements have inspired moral renewals.

Knight builds her case by presenting the “Nature Mysticism” of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Thomas Merton as sources for theological reflection and ethical information. What gives her argument heft, however, is her use of the corpus of contemporary writings by geologist, deep cosmologist and religious historian Thomas Berry, CP that provides the necessary scientific cosmology as architecture to uphold her proposal. Building on earlier Christian theologians who likewise employed the explicit “cosmo-genesis” framework introduced by Thomas Berry, she establishes the ground and identifies the methodology for her subsequent elevation of mystical texts by Teilhard and Merton. Since most readers of *The Merton Seasonal* are particularly interested in how Merton features as a critical figure in building an ecological spirituality and ethics, I will spend the remainder of this review on the Merton chapter (73-114) and how the author works with his legacy to make her case.

Selectively reviewing the work of several Merton scholars who share her intuitions and eco-theological orientations, the author devotes a significant portion of the Merton chapter to his general biography and the formative ways nature appears in his spiritual awareness. Therefore, if Knight-Messenger were simply intending to present Merton as a model of a “nature mystic” she succeeded. If she meant to argue for Merton’s candidacy for “Patron of the Environment,” she clearly provided the rudiments of a case. By laying out a generous sketch of his contemplative development as a monk of Gethsemani – his understanding and teaching of the practice of contemplation and his considerations of the mystical life – she established him as a *bona fide* ecological “saint” or mentor.

As one who has intensively investigated those same three religious giants and mystical luminaries, I agree that they have indeed left us the very sources and reports to make Knight-Messenger’s case. Her instincts and creative weaving of engagements with Teilhard, Merton and Berry are on the mark. Moreover, she is to be encouraged in her call for the acknowledgment and integration of first-order testimonies acknowledged as “sources” of ecological mysticism that

would bring new vitality to the work of what the author calls “building ecological theology and ethics.” Kudos again for her development of a multi-faced, critical methodology to undertake her challenging enterprise.

Readers, teachers, religious and ecological thinkers and nascent mystics will have in hand a trove of academic resources to follow Knight-Messenger in her theological investigations. But if the promise of this study was to bring forth and elucidate those “primary sources” and mystical reports from the noted subjects, using Tucker and Grim’s method of retrieval, re-evaluation, and reevaluation, this reader did not see evidence or display of that process or product, which simply means there is more to do. That noted, the author’s instinct to retrieve those “scriptures” is inspired, and she has gone to the right sources to find them. Indeed, such testaments giving evidence of and primacy to the human experience of divine encounter in the incarnate realm of cosmic and terrestrial “nature” are the very basis for a mystical and moral revival for Christians of this era, broadcasting authoritative or revelatory evidence of divinity’s cosmological immanence.

I salute my theological colleague Rachel Knight-Messenger for this significant contribution to the work of restoring to the Christian soul a capacity for mystical intimacy with what Thomas Berry calls “incendent” divinity. Her – our – unfinished work is a challenge to all of us to discover what she points to in this book: the “Great Work” of recovering our paradise mind and cultivating the capacity to abide in the “Divine Milieu.”