

Attuned to the Mystical Merton

Review of

Turning to the Mystics: Thomas Merton

By James Finley

Foreword by Kirsten Oates

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Reviewed by **Judith Valente**

Building on his popular “Turning to the Mystics” podcasts, psychotherapist and retreat guide James Finley of the Center for Action and Contemplation is now turning content from those podcasts into slender, highly readable books. It’s no surprise that the first spiritual figure that Finley profiles is Thomas Merton. Finley himself was a monk at the Abbey of Gethsemani for six years and is among the dwindling number of people alive who knew Merton personally. His personal remembrances of Merton add texture to the content in this book.

This is not a brief biography of Merton’s life, though the book contains some significant biographical information. Mainly, the text reflects on Merton’s writings on contemplation and how each of us can become an everyday contemplative. Finley is especially adept at underscoring the transformative changes that can take place in the heart and mind as we progress on the path of contemplation.

The word “mystic” is one that often defies description or definition. We seem to know one, though, when we encounter one. Finley does his readers a service by detailing the characteristics of a mystic early on in the book. A mystic, he says, is “a person who has come to a habituated state we can call Christ Consciousness, or God Consciousness. They bear witness to the Godly nature” (xv) within us, our intimacy with a loving God, and, by extension, our intimacy with all others.

The mystic, he adds, wants to offer guidance to others seeking this intimacy with God “because they know from their own experience how very bewildering this can be at first” (xv). He references throughout the book such great teachers as St. John of the Cross, Meister Eckhart and Teresa of Avila, but also the late Benedictine sister and spirituality writer Macrina Wiederkehr, the social activist Catherine de Hueck Doherty, with whom Merton worked as a young man at Friendship House in Harlem, Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, and Jewish scholar Abraham Joshua Heschel. Certainly Merton himself amply fits the description of a mystic as well.

Finley spends a significant amount of time on what is one of Merton’s most famous pieces of writing – the prayer that begins, “*My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going*” (11-12, 34-35).

Judith Valente, immediate past president of the International Thomas Merton Society (2023-2025), is a retired journalist and poet from New Jersey who currently lives in central Illinois. She is the author of the spiritual memoir *Atchison Blue* and three books of poetry, along with *How to Be: A Monk and a Journalist Reflect on Living & Dying, Purpose & Prayer, Forgiveness & Friendship*, coauthored with Br. Paul Quenon (2021). Her most recent book is *The Italian Soul: How to Savor the Full Joys of Life* (2025). She is currently serving as chair of the Program Committee for the ITMS Twentieth General Meeting to be held in June 2027.

It is the text of countless broadsides, posters and pocket-sized prayer cards. Still, Finley manages to extrude new insights from what is one of Merton's most familiar pieces of writing.

Merton himself has written so much about his inner life, and so many books have also taken on this task, that it is hard to discover something new in his body of work. And yet there are passages that remain ever fresh no matter how many times one has come across them. I appreciated those passages that Finley chose to underscore, which retained an air of novelty even if they were already somewhat familiar, such as this reflection from *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* quoted by Finley, in which Merton ruminates in prayer while looking at the altar in Gethsemani's chapel:

Beauty of the sunlight falling on a tall vase of red and white carnations and green leaves on the altar of the novitiate chapel. The light and dark, the darkness of the fresh crinkled flower, light, warm and red all around the darkness. The flower is the same color as blood, but it is in no sense whatever "red as blood," not at all. It is as red as a carnation, only that. This flower, this light, this moment, this silence = Dominus est. God is eternity. He passes. He remains. We pass in and out. He passes. We remain. We are nothing. We are everything. He is in us. He has gone from us. We are here in Him. He is gone from us. He is not here. We are here in Him. All these things can be said, but why say them?

The flower is itself. The light is itself. The silence is itself. I am myself. All perhaps illusion, but no matter. For illusion is the shadow of reality, and reality is the grace and gift that underlies these lights, these colors, this silence: Is that true? They are simply real. They themselves are his gift. (46-47)

Finley does a fine job of turning these thoughts of Merton into a kind of midrash to which we can return repeatedly and still find something new.

As fine as Finley's explications are, it is the passages written by Merton himself that linger in the consciousness, and keep challenging us long after we've closed this book – passages such as this one from *The Seven Storey Mountain*, in which Merton writes:

We cannot arrive at the perfect possession of God in this life. That is why we are traveling and in darkness. But we already possess Him by grace; and, therefore, in that sense, we have arrived in our dwelling in the light. But, oh, how far I have to go to find You in whom I have already arrived.

For now, oh, my God, it is to you alone that I can talk because nobody else will understand. I cannot bring any other person on this earth into this cloud where I dwell in your light, that is your darkness where I am lost and abashed. I cannot explain to any other person the anguish, which is your joy, nor the loss, which is the possession of You, nor the distance from all things, which is the arrival in You. (64-65)

Such passages of Merton quoted in the book will give any appreciator of Merton's thought and writing ample material for reflection and contemplation for a long time to come. One can return to such passages repeatedly and find new insights. That is perhaps the greatest gift of this slender volume.