

MCGINN, Bernard, *Modern Mystics: An Introduction* (New York: Crossroad, 2023), pp. viii, 340. ISBN 978-0-8245-9525-8 (cloth) \$49.95.

Bernard McGinn's *Modern Mystics*, written during the pandemic from sources readily available on hand, is a kind of coda to his magisterial history of Western Mysticism from its origins through the seventeenth century, *The Presence of God*.¹ The author tells us that his original plan to include 15-20 short essays on twentieth-century figures metamorphosed into ten somewhat longer treatments in order to do justice to the lives and writings of those selected, not necessarily as the greatest or even the most representative contributors to an ongoing tradition of (mainly Christian) mysticism, but those to whom the author has found himself particularly attracted, some of longstanding interest, others more recently encountered. The result is a fascinating series of profiles, arranged chronologically by date of birth, five men and five women, seven Catholics, one Protestant, one Jewish, one drawn strongly toward Catholicism but resisting entry into the church. Three of the women are canonized Carmelite religious (Thérèse of Lisieux, Elizabeth of the Trinity and Edith Stein), the other two, non-Catholic laywomen (Simone Weil and Etty Hillesum); four of the men were ordained Catholic religious (Charles de Foucauld, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Henri Le Saux [Swami Abhishiktananda] and Thomas Merton), the other the Protestant statesman Dag Hammarskjöld. The five oldest were born in the nineteenth century but all except Thérèse, who died in 1897 at the age of 24, lived into the twentieth; the others lived their entire lives in the past century, the last survivor dying in 1973. As even a passing acquaintance with these names makes clear, they represent a wide variety of approaches to life and faith, from Foucauld's solitary life as "universal brother" in the midst of Muslim North Africa to Abhishiktananda's conflicted efforts to remain faithful to his heritage of Catholic faith nourished by his Benedictine background while embracing a deep commitment to Hindu philosophy and spirituality as well; from Thérèse's and Elizabeth's immersion in the traditional cloistered life of Carmel to the much less conventional journey of their Carmelite successor Edith Stein from Jewish atheist and brilliant philosopher, to conversion and religious life as Sr. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, to death in a German concentration camp, the fate as well of the diarist Etty Hillesum, who found, or was found by, God in the midst of a thoroughly, even typically, secular lifestyle. The Second World War also marked profoundly the life and work of Simone Weil, who died in England, "in exile," at least

1. Bernard McGinn, *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*, 7 vols. in 9 (New York: Crossroad, 1991-2021).

in part because her weak constitution could not survive her adamant refusal to eat more than her compatriots in occupied France were allowed. Both Hammarskjöld and Teilhard were published only posthumously, the former because his inner life remained very much a private matter during his public service as Secretary General of the United Nations, the latter because his controversial writings on the spiritual significance of an evolving universe were considered too radical by his Jesuit superiors to appear in print.

McGinn provides a well-organized, insightful 25-35-page overview including significant events of the life and key elements of the thought of each of these figures, without adhering to too rigid a schema. He makes clear why he considers each of them someone worth getting to know. For example he provides an extensive commentary on the “Last Retreat” notes of Elizabeth of the Trinity, perhaps the least familiar of his ten subjects, which testify to the Christological and Trinitarian dimensions of her spirituality, and show her to be “a major witness to the mystical theme of deification” (108). He points out the connections Le Saux finds between the Hindu triad of sat (infinite being), chit (infinite awareness) and ananda (infinite bliss), and the Christian Trinity. He analyzes both the mystical dimension of Edith Stein’s major philosophical work *Finite and Eternal Being*, perhaps the most dense and demanding segment of the entire volume, and the more Christological and soteriological perspectives of her late work *The Science of the Cross*. He wrestles with Simone Weil’s radically apophatic theme of “decreation” and its similarities with the traditional (especially French) mystical concept of “annihilation.” His study of Hammarskjöld includes a brief excursus on modern Protestant mysticism, as well as a thorough analysis of the mystical elements he finds in the Swedish diplomat’s journal *Markings*. Likewise Foucauld’s imitation of the hidden life of Jesus, first at Nazareth and later in the Algerian desert, Thérèse’s identity as a mystic of “living confidence” (64) even in the face of a long dark night of the absence of God in the final period of her short life, Teilhard’s affirmation of the holiness of matter and the fullness of the cosmic Christ as the end point of creation, Etty Hillesum’s inspiring quest for true meaning in the face of the looming destruction of the Nazi “final solution,” her “total honesty and full surrender to God” that make her “the very definition of a nondenominational mystic” (273), make them attractive and challenging subjects for inclusion in this volume.

McGinn precedes the chapters on his ten modern mystics with a very helpful introductory overview, drawing on his unmatched familiarity with the Western Christian mystical tradition. He provides a historical survey of the eclipse and rebirth of mysticism in the eighteenth and nineteenth

centuries, the rise of the academic study of mystical theology and mystical experience in both religious and secular settings in twentieth century, a brief discussion of each of what he considers to be the six essential aspects of mysticism (as an element, not the whole, of religious life; marked by a process; involving an awareness that is immediate, yet paradoxically may still involve mediation; a sense of the divine presence, which may also – again paradoxically – include an experience of the divine absence; and the final element of what is traditionally called *contemplata tradere* – handing on the fruits of religious experience). He then goes on to identify some important themes of modern mysticism – the continued presence of paranormal elements, including visions and ecstasy, which he, like many mystics and commentators, considers not to be constitutive of all mystical experience; the importance of suffering and dereliction in the spiritual life; the complementarity of action and contemplation; a growing appreciation of a holistic inclusiveness, incorporating the physical and psychological as well as the interior life in spiritual experience; a renewed appreciation of the apophatic element, the encounter with a God beyond images, words, concepts, feelings; mystical experience as an important basis for interreligious contact; mysticism as a “marginal” practice, a sign of contradiction as well as of attraction to the religious status quo, the institutional ecclesial establishment, which nevertheless can have and has had a revolutionary effect on “the center.” Finally he provides a list of no less than 43 modern figures who could be considered mystics of one sort or another, from which his ten subjects have been selected.

As yet unmentioned is the presence of Thomas Merton in this book, the subject of the tenth and final profile. He is actually mentioned on the very first page, along with Teilhard de Chardin and Karl Rahner, as one of the contemporary witnesses to the importance of the mystical dimension of faith, writing to E. I. Watkin: “There is no question that it is the mystics who have kept Christianity going, if anyone has.”² He is also mentioned in this introductory chapter in connection with the themes of suffering/dereliction (20), action and contemplation (21) and crossing traditions (23) (and could have been cited in others, particularly the apophatic and marginality).

His appearance as the culminating figure in the volume (297-326) is simply due to chronology, being the last-born of the group, but it has a certain appropriateness. Though it is not mentioned in the text, many Merton readers will have noticed that he has connections with a number of his predecessors profiled in the text: the influence of Thérèse on his early

2. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 583.

post-conversion life is well-known (Elizabeth is also referenced in the early journals, but not discussed in any detail); he had tentatively planned to visit Abhishiktananda on his Asian trip, but because of the remoteness of the swami's Himalayan ashram this proved to be unfeasible. He wrote articles on both Teilhard³ and Simone Weil.⁴ As the only American (in fact the only English-language author), he may be the most readily accessible as well. McGinn's discussion of Merton's life and legacy is broad and solid, aimed more at those less familiar with his work, but valuable even for devoted Merton readers. As his chapter subtitle indicates, the author stresses Merton's role in "the Renewal of Contemplation" in the contemporary era. He begins by considering Merton's favored terminology, discussing the "intimate" relationship between "mysticism" and "contemplation" in Merton's work (301), goes on to reflect on "Merton's Moments" (301-304) – specifically, as one would expect, the Firewatch (1952), the Fourth and Walnut epiphany (1958, misdated 1964!) and the Polonnarua experience (1968) – then goes back to provide an overview of Merton's "Life and Letters" (304-309), with particular notice of his conversion and vocational decision, as well as the paradox of his desire for silence and solitude and his prolific writing and growing reputation, and eventual contacts with both influential and quite ordinary correspondents. McGinn uses Merton's own allocation of his writings into three periods in his June 1968 letter to Sr. J. M^s as a framework for considering the development of his work. He then touches on Merton's 1966 vocation crisis after falling in love with his nurse, finishing his survey of course with the Asian trip and unexpected sudden death in December 1968 – all well-known events, but treated here succinctly and fairly. The rest of the chapter is devoted to "Merton's Mystical Teaching" (309-21), beginning with an examination of key sources for his teaching on mysticism/contemplation (309-12), which include (somewhat surprisingly) *Bread in the Wilderness* (1953),⁶ his book on the Psalms; *Seeds/New Seeds of Contemplation* (1949/1961)⁷ of course; and the posthumously issued

3. "The Universe as Epiphany" and "Teilhard's Gamble," in Thomas Merton, *Love and Living*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone and Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979) 179-84, 185-91.

4. "Pacifism and Resistance in Simone Weil," in Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968) 76-84.

5. Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity: Letters on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction*, ed. Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1990) 384-85.

6. Thomas Merton, *Bread in the Wilderness* (New York: New Directions, 1953).

7. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1949); Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961).

works *The Climate of Monastic Prayer*⁸ (also published as *Contemplative Prayer*⁹) (1969), *The Inner Experience* (2002)¹⁰ and the extensive notes for his monastic conferences from 1961, *An Introduction to Christian Mysticism* (2008).¹¹ He then focuses on central themes: first “Silence and Solitude: The Desert” (312-13), with its paradoxical affirmation that true solitude is the ground for “profound solidarity” (313) with the wider human community and all creation. He then turns to “Mystical Contemplation” (313-18), where he stresses Merton’s focus on “the existential reality of contemplation” (314), the lived reality of spiritual experience rather than theoretical abstractions; he highlights the importance for Merton of *theoria physike*, the recognition of the presence of the Creator in creation, learned from his immersion in the Greek patristic tradition; the dark, apophatic dimension of mysticism, including the notion of “dread” found especially in *The Climate of Monastic Prayer*; and his treatment of the traditional theme of mystical union, which McGinn notes “is just one among a range of related and overlapping terms for quasi-experiential knowledge of God” (318). The last subsection on “Concomitants of Contemplation” (318-21) looks at three “spiritual values” intrinsic to the contemplative life: commitment to prayer; the emergence of the true self; and the recognition of the need for authentic community, for finding the presence of God in ordinary life, for a holistic consideration of the true self and for freedom from excessive concern for oneself in order to do the will of God. McGinn concludes his presentation, appropriately, with the passage from Merton’s message on the occasion of the dedication of his archives at Bellarmine College in 1963:¹² “Whatever I may have written, I think it can all be reduced in the end to this one truth: that God calls human persons to union with Himself and with one another in Christ, in the Church which is His Mystical Body” (321).

There are occasional minor errata that do not substantially detract from his presentation. The opening anecdote about his directing a visiting couple to Merton’s gravesite states that the grave eventually had to be moved outside the monastic enclosure because it attracted so much attention, which I’m not at all sure actually happened; he repeatedly refers to

8. Thomas Merton, *The Climate of Monastic Prayer* (Washington, DC: Cistercian Publications, 1969).

9. Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1969).

10. Thomas Merton, *The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation*, ed. William H. Shannon (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2003).

11. Thomas Merton, *An Introduction to Christian Mysticism: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition 3*, ed. Patrick F. O’Connell (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2008).

12. Thomas Merton, John Howard Griffin and Msgr. [Alfred] Horrigan, *The Thomas Merton Studies Center* (Santa Barbara, CA: Unicorn Press, 1971) 14.

Merton's abbey as Gethsemane rather than Gethsemani; he is sometimes rather vague about dates, as with the Louisville epiphany noted above; Merton's birthplace is given as Pardes, not Prades; his mysticism conferences were given to newly ordained monks, not novices. There are also a couple of rather surprising omissions in his treatment of Merton's mystical teaching: there is no mention of the sapiential or sophianic dimension of Merton's spirituality, as revealed especially in Christopher Pramuk's groundbreaking book *Sophia*,¹³ and as intrinsic particularly to the Fourth and Walnut experience that is one of McGinn's key "Moments." Perhaps even more noteworthy is the complete lack of attention to the profoundly paschal character of Merton's mysticism, to participation in the death and resurrection of Christ, as articulated by St. Paul in one of Merton's favorite and most cited passages, "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me" (Gal. 2:19-20), as the central dynamic that leads to authentic selfhood and through the gift of the Spirit bestowed on Calvary, to union with the resurrected Christ and sharing in the Trinitarian life of eternal love. McGinn explicitly refers to the Incarnational and Trinitarian dimensions of Merton's mysticism (315), and notes the importance of sharing in the Passion in his discussions of other figures, for example Elizabeth (see 105) and Edith Stein (see 166), but the closest he gets to this motif in Merton is the more generic reference (321) from *The Climate of Monastic Prayer* (120) to the death of the self-centered ego and emergence of a new and liberated self, living and acting in the Spirit, in which the paschal dimension remains implicit. Despite these lacunae, however, it would be difficult to conceive a more accessible and appealing introduction to the mystical dimension of Merton's life and thought within the parameters of the thirty pages McGinn was able to devote to this topic.

In his brief final conclusion on "Reading the Modern Mystics" (327-30), McGinn encourages readers not only to aim for a deeper comprehension of their diverse yet ultimately harmonious presentations of their own understanding, and often their own experience, of living in the presence of God, but "under their inspiration, also [to] enter into a new and transcendent contact with the divine." Under McGinn's wise guidance the reader can certainly find the first of these goals, and perhaps be drawn toward the second as well. *Modern Mystics* turns out to be an unanticipated (even by its author) but certainly deeply appreciated side effect to "the constraints" imposed by "the time of Covid" (vii).

Patrick F. O'Connell

13. Christopher Pramuk, *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009).