

Meeting the Mystics with Merton

Review of

A Course in Christian Mysticism

By Thomas Merton

Edited by Jon M. Sweeney

Foreword by Michael N. McGregor

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Reviewed by **Thomas A. Snyder**

In editing and making available Thomas Merton's thirteen lectures on the Christian mystical tradition, Jon M. Sweeney has provided a valuable resource for serious students of the history of Christian spirituality and those exploring the rich strata of our mystical tradition. These lectures, or "conferences," were delivered during the period 1961-1964 at the Abbey of Gethemani, where Merton served as novice master to the young men preparing for the Cistercian monastic life. In his Editor's Prologue (xi-xvii), Sweeney invites us to consider that over fifty years later this publication "seems like the ideal evolution of what his work has done for people of faith over that time. Thomas Merton is the person who, more than any other, has made the gifts of monastic life available to those of us who reside outside monastery walls – those of us who live without the daily nutrition of what the vows of obedience, poverty, chastity, conversion of life, and stability provide. These lectures are perhaps his greatest example of his gift" (xii). This is not an overstatement.

Thirteen lectures covering the first sixteen centuries of Christian history are introduced by Merton in a preface written on the Vigil of the Assumption, 1961, in which he chooses Evelyn Underhill, a non-Catholic, to provide the guiding principle for the study. He quotes her: "The essence of mysticism being not a doctrine but a way of life, its interests require groups of persons who put its principles into effect" (xix), and Merton concludes that "the Christian mystical tradition is something that has been handed down not only to be talked about but to be *lived*" (xix).

Before examining the content of the lectures, the qualms that have historically been caused by the idea of mysticism should be addressed. In an effective foreword (vii-x), Michael N. McGregor points to Merton's early intellectual distrust of even the word *mysticism*, until, at the urging of his friend Robert Lax, he read Aldous Huxley's *Ends and Means*, and came away understanding that this was more than hocus pocus, that it was "very real and very serious" (vii). McGregor notes that Merton continued with an uneasiness about the term "mysticism" and frequently substituted the term "contemplation" (viii). (This point is also made in William Shannon's helpful entry on

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“Mysticism” in *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* [314-15].) Historically, this uneasiness with the term/concept of mysticism is characterized by Merton in Lecture 8 with the early anti-mystical attitudes of Tertullian and Jerome: “The West is then to a certain extent predisposed to water down mysticism, and accept it in a diluted, more devotional form, or else reduce mysticism to speculation and study” or encase it in “social forms, rules, observances, practices, rites” (90) – in other words, kept at a distance, sanitized, institutionalized – made safe.

If the ultimate spiritual reality of the mystical *experience* (note the emphasis on that word) is union with God, this can hardly be an enterprise to be diluted or corralled! Both McGregor (viii) and Sweeney (xvii) in their opening words remind the reader that a study like this can only be entered into with a willingness to be challenged and changed. The movement in a study of mysticism is from information through formation to transformation.

In Lecture 1, “The Aim of This Course” (1-11), Merton outlines the nature and direction of his study. He begins by affirming the necessary union of theology and mysticism with a strong claim and dire warning: “Without mysticism there is no real theology, and without theology there is no real mysticism. Hence the emphasis will be on mysticism as theology, to bring out clearly the mystical dimensions of our theology, hence to help us to do what we must really do: *live our theology*. . . . we must live our theology, fully, deeply, in its totality. Without this, there is no sanctity. The separation of theology from ‘spirituality’ is a disaster” (1 [emphasis added]).

Proceeding with this sense of urgency, Merton leads us chronologically through the history, particular contexts, theological movements, controversies and major figures in the study of mysticism. Lecture 2, “Mystical Theology in St. John’s Gospel” (12-20), highlights the Incarnation as “the center of Christian mysticism” (13), sacramental mysticism, mutual service and following Christ into his new realm. He also addresses mysticism in St. Paul, which “implies a growing consciousness of this mystery in us until we reach a full mystical understanding of the mystery of Christ in ourselves” (18). The lecture concludes with an examination of texts from Acts on Pentecost (“Mystical life comes from the Spirit, and is lived in the Church, as a witness of the living and risen Christ” [19]) and the stoning of Stephen, which links mysticism and martyrdom. Building on this biblical foundation, Merton moves into the post-apostolic era in Lecture 3, “Martyrs and Gnostics (Ignatius, Irenaeus, Clement, and Origen)” (21-39). This includes a rather positive assessment of Christian gnosticism, and a sympathetic re-evaluation of Origen. Lecture 4, “Divinization and Mysticism (The Cappadocian Fathers)” (40-56), examines the works and major themes of Athanasius, Gregory Nazianzen, Basil and, most extensively, Gregory of Nyssa. Themes expanded upon are divinization, mystical contemplation, and especially in Gregory of Nyssa, “the first clear Christian formulation of apophatic mysticism – mysticism of darkness, unknowing, or night” (49). From this we read about mystical union, mystical ecstasy and the spiritual senses, themes developed in various ways over succeeding centuries. Lecture 5, “Evagrius Ponticus” (57-70), whom Merton labels “The Prince of Gnostics,” examines Evagrius’ contributions with cautious conclusions about his teaching.

Lecture 6 is deep and rich as we read about “Contemplation and Cosmos (Maximus the Confessor)” (71-78). For this reader, Merton’s careful examination of *theoria physike* was pivotal to this study. The opening section of the lecture, “The Beginning of the Contemplative Life” (71-73), defines this term as “a contemplation according to nature (*physis*). It is also a contemplation of God in and through nature, in and through things he has created, in history. It is the multiform wisdom, the gnosis that apprehends the wisdom and glory of God, especially his wisdom as Creator and Redeemer” (71).

There follows a detailed enumeration of aspects of this “supernatural understanding of nature, of history, of revelation, of liturgy and of man himself” (72), and a fleshing out of the teachings of Maximus, “the Father of Byzantine mysticism” (73), including their contemporary relevance and impact. While expansive in definition, example and application, Merton, ever the careful scholar, also delineates the dangers and limitations of this spiritual concept.

While brief, “The Dionysian Tradition,” outlined in Lecture 7 (79-87), portrays Pseudo-Denys the Areopagite as “the real propagator of Christian mystical theology” (79), and traces the ongoing influence of this theology from the sixth century through monastic traditions, across the Middle Ages, through the Rhenish mystics and to those who influenced the sixteenth-century Carmelites. It is an interesting study in the historical transmission of one of the strains of Christian mysticism.

Augustinian mysticism is examined in the next lecture, “Western Mysticism: The Influence of St. Augustine” (88-98), as Merton asserts that “we must now account for the dominant personal influence of the great Western Doctor of grace and conversion: St. Augustine. The Augustinian theology, inseparable from the drama of Augustine’s own conversion and of his whole life, comes to give all the spirituality of the West a special character of its own” (88-89). While the lecture gives the context, including the Pelagian controversy, and anchors the saint’s mystical theology in his biography, the essential aspect of “longing for God” comes through Augustine’s now familiar plea for interior unity: “You have made us for yourself and our heart is restless until it rests in you” (93). This union is communal and ecclesiological as well as personal, since the “purity of our love for God implies equally love of ourselves in and for God, and of our brother in and for God” (93). Since we are encompassed in this loving bond, which is an experience of grace, we experience contemplation as the “summit of love” (93).

Lectures 9 and 10 focus on “St. Bernard of Clairvaux” (99-117) and “St. Bernard’s Sermons on the Song of Songs” (118-40). Merton celebrates Bernard through placing him in historical context, providing one of the lengthier biographies in this series, and interpreting his work. He treats this Doctor of the Church sympathetically and in detail, asserting that in Bernard’s mystical thought “man is made in the image of God and is therefore made for union with God” (115). He expressed this thought homiletically, poetically and through symbol. Merton invites us to understand the symbolic mentality of the twelfth century as a key to understanding Bernard’s work. “A symbol signifies – it does not explain. It points to an invisible and sacred reality which we attain not by comprehension but by love and sacred awe, by an initiation to a higher world, and by the gift of ourselves” (109). (Could I suggest that this may be a suggestion for twenty-first-century spirituality as well?) Noting Bernard’s Marian devotion and his emphasis on the Cistercian theology of love, Merton states that the saint was “a speculative mystic. That is to say, he a true theologian. He is not studying mysticism but the mystery of our union with God” (119). He asserts that the study of Bernard’s sermons on the Song of Songs is the key to Cistercian mystical theology and “gives us a whole theology of the spiritual life” (119). It was probably with a particular intensity that the novice master could enjoin his students, in what is almost a paean to their Cistercian ancestor: “We must enter into the mind of Bernard as a saint and genius, and as a writer; to see him as an example of the religious sensibility of the twelfth century with its deep sense of the sacred, its sense of the reality of mystery, the capacity to reach sacred reality through symbol, in which the invisible and visible are brought together” – to which he adds this (still) timely admonition: “It will help us to remember that we lack this sense of the sacred to a great extent; in proportion as we recover it we may learn to appreciate Bernard” (107).

“Fourteenth-Century Mysticism: The Béguines, Eckhart, Tauler” is the theme of Lecture 11 (141-60). In the context of several movements which grew in the central Middle Ages, here, for the first time, we learn about women’s contributions to the faith. Special attention is paid to the thirteenth-century Hadewijch of Antwerp and her mystical poetry, reminiscent of the songs of the medieval troubadours, in which the one yearns for divine union with the Beloved, “risking all for love, abandonment and going forth one knows not where or how, trusting in his fidelity” (145). Merton follows with a section on “Women Saints of the Late Middle Ages” with a more detailed look at St. Catherine of Siena, “a woman with a special and prophetic vocation in the medieval Church” (148). The remainder of the lecture addresses fourteenth-century Rhenish mystical movements with special attention to Meister Eckhart and John Tauler. While Merton acknowledges Eckhart’s brilliance as a speculative theologian and contributor to mystical thought, he expresses concern over the magister’s recklessness in expression, which later brought condemnation. John Tauler, while complementing some of Eckhart’s thought seems more prudent in expression, but, akin to Eckhart can describe mysticism “as the birth of God in the ground of the soul” (157).

Two of the most extensive conferences are Lectures 12 and 13: “Spanish Mysticism: St. Teresa of Avila and Others” (161-83) and “St. John of the Cross: Dark Nights and Spiritual Crises” (184-208). St. Teresa was preceded by several strong reformers and spiritual writers, amid a plethora of spiritual writers (some 3,000 in this Spanish Golden Age!). Yet this broad spiritual landscape was situated within the context of the Inquisition, and no one was immune from its influence. Still, despite their own problems, these two Carmelite saints produced works that have helped shape Christian spirituality for more than five centuries. Setting Teresa and John against the backdrop of the Carmelite reform, with its emphasis on silence and solitude and its extensive examination of the levels of prayer, Merton calls Teresa “one of the most attractive of the mystics by reason of her human qualities, her frankness, simplicity, energy, humor, and good sense” and notes of her approach to prayer that “more than any other school, this one analyzes the experience of contemplation and of union with God. The approach is essentially practical” (169). Merton then describes the nature of what John of the Cross presents: “They are both called ‘dark night.’ The first is the ‘night of sense’ which brings one to the maturity of the spiritual life, and the second is the ‘night of the spirit’ which brings one to the perfection of the mystical life” (184). He gives a thorough walk-through of *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* to illustrate this mystic’s process and thought. There is a wealth of learning in this lecture for spiritual directors and directees, including: “Good direction includes recognition of God’s action, acceptance of the fact that when he works, no intervention of ours can be of help, but will only hinder” (194). An old Protestant saw has it this way: “Let go and let God.” These last two lectures could each be a study standing on its own.

Jon Sweeney augments these lectures with “More Sources and Readings” relevant to each topic (209-19) as well as “Group Discussion Topics and Questions” (220-28) if this were offered as a study. Concluding “Editor’s Notes” identify the original scholarly editions from which this material was drawn and condensed and indicate the very few changes made in the text (229-30).

As one who teaches and leads parish studies, I would consider that a facilitator, even with these helpful addenda, would need to do some serious unpacking of terms, historical data, biographical information and religious terminology for anyone stepping into this area for the first time. For those of us who already belong to Merton, who have begun the spiritual quest, however circuitous our way, who search and thirst for more nurture for our exploration into God, *A Course in Christian*

Mysticism can only enhance this holy journey and keep us focused on its end. Merton sums this up for us in his discussion of Athanasius: “divinization and salvation are regarded as one and the same thing. It is our destiny to be united to God in the One Son of God. . . . Divinization is our last end. This is the vocation of all Christians” (42). In this sense, as a vocational guide, Jon Sweeney’s careful edition of this important Merton work serves us well.