

A Unique Experience

Review of

The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation

By Thomas Merton

Edited with an Introduction by William H. Shannon

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Reviewed by **Robert Barron**

After reading Edward Rice's portrait of Thomas Merton, *The Man in the Sycamore Tree*, one might get the impression that Merton, at the end of his life, was prepared to leave Gethsemani, quit the Trappist order, and even abandon his Christian faith for a Buddhist-inspired "spirituality" beyond the polarities of the religions. Even in treatments far more sober than Rice's, it is sometimes suggested that Merton's explorations of eastern philosophy and spirituality led, at the very least, to a major shift in his thinking and a turning away from the dogmatic Christianity that characterized the work of his earlier years. I have long suspected that this "early-Merton / later-Merton" distinction, though superficially legitimate, is finally more obfuscating than illuminating. What strike me as far more interesting than the shifts and evolutions in Merton's style are the deep continuities that obtain from, say, *The Seven Storey Mountain* through *New Seeds of Contemplation* all the way to *The Asian Journal*. To give just one example, the distinctively Christian "big idea" that he took in, at the age of twenty-three, from Étienne Gilson's *Spirit of Medieval Philosophy* – the radical *aseity* of the creator God – informed Merton's thinking about prayer, contemplation, war and peace, and the dialogue with eastern religion. I am pleased to say that Merton's "last major work," the recently published manuscript *The Inner Experience*, confirms this intuition of mine.

As William Shannon explains in his very helpful introduction, the history of this text is quite complex. It began as the short, and by most accounts not very satisfying, 1948 book *What is Contemplation?* and was then revised extensively in 1959 (four drafts from that year are extant) and finally tinkered with lightly in 1968 just before Merton's untimely death. Though selections from it appeared in the ensuing years in various journals and collections, it is only now that the work in its entirety has become available. Perhaps owing to its somewhat checkered history, there is something of a hodge-podge quality to *The Inner Experience*. It rambles from Buddhist-inspired meditations on the awakening of the inner self, through the distinction between acquired and infused contemplation, to considerations of texts from John of the Cross, to a treatment of the relation between contemplation and neurosis. But what emerged as most interesting for me was Merton's keen sense – evident throughout the book – of the uniqueness of Christian contemplation, a quality made clear

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precisely through his dialogue with Eastern spirituality.

In the chapter entitled provocatively “A Preliminary Warning,” Merton lays out the distinction between the “exterior ‘I,’” concerned with “projects” and “temporal finalities” and the “interior ‘I,’” which “seeks only to be, and to move . . . according to the secret laws of Being itself” (5). This is very close, of course, to the split between the “true self” and the “false self” that Merton developed in a number of his writings in the ’50s and ’60s, and both demarcations are rooted ultimately in Paul’s dichotomy between living “according to the Spirit” and “according to the flesh.” His point is that contemplation is nothing other than an accessing of the elusive interior, true, and spiritual self and a concomitant bracketing of the demands of the far more readily available false self. It is living one’s ordinary life but with an entirely new center and orientation. Contemplative prayer is, therefore, not the fussy compartmentalized practice of a few religious seekers, but rather the very form and substance of the Christian life. To demonstrate the “process” by which the true self, the interior I, is awakened, Merton turns to the Zen experience of *Satori*, “which is the very heart and essence of Zen.” Normally, *Satori* happens only after a long spiritual and ascetic discipline when “the monk experiences a kind of inner explosion that blasts his false exterior self to pieces and leaves nothing but ‘his original face’” (8). When one has learned the illusory quality of both his desire and the demanding self which is the ground of desire, he finds the real self, the inner I, free of attachments and plans and anxieties. Beyond affirmation and denial, beyond the division between self and not-self, the silence of one’s original being emerges. Merton argues that this awakening is similar to what Paul spoke of when he said, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.”

But then he draws back. Though the discovery of this inner self plays an important role in Christian mysticism, there is a marked difference between the Christian and Buddhist forms of contemplation. In Zen, Merton argues, “there seems to be no effort to get *beyond* the inner self,” whereas in Christianity the discovery of the interior I is but a stepping stone to the more profound awareness of the creator God in whose image that “true I” is made. In a properly Christian form of *Satori*, in short, the contemplative would gaze at the God who is revealing himself in the tranquil mirror of the inner self. And this makes a world of difference. For the Christian, Merton says, “there is an infinite metaphysical gulf between the being of God and the being of the soul, between the ‘I’ of the Almighty and our own inner ‘I’” (12). When this radical difference is overlooked or compromised, contemplation becomes, as D. T. Suzuki described it, merely a “psychological experience.” But what keeps the Christian experience from devolving into a type of philosophical meditation, a gazing upon the distant object of the supreme being, is precisely the paradoxical nature of the divine reality. Because God is not so much a being (even the supreme being) but, as Aquinas said, *ipsum esse subsistens*, God can, while retaining his radical transcendence, enter most intimately and non-competitively into the reality of his creatures. “Hence,” in Merton’s words, “the Christian mystical experience is not only an awareness of the inner self, but also . . . an experiential grasp of God as present within our inner self” (12). Elsewhere in his writings, Merton signaled this non-competitiveness of God and self when he observed that contemplation is finding that place in us where we are here and now being created by God. Once more, it is a question of moving past the exterior I to the interior I (like Zen) but then through that ground to the Ground, the *Seelengrund* of which Meister Eckhart spoke, the God who can be so close because he is so other.

It is, of course, precisely this rootedness in the creator God that makes of the contemplative a person of social connection and active love. When one has discovered one’s own deepest center in

God, he, necessarily, discovers that which centers everyone and everything else in the cosmos. In *The Inner Experience*, Merton comments that “charity, which is the life and the awakening of the inner self, is in fact to a great extent awakened by the presence and the spiritual influence of other selves that are ‘in Christ’” (23). It is no accident that the major revisions of this text were done just after Merton’s famous experience at the corner of Fourth and Walnut in Louisville, when he realized that he was connected to all the ordinary people who streamed past him at that busy intersection and that this insight was itself the fruit of his contemplative vocation.

Now none of this insistence upon the distinctive quality of Christian contemplation is meant to denigrate either Zen or Merton’s creative engagement with it. Aquinas said that he used Aristotle’s philosophy as a *manuductio* (a leading by the hand) in order to orient the mind of his reader to the contemplation of divine truth. In a similar way, Merton used the exquisitely refined spiritual and psychological perceptions of the Zen masters in order to clear the ground for a consideration of Christian contemplation. In the *Asian Journal*, we hear that, when Merton met with various Buddhist teachers, including the Dalai Lama himself, he was most interested in their philosophy of mind. This exploration of Zen epistemology and psychology as a propaedeutic to Christian prayer is altogether congruent with the project of *The Inner Experience*.

All readers of Thomas Merton should be grateful to William Shannon and to HarperCollins for bringing this bridge text to light, not only because it offers a snapshot of Merton’s mind at a transitional period in his career, but also because it confirms that the heart of this great mystic’s work was the union with God who remains, in Augustine’s words, *intimior intimo meo et superior summo meo*, closer to me than I am to myself and higher than what is highest in me.