

The pride and despair central to the film is also, as Merton already knew in the 1960s, part of our collective damaged and damaging relationship to God's creation. In our pride and lack of humility we continue to exploit and destroy our planet; this brings many of us to despair. Can God forgive us?

As with both personal and collective despair there is through grace always the possibility of redemption which comes in the film (as it has before) through the presence of the feminine – the pregnant Mary. This gives Toller and the viewer a fleeting experience of euphoric hope and joy, which, although still alongside grief, is unconstrained by the world.

This is a powerful and important film where matters of faith are dealt with in a serious and unflinching way.

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### **A Course in Christian Mysticism**

Thomas Merton

Edited by Jon M. Sweeney

Liturgical Press Collegeville, Minnesota, 2017

ISBN 9780814645086 (pbk) 236 pages

\$19.95 / £14.99

This is a wonderful book. Straight from Merton himself, it brings us a thorough introduction to, and survey of, the range and depth of Christian mysticism. There are times when we can almost hear Merton giving his lectures, and yet the book is readable and well-edited. The lectures have been selected from three of the volumes of the Monastic Wisdom Series, originally edited by Patrick O'Connell and published by Cistercian Publications—*An Introduction to Christian Mysticism*, *The Cistercian Fathers and their Monastic Theology*, and *Cassian and the Fathers*. I certainly learnt a great deal about Christian spirituality with the bonus of knowing that I was somehow being taught alongside those students at Gethsemani in the early 1960s when Merton gave these lectures.

At the start Merton sets out his foundational conviction: 'Some think it is sufficient to come to the monastery to live the Rule. More is required – we must live our theology, fully, deeply, in its totality. The separation of theology from "spirituality" is a disaster.' (p. 1) Merton proceeds to offer us helpful definitions of asceticism and mysticism, and points to the extremes which are to be avoided.

A mystic, says Merton, is someone who through contemplation and self-surrender seeks union with God. Perfection in Merton's understanding is somewhat different from the popular conception of this problematic word. Merton speaks of the ascetic life as consisting of 'practice and training in virtue until perfection is achieved in the relative sense of freedom from inordinate passion.' (p. 6) This is what many of us would call discipleship. For me and many others one of the most attractive features of Merton's life and his writings is their humanity. Perfection for Merton is a way of life which is set on God but which is at the same time fully human. This perfection is above all revealed to us in the life and teaching of Jesus Christ.

Merton begins with the New Testament, looking at mystical theology in the writings of John and Paul. Both emphasise abiding or dwelling in Christ as essential to Christian faith. According to the New Testament, this mystical relationship 'comes from the Spirit, and is lived in the Church, as a witness of the living and risen Christ.' (p. 19) Merton then moves on to the early church fathers: Ignatius of Antioch, Irenaeus, Clement and Origen. Here we find some great Merton quotes. 'As silence is to speech, so the Father is to the Son. To hear and possess the silence of the Father is the real objective of reception of the Word.' (p. 23) In this period Merton draws out in particular the acceptance of providential suffering and the crown of martyrdom.

We continue in the lectures through the Cappadocian Fathers to Evagrius Ponticus, who Merton describes as 'one of the most important, the least known, the most neglected, and the most controversial of Christian mystics'. (p. 57) Merton is clearly wary of the tradition and theology of Pseudo-Denys, even though he describes this as highly original and very important. One of the strengths of the book is Merton's clarity of insight and teaching, and his willingness to guide the student with some direction as to what is valuable and what is to be treated with caution or even to be avoided.

Both St. Augustine and Bernard of Clairvaux are given thorough and positive coverage. Merton is particularly drawn to St. Bernard's Sermons on *The Song of Songs*, which merit a substantial chapter on their own. We are then taken on a short survey of fourteenth century mysticism and the Rhenish school, before the final section which focusses on Spanish mysticism. Merton has much to say about Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross. He deals carefully with contemplation and the Carmelite school, and St. John of the Cross' instructions for good spiritual direction. I was particularly struck by his comments on the writings of Francisco de Osuna, and I look forward to exploring *The Third Spiritual Alphabet*. I

would also be intrigued to read, if I can track down a copy in English, *The Second Spiritual Alphabet*, which Merton tells us is 'for people in active life with little time for prayers'. (p. 165) The last chapter is, not surprisingly, given over to St. John of the Cross and the Dark Night and spiritual crises, and to the keys to discernment especially for spiritual directors.

This is an excellent book, both for the student of Christian spirituality, for the aspiring contemplative, and for anyone who is simply looking for a readable introduction to the great thinkers and writers of Christian spirituality.

**Ian Cowley** is an Anglican priest who has served in parish ministry in South Africa, Sheffield, Cambridge and Peterborough. From 2008 to 2016 Ian was Co-ordinator of Spirituality and Vocations in the Diocese of Salisbury. He is author of four books on spirituality, discipleship and the local church. He has recently retired from full-time ministry and continues to write and teach. His new book *The Contemplative Response* is published by BRF on 15<sup>th</sup> January, 2019

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### **The Root of War Is Fear: Thomas Merton's Advice to Peacemakers**

Jim Forest

Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 2016

ISBN 978-1-62698-197-3 (pbk) 223 + xiv pages

\$25.00 £17.99

The name Jim Forest is well known to readers of *The Merton Journal* on various fronts. For some, through his wonderful, lavishly illustrated biographies of Thomas Merton, Dorothy Day and, most recently, Daniel Berrigan. Or Jim's engrossing correspondence with Thomas Merton published in *The Hidden Ground of Love*. Merton's frequently quoted letter to Jim, 'Advice to a Young Activist', is the most frequently published of any of Merton's letters. Or again, for his ongoing support of the Merton Society, giving so generously of his time and talent to speak at various events over the years, including the inaugural meeting in Winchester, twenty-five years ago this December.

Jim Forest's recent book, *The Root of War Is Fear: Thomas Merton's Advice to Peacemakers*, was a book begging to be written. Over the years much has been written about Merton's writings on nuclear weapons, war and peace, and related issues. In this excellent book Forest gives us a very well rounded presentation of Merton's thinking on these subjects and,