

MONASTIC WISDOM SERIES: NUMBER THIRTEEN

Thomas Merton

**An Introduction to
Christian Mysticism**

Initiation into the Monastic Tradition 3

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**An Introduction to
Christian Mysticism**
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by
Thomas Merton

Edited with an Introduction by
Patrick F. O'Connell

Preface by
Lawrence S. Cunningham

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cistpub@wmich.edu

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PREFACE

In the 1949–1951 correspondence between the newly ordained Thomas Merton and his abbot, James Fox, later published in *The School of Charity*, there is a discussion about the education of young monks that is extraordinarily interesting. Merton felt that the young men entering the monastery were being educated for the priesthood but that there was no coherent program of monastic formation. At a time when it was universally assumed that choir monks would go on for the priesthood, the education of these young monks was, of necessity, a course of studies laid out by canon law as a prerequisite for ordination, with instructions in monasticism of necessity ancillary to that demand. It is clear that Merton saw something fundamentally out of balance with this arrangement but was unsure how to right the balance. He recognized, as he noted in a letter to Dom James, that it was difficult to see how one could superimpose a monastic curriculum on top of the seminary curriculum. His solution, first as master of scholastics and later as novice master, was to develop a course of instructions for novices and the newly professed that went under the generic name of “monastic orientations.”

The net result of Merton’s convictions was a whole series of courses designed for novices or, in the case of this volume, a kind of “post-graduate” seminar for newly ordained priests. Anyone who has visited the Merton archives in Louisville can inspect the vast pile of bound mimeographed volumes that give witness to how seriously he took this task of monastic education. How grateful we are that Patrick O’Connell has undertaken the arduous task of seeing some of these volumes to publication. O’Connell

has set a high standard with his editions of Merton's novitiate notes *Cassian and the Fathers* (2005) and *Pre-Benedictine Monasticism* (2006), and we are now in his debt with *An Introduction to Christian Mysticism*.

We might begin by noting that in the early 1960s a wide survey of Christian mysticism was somewhat of a novelty. In the standard seminary curriculum there was at least a one-semester cruise through Adolphe Tanquerey's scholastic manual on ascetical theology. To complicate matters, both primary and secondary sources were in short supply in English. Merton compiled these notes nearly two decades before the first volume of the Paulist Press "Classics of Western Spirituality" saw the light of day and a generation before Bernard McGinn published the first volume of his massive history of the subject. As O'Connell notes, Merton, thanks to his linguistic skills, had to draw heavily on Franco-phone sources and what little was available to him in Gethsemani's library. Wisely, Merton drew on primary texts when he had access to them and studiously avoided the swamp of neo-scholastic debates that had been common in the earlier twentieth century about the nature of, and distinction between, ascetical and mystical theology.

For serious students of Merton's work this present volume is an estimable resource and that for at least two compelling reasons. First, these notes, as it were, serve as a foundational level for grasping what stands behind such finished works as *No Man Is an Island*, *Thoughts in Solitude*, *New Seeds of Contemplation* as well as many of his essays on the spiritual life. That Merton wore his learning lightly is, in fact, the case. Behind the limpid prose of his classical works on the spiritual life, however, is a vast well of learning in the sources. This volume is clearly an example of *ressourcement* and as such tells us much about Merton's intellectual and spiritual development. That he was in intellectual dialogue when giving this course with von Balthasar, Daniélou, and Leclercq, those masters of *ressourcement*, should come as no surprise.

Second, I think O'Connell makes a crucial point about Merton's appropriation of an old trope in the Christian mystical

tradition. In a distinction as old as Origen's prologue to his commentary on the Song of Songs, spiritual writers have noted that between the stage of purification (*ethike*) and the profound encounter with God (*theologia*) there is the human grasp of the presence of God in the created cosmos which was called *theoria* or *theoria physike*. The later tradition would call that the stage of illumination between purification and union but the point is, and O'Connell correctly notes it, that an appreciation of *theoria* is a crucial key to help explain what seems to be in Merton simply a byproduct of his enormous curiosity: Zen calligraphy, Shaker furniture, the abstract art of Ad Reinhardt, and so on. In fact, it was a new way of "seeing" (*theoria*, at root, mean "gazing") and is part of the contemplative process. The value of *theoria* is, of course, that it means that the penitential life is not an end in itself but a preparation for a new way of seeing.

Merton never pursued this idea in any systematic fashion but one can see in it a kind of a theology of culture broadly understood. Not only did Merton see contemplative union open to every baptized Christian but he strongly asserted that one can cultivate the eye to see in a fresh new way. Not to put too fine a point on it: if one hopes to grasp the mind of Thomas Merton and not be satisfied with clichés and stereotypes then one must take into account these profound academic exercises. They are a key to his understanding of the contemplative life as, for example, he describes it in the opening pages of *New Seeds of Contemplation*.

Finally, a sympathetic reader of this volume needs to advert to the word "introduction" in the title. After all, had Merton done an in-depth study of Augustine or Bonaventure or Eckhart or the great Carmelites this would not have been a book but a set of books. One would better think of this work as a set of blaze marks to work one's way through the complex story of Christian mysticism. One makes that journey with a deeply serious and widely educated guide who is able to point out the salient landmarks of the mystical tradition. "Guide" I think is the right word. Saint John of the Cross never spoke of a spiritual director but frequently

spoke of the spiritual guide (*guia*) and the spiritual teacher (*maestro espiritual*) and in Merton one finds both.

In reading these pages I was struck how Merton attempted to mend the long historical rift between systematic theology and the contemplative theology normative in the Church before the rise of scholasticism. He was not spinning out some variety of spiritual gnosis but, rather, recalled to his students, and now, gratefully, to us, the truth of one of Saint Thomas Aquinas's most profound observations, namely, that faith has as its final end not what is articulated but the reality behind that articulation (*non ad enuntiabile sed ad rem*).

Lawrence S. Cunningham
The University of Notre Dame

INTRODUCTION

The series of conferences that comprise *An Introduction to Christian Mysticism* is unique among the courses taught by Thomas Merton during his term as novice master at the Abbey of Gethsemani (1955–1965) in that it was not intended for or presented to the novices. On January 14, 1961, Merton had written to Herbert Mason, “In March and April I have to teach eighteen lectures in mystical theology in the new pastoral course for our young priests, and this is keeping me busy.”¹ By the time the lectures actually started the number had expanded to twenty-two (15), to be given twice a week, evidently, during March, April and May.² The course duly began on March 1³ and continued

1. Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994), 270.

2. See Merton’s letter of March 9, 1961 to Robert Lax: “What makes me most busy at the moment is twenty two lectures on mystical theology. This is some of the vanity which God hath given men to be exercised therein” (Thomas Merton and Robert Lax, *When Prophecy Still Had a Voice: The Letters of Thomas Merton & Robert Lax*, ed. Arthur W. Biddle [Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001], 219). Two lists of preliminary outlines of the course each include twenty-two classes: the earlier, in pencil, indicates the first eight classes as assigned to March, the next six to April, and the last eight to May; for transcriptions of the two outlines, see Appendix A, pages 349–50 (the later outline, in pen), and 351 (the earlier, in pencil).

3. See Merton’s journal entry for March 3, 1961: “I started the mystical theology class Wednesday (Mar. 1)” (Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years. Journals, vol. 4: 1960–1963*, ed. Victor A. Kramer [San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996], 97).

through May 19,⁴ when Merton noted in his journal, “Finished the official mystical theology course today. Some extra classes to be fitted in where I can.”⁵ In fact, however, these extra classes continued at least throughout the summer. The Foreword to the mimeographed text of the course notes is dated “Vigil of the Assumption, 1961” (i.e., August 14) (4), but the classes continued at least into the following month. On September 9, Merton wrote to Etta Gullick, “I had a mystical theology course which is getting prolonged by a ‘popular demand’ which I suspect to be ninety percent nonsense and ten percent pure illusion. And it requires a lot of preparation.”⁶ The day before, he had noted in his journal, “So I teach and teach, not only novices. This mystical theology class drags on and on. The young priests now want some sort of seminar, and I think it is foolish, a waste of time, yet to please them and soothe my guilt feelings—and perhaps to satisfy my vanity—I suppose I will do it. I wish I could call it love.”⁷ There is no further mention in journal or letters of the mystical theology course, nor are there any subsequent references to a seminar for

4. Omitting two classes during Holy Week (March 26–April 1), this would have been the twenty-second class if the course met twice per week.

5. *Turning Toward the World*, 120; Merton writes of “still slugging {slogging?} along with mystical theology” in a letter of May 10 to Sr. Thérèse Lentfoehr (Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends*, ed. Robert E. Daggy [New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989], 238), but three days later he writes to Abdul Aziz, “I have been taken up with more numerous classes for the last three months, but this is now ending. I will send you the notes of these classes in mystical theology when they are ready” (Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon [New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985], 48), and on the same day he writes to Mark Van Doren, “For three months I have been pounding away at a mad course in mystical theology and have enjoyed the sweating, but it is finally ending and I enjoy that more. It is always racking to talk about what should not be said” (*Road to Joy*, 41). On the last day of the official course, he tells John Wu, “I have been busy finishing up my course in mystical theology and various other tasks” (*Hidden Ground of Love*, 616).

6. *Hidden Ground of Love*, 353.

7. *Turning Toward the World*, 160.

the young priests, but circumstantial evidence suggests that Merton did continue to meet with the group for some considerable time subsequent to this entry.

While he sounded rather tired of the conferences by this point, he had earlier expressed satisfaction that they were speaking to an authentic desire among the monks attending the course for a deepened awareness of the contemplative dimension of their lives. On March 24, he reflected in his journal on a session held in the new cinderblock cottage that would become his hermitage:

Wednesday afternoon (rain). The Pastoral Theology group and others came to St. Mary of Carmel—conference on the Spiritual Senses and general discussion. A very happy atmosphere and I think everything was profitable—a kind of opening up. Have never had so much of a sense of the need and the *hunger* of the priests in the monastery for mysticism and contemplation—in a very simple way. It is true that a large part of our difficulties comes from frustration of this deep need and a kind of inarticulate temptation to despair that takes refuge in activities without too much sense.⁸

As he points out in his Foreword, while the “approach has been mainly historical and positive in an attempt to recover some of the rich thought of the patristic and medieval periods” (3), his purpose was less strictly academic than formational,

an effort to broaden the horizons and deepen the perspectives of mystical theology in a monastic setting. . . . The lectures were intended primarily for monastic priests in a course of “pastoral” theology—that is to say for monks who sought background and contact with sources that would enable them to be of benefit to their brethren in spiritual direction or in that *sapientiae doctrina* which St. Benedict looks for in superiors (3).

8. *Turning Toward the World*, 102.

They reflect Merton's core belief, the foundation as well of his numerous published books on contemplation, that "the Christian mystical tradition is something that has been handed down not only to be talked about but to be *lived*" (4).

Merton's original outlines for the course present an ambitious overview of the mystical tradition that in the event he was not able to carry out fully. The subtitle of the course, "(From the Apostolic Fathers to the Council of Trent)," represents a considerable scaling back of the chronological breadth initially proposed: in the earliest outline, the twelfth class, the beginning of the second half of the course, is labeled "Post Trent—Jesuits—St Teresa." (351)! It is followed by: "St John of the Cross" [13]; "Dark Night" [14]; "Later Carmelites—mod. Debates" [15]; "Semi Quietists etc" [16]; "Modern Writers—Saudreau Poulain" [17]; "Non-Christian mysticism?" [18]; "Hallaj—Sufis"⁹ [19] (n. 20 is left blank, presumably for a second class on this topic); "Byzantine Mysticism" [21]; "St Gregory Palamas" [22]. The semi-Quietists and modern writers were already cancelled on this first outline to make room for two additional classes on "Franciscans—Rhenish Mystics" and "Complete Separation of Myst + Theol" (the latter itself subsequently cancelled) to precede the "Post Trent" class. By the time Merton put together his second outline (349–50) the Jesuits and St. Teresa had moved all the way to class 19 (which was then switched to 20), followed only by "St John Cross Dark Night" (originally 18-19, then 20-21, and finally just 21); "Later Carmelites" (subsequently added to the Jesuits and Teresa class); and "Byz. Myst. Conclusion" (originally two classes reduced to one). In the actual text, however, the Byzantines have disappeared along with the non-Christians. In fact in his Foreword Merton writes, "It has not been possible to carry out our original intention to discuss St. John of the Cross and the Byzantine mystical tradition" (3), though in the final text John of the Cross does

9. In his January 14 letter to Herbert Mason, Merton had written, "I want to bring in Hallaj and maybe other Oriental mystics if I have elbowroom" (*Witness to Freedom*, 270).

receive extensive discussion, in a context that reflects a considerable reorientation found in what were evidently the “extra classes” added after the formal conclusion of the course, and more specifically those which were subsequent to the writing of these prefatory remarks in mid-August.¹⁰

Merton’s plans for what was initially to be the first half of the course remain quite consistent in topics, if not in number of classes, in the two outlines, and are followed closely in the actual text of the conferences. After a pair of introductory classes, the topics include: St. John’s Gospel, Martyrs, Gnostics, Divinization, Christological Controversies, the meaning of the term “mysticism,” Gregory of Nyssa, the spiritual senses, Evagrius, Pseudo-Dionysius, “Western Mysticism,” the Dionysian tradition in the West, the Franciscans, the Rhenish mystics, Quietism, and the separation of mysticism and theology. Except for the last two, which are treated only in passing, this list accurately represents the actual development of the course as found in the written notes. The only significant differences between the two versions of the outline for these sections of the course are the omission of mention of Pseudo-Macarius in the second version,¹¹ and the addition of “Theoria Phys[like],” which becomes an extremely important section of the course as finally written.

The only topic that receives major attention in this part of the course that is not specifically mentioned in the outlines is Béguine spirituality, which is discussed in some detail under the general heading of “Fourteenth-Century Mysticism” (“The 14th–15th Cents.” in a secondary, marginal list on the second outline).

10. Merton notes in his journal that he is “writing up mystical theology notes” on August 11 (*Turning Toward the World*, 150).

11. Merton included a section on Pseudo-Macarius in the “Prologue to Cassian” section of his novitiate course on Cassian and his predecessors (Thomas Merton, *Cassian and the Fathers: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition*, ed. Patrick F. O’Connell, *Monastic Wisdom [MW]*, vol. 1 [Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2005], 81–88), which may have prompted him to omit discussion of this author here, as was the case with Origen (see below, xxi)—though not of Gregory of Nyssa or of Evagrius.

However, following the section on St. Teresa, the entire rest of the text of the course consists in material not included at all in the projected outlines of the course, namely a lengthy section on "The Spiritual Direction of Contemplatives" followed by a second section on the same topic, subtitled "Direction in the Crises of the Mystical Life" (along with two appendices to be considered later). These sections, which comprise 44 pages of a total of 170 in the mimeographed version of the text proper, evidently owe their existence to the continuation of the course beyond its intended limit of twenty-two classes, and to another project on which Merton was engaged during the period of the "extra classes" of the summer and early fall of 1961.

From indications in Merton's journal and letters, it is possible to get some sense of the progression of classes: during March he appears to be keeping to his schedule, or perhaps even slightly ahead, as he is discussing the topic of the spiritual senses (class 8 on the outlines) at the hermitage during what appears to be his seventh class.¹² But the pace apparently slows subsequently, since in his May 13 letter to Mark Van Doren, less than a week before the formal end of the class, he writes, "I ended up last time Beguines, beguines and beguines. They were wonderful, like the quails around my house. Everybody has forgotten them, but they were very wise and Eckhart learned all the best things he knew from them."¹³ In the two remaining "regular" classes he could hardly have progressed beyond the Rhineland mystics, Eckhart and Tauler, and in fact his frequent mentions of Eckhart in letters

12. If the classes were held on the same days each week, as seems likely, they were given on Wednesdays (the day on which the first class was held—March 1) and Fridays (the day of the final class—May 19); the entry for March 24 is unclear, since it begins "Wednesday afternoon" but that day was a Friday; presumably he was referring to a class that met two days previous, which would have been the seventh class; if he was mistaken about the day and was actually referring to a class that met on that day, it would have been the eighth class.

13. *Road to Joy*, 41; see also his journal entry from the beginning of that week, Sunday, May 7, in which he writes about reading Dom Porion's book on Hadewijch, his major source for the Béguines (*Turning Toward the World*, 117).

and journal entries of June and July suggest that he may well have continued to discuss these fourteenth-century Germans after the completion of the course proper.¹⁴ Certainly the material on St. Teresa must have been discussed during these extra summer classes, followed by the additional, new topic of spiritual direction (unless this was the subject of the “seminar” that the priests had requested and was thus presented through the fall).

The reason for this unexpected change in focus is explained in letters and journal entries from the summer. In a June 21 letter to Mark Van Doren, he remarks, “I am not writing much at the moment and not intending to write much except for doing chores like an Encyclopedia article (*New Catholic Encyclopedia*, which will probably be stuffy).”¹⁵ He elaborates on the “chore” in a journal entry for June 29: “*New Cath. Encycl.* has repeated its request for one article. I am convinced they do it very unwillingly, merely to get my name on their list. I refused before a ludicrous request to do 300 words on Dom Edmond Obrecht (!!) and now they have asked for 5,000 on spiritual direction and I feel utterly foul for having accepted.”¹⁶ There is no further mention of the article until a September 19 letter to Sr. Thérèse Lentfoehr,¹⁷ and then in his journal five days later he writes, “Have to finish article for *Catholic Encyclopedia*,”¹⁸ which he calls a “tiresome task” in a letter of the same day to Dona Luisa Coomaraswamy.¹⁹ Finally

14. See his letters to Etta Gullick of June 10 and July 1 (*Hidden Ground of Love*, 342, 343) and the journal entry of July 4 (*Turning Toward the World*, 137).

15. *Road to Joy*, 42.

16. *Turning Toward the World*, 135.

17. “I have had to write a few articles for a new *Catholic Youth Encyclopedia* which, between you and me and the gatepost, sounds rather useless. But maybe they had a method in their madness, and decided to do something that would have more life in it than the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*. I have a long article to do for them, too, on ‘Spiritual Direction’” (*Road to Joy*, 239); his articles on “Contemplation” and “Perfection, Christian,” appeared in *The Catholic Encyclopedia for School and Home*, 12 vols. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965), 3.228-30, 8.328-32.

18. *Turning Toward the World*, 164.

19. *Hidden Ground of Love*, 133.

on October 10 he writes in his journal, "The other day I finally finished the article 'Direction, Spiritual' for the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*. I should have finished it in August (Deadline Nov. 1, but I wanted to get it done in August)."²⁰ Work on this article (which ironically ended up not being accepted for publication in the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*²¹) coincided with the concluding phase of the mystical theology course, and prompted Merton either to include a section on spiritual direction at the end of the course itself, or perhaps to make it the subject of the "seminar" requested by his students, if such a continuation of these conferences did indeed take place. The latter supposition is perhaps more likely, as there is no hint of inclusion of this material in the Foreword to the notes, written in mid-August, and in fact it is clear that at that time Merton had no idea that he would include a substantial section on John of the Cross in the second, "spiritual crises" section of the direction material. Given the fact that not quite four weeks separates the writing of the Foreword from the journal entry mentioning the request for the "seminar," the rather abrupt shift in focus, and the quite detailed elaboration of the spiritual direction material, it is at least plausible that this topic became the focus of a somewhat distinct set of conferences, which also allowed Merton to incorporate material from John of the Cross (some of which is related only tangentially to spiritual direction), and which were still related closely enough to the mystical theology material proper to allow them to be included as the two final sections of the written notes.

As for the material in the appendices, Merton's only reference to the first comes in a journal entry for December 14, 1961, where he notes that he is reading the *Scala Claustralium* "for the novices,"²² an indication that he was intending to use it in regular novitiate conferences and that it was incorporated into the mysti-

20. *Turning Toward the World*, 169.

21. The article has now been published in *The Merton Seasonal*, 32.1 (Spring 2007), 3–17.

22. *Turning Toward the World*, 184.

cal theology notes because of the relevance of the material rather than because he had or was intending to discuss it with the group of young priests to whom the course had been given. The second appendix, on Robert Jay Lifton's book on brainwashing, is related somewhat tenuously to the spiritual direction material and in fact was initially headed "Appendix—to Spiritual Direction" in Merton's original notes,²³ and presumably was added to the notes even later than the *Scala* material, perhaps even in early 1962;²⁴ it seems unlikely that it was ever discussed with the "seminar," which presumably had stopped meeting by that time, since it is probable that some further mention of the group would appear in the journal if it continued to meet on a long-term basis. In any case, by March 1962, the mimeographed notes on mystical theology had been printed up and not only distributed to those who had been in the course but sent to various interested parties beyond the confines of the monastery, since in a March letter to Sr. M. Madeleva, president of St. Mary's College at Notre Dame, Merton mentions having already sent them to her.²⁵

23. Merton subsequently crossed out "to Spiritual Direction" and interlined "II" after "Appendix".

24. A discussion of "brainwashing" in a January 25, 1962 letter to Victor Hammer is clearly dependent on the Lifton book, and suggests that Merton had read it recently and it was fresh in his mind: "As for brainwashing, the term is used very loosely about almost anything. Strict technical brainwashing is an artificially induced 'conversion,' brought about by completely isolating a person emotionally and spiritually, undermining his whole sense of identity, and then 'rescuing' him from this state of near-collapse by drawing him over into a new sense of community with his persecutors, now his rescuers, who 'restore' his identity by admitting [him] into their midst as an approved and docile instrument. Henceforth he does what they want him to do and likes it, indeed finds a certain satisfaction in this, and even regards his old life as shameful and inferior" (*Witness to Freedom*, 6).

25. *Witness to Freedom*, 43; she was writing to inquire why the English mystics, specifically Julian of Norwich, had not been included in the notes (see below, pages xxi, xlix–l); Merton had evidently sent the notes in connection with his role as advisor to St. Mary's faculty who were in the process of setting up a

* * * * *

Because Merton's various courses with the novices were open-ended and he had complete control of the schedule, he was able to develop those sets of conferences according to his own designs. The situation with *An Introduction to Christian Mysticism* was quite different: the limited number of classes (at least as originally projected), as well as the broad chronological sweep of the material, imposed certain limitations both on the content and on Merton's ways of dealing with his material. He realized from the start that his survey could not be completely comprehensive, given the time constraints. An initial principle of selection was to focus on the mystical dimension of Christian spirituality, while recognizing the continuum between ascetical and mystical aspects:

If this "course" is restricted to twenty-two lectures in the Pastoral year, it is obviously taken for granted that much else has been said and taught and assimilated, especially in ascetic theology, before we come to this short series of lectures. Ascetic theology is prescribed in the novitiate. {It presents the} fundamentals of monastic life. The Master of Students should continue the ascetic formation of the young professed monk, deepening his monastic life and, especially, orienting his life of studies and his spiritual growth toward the monastic priesthood. There are retreats, constant sermons and conferences, reading. There is individual direction {and} constant "exercise" in the ascetic life. Hence for all the years of the monastic life through which the student has now passed, he has been subjected *intensively* to ascetic formation and has at least gathered some smattering of knowledge about mystical theology.

Hence the purpose of these lectures is not to cover every detail and aspect of the subject, but to look over the whole field, to *coordinate* and *deepen* the ascetic knowledge that it

program in Christian Culture there: see his December 13, 1961 letter to Bruno Schlesinger, a faculty member at the college (*Hidden Ground of Love*, 541-43).

is presumed everybody has, and to orient that asceticism to the mystical life. (15)

Though the heading "ASCETICAL AND MYSTICAL THEOLOGY" is found in the typescript on the first page of the text proper and is sometimes used to refer to these conferences,²⁶ the title used on the preceding handwritten page that includes the Foreword is the more accurate "An Introduction to Christian Mysticism," which is therefore used as the title for this volume.

A second principle was to omit certain topics that had been discussed by Merton in novitiate courses and were available in mimeographed form:²⁷ thus he mentions that despite their importance to the subject he will not be looking in detail at St. Paul's mystical teaching (40), or at Origen (52), or at the Cistercians (18), because they had been discussed in other courses, though references to all of them, particularly the Cistercians, are brought in at appropriate places. Certain other figures that would certainly merit inclusion, such as Jan Ruysbroeck and the English mystics of the fourteenth century, do not appear; they were perhaps originally intended to be included under the heading of "The 14th-15th cents." but were omitted because of time constraints. Merton writes to Sr. Madeleva, who inquired about the absence of the latter group, "The chief reason why Julian of Norwich and the other English mystics are not in the notes I sent is that I did not have time to treat them adequately, and in proportion to my love for them,"²⁸ though it should be noted that this love actually was

26. See for example Victor A. Kramer, "Patterns in Thomas Merton's Introduction to Ascetical and Mystical Theology," *Cistercian Studies*, 24 (1989), 338–54; this is the title given in the Table of Contents in the "Collected Essays" and it has been pasted in on the title page of some copies of the bound mimeograph.

27. This is not always the case, however: both Gregory of Nyssa and Evagrius had been discussed in detail in Merton's conferences on Cassian and his predecessors but reappear here: see *Cassian and the Fathers*, 52–60, 88–96.

28. *Witness to Freedom*, 43 [March, 1962].

developing during the period when Merton was teaching the Mystical Theology course, as will be seen below.

The other major difference between this set of notes and those of Merton's novitiate courses is the relative absence of extended discussions of primary texts. Aside from the Appendix on the *Scala Claustralium*, not originally prepared for these conferences, only discussions of the *De Oratione* (and to a lesser extent the *Kephalaia Gnostica*) of Evagrius, the poems of Hadewijch, and the writings of Teresa of Avila and of John of the Cross are based mainly on primary source materials. Merton's survey relies heavily, as he himself points out, on secondary sources, especially those currently available only in French, such as the *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, the first two volumes of the *Histoire de Spiritualité Chrétienne*, and books such as Jean Daniélou's *Platonisme et Théologie Mystique* (on Gregory of Nyssa) and Hans Urs von Balthasar's *Liturgie Cosmique* (on Maximus the Confessor), easily accessible for the bilingual Merton. But it should be noted that generally Merton does not simply follow a single source in his own discussion of a particular topic or figure. For example in the section on divinization he uses ten different sources, and in his treatment of Meister Eckhart he incorporates material from nine different sources. As a rule, whether he is drawing on multiple sources or relying on one major source, for example the introduction to a French translation of John Tauler's sermons in his section on the fourteenth-century German preacher and mystic, he mainly uses secondary material as a quarry for quotations from the mystics themselves, so that his notes are filled with passages from the figures he is discussing even if few particular texts are discussed *in extenso*. Given the nature of the course, this strategy is both appropriate and effective.

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This reliance on secondary sources should not be taken as an indication that Merton does not highlight key themes of his own in these conferences. One such theme emphasized from the

very outset is the intrinsic relationship between mysticism and doctrine. He notes in his introductory remarks that

the great mystical tradition . . . is not separated from the dogmatic and moral tradition but *forms one whole* with it. 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. 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. Without this, there is no sanctity. The separation of theology from “spirituality” is a disaster. (15–16)

While he is critical of a sterile intellectual approach to the Christian life, theology as “a mere product of erudition” in the words of the Orthodox theologian Georges Florovsky (37), he warns against a perspective that would treat theology as “a penance and effort without value, except as a chore to be offered up, whereas spirituality is to be studied, developed, experienced.” Merton contends that this devaluation of the doctrinal content of the Christian mystery leads to “experience of experience and not experience of revelation and of God revealing,” which is “the death of contemplation” (36). He endorses von Balthasar’s evaluation of the Patristic era as an age when “personal experience and dogmatic faith were a living unity” and agrees that “[m]ysticism and experience” must be recognized as “a *servant* of revelation, of the Word, of the Church—not an evasion from service” (36). He finds in the Gospel of John the model of this integration of the doctrinal and the experiential dimensions: “It is a theology; it is mysticism—{there is} no separation between the two; both are one in *our life in Christ*” (38).

Thus union with God is recognized to be profoundly Trinitarian, a process in which the gift of the Spirit unites the believer to the Son, in whom one is united to the Father, as St. Irenaeus declares: “those who have in themselves the Spirit of God are

brought to the Logos, the Son, Who takes them and offers them to the Father. From the Father they receive incorruptibility" (51). Merton finds the same idea in Clement of Alexandria: "Through the Scriptures we are drawn by the Spirit to the Father, through the Son" (54). Likewise Merton points to the "Incarnation [as] the center of Christian mysticism" (38). The consistent Patristic teaching is that the union of the Word with humanity in the person of Jesus makes possible participation in divine life, both in this life and in eternity:

The mysticism and the dogmatic theology of the Church are inseparably united in Athanasius, to such a point that they stand and fall together by the single argument of man's divinization by the Incarnation of Christ. . . . Divinization is the result of the Incarnation; more, it is the very *purpose* of the Incarnation. . . . St. Athanasius sums up his whole doctrine: HE BECAME MAN IN ORDER THAT WE MIGHT BECOME GOD. HE MADE HIMSELF VISIBLE IN HIS BODY IN ORDER THAT WE MIGHT HAVE AN IDEA OF THE INVISIBLE FATHER. HE UNDERWENT OUTRAGES FROM MEN IN ORDER THAT WE MIGHT HAVE PART IN IMMORTALITY (*De Incarn.* 54). This gives the complete picture. St. Athanasius is not explicitly concerned with what we would call mystical experience, but his doctrine is the theological foundation for all such experience. (60, 62)

Soteriology is presented as equally central to any authentically Christian experience and interpretation of mystical union. It is only through dying to the alienated, sinful self and rising to new life with and in the resurrected Christ that one shares in the divine life of Trinitarian love. Asceticism is initially identified, based on Mark 8:34, with taking up one's cross (19) through self-denial and following Christ, and is linked to martyrdom as a participation in Christ's death and resurrection that in Ignatius of Antioch becomes an early articulation of mystical union (43). But the paschal journey is not restricted to the literal surrender of life in physical martyrdom: this pattern must be reproduced in any authentic Christian spiritual life. As Merton summarizes,

what the martyr undergoes physically every Christian must undergo spiritually:

The tradition of the martyrs makes it clear that to attain to perfect union with God, a “death” of the self is necessary. . . . How does one die to self? The martyr’s case is unambiguous. His exterior, bodily self is destroyed in a real death, and his inner self lives in Christ, raised up with Christ. . . . The ascetic and mystical death to self must in some sense reproduce what is most essential in the martyr’s death. Actual dissolution of the union of body and soul is not of the “essence” of this death of the self, but complete liberation from bodily desires seems to be so. . . . We must bear in mind the question of the “death of the self” as we proceed in this course. It will be interpreted variously down the ages (v.g. the mystic death in the Dark Night of St. John {of the} Cross, the stigmatization of St. Francis, etc.) (48)

Merton finds this same focus to be central as well in his own Cistercian tradition:

We see in Bernard the full mystical explicitation of what is contained and already quite explicit in the Fathers. Observe how the idea of death to ourselves in order to live in Christ is expressed here. It is a mystical transposition of the literal death we saw in the great martyr-theologians. {Note the} classical expressions—the drop of water in the barrel of wine, etc. Note the nature of this “death”: it is “*death by absorption into a higher life*”—death brought about by a life—the end of one life by being lifted into a higher life of a more exalted nature. (64)

Thus in Merton’s view the mystical and the doctrinal are inseparable. Christian life must be the actualization of the saving mysteries that are professed in faith and celebrated in the liturgy and sacraments. He cites with approval Vladimir Lossky’s assertion that defense of dogma is at the same time a defense of the authentic possibilities for sharing the divine life. He summarizes:

By “mysticism” we can mean the personal experience of what is revealed to all and realized in all in the mystery of Christ. And by “theology” we mean the common revelation of the mystery which is to be lived by all. The two belong together. There is no theology without mysticism (for it would have no relation to the real life of God in us) and there is no mysticism without theology (because it would be at the mercy of individual and subjective fantasy). . . . Mysticism and theology have one and the same end—they culminate in *theosis* or the fullness of the divine life in the souls of the faithful. (65–66)

The loss of this interpenetration of doctrine and experience in the West during the late Middle Ages is for Merton one of the main reasons for the eclipse of the contemplative life in the centuries since the Reformation, and its recovery is one of the imperatives of the renewal of contemporary Christian life, a recovery that Merton sees as being assisted immeasurably by a revived awareness of the Eastern Christian tradition, both in the Patristic era and later, for the East largely was able to avoid the split between doctrine and life that developed in the West with the rise of the more objective, “scientific” theology of the schools and the concomitant separation of knowledge and love among the “affective Dionysians” following the lead of Thomas Gallus, along with the general tendency toward anti-intellectualism that predominated among spiritual writers from the late Middle Ages down to modern times; Merton much preferred the idea maintained in his own Cistercian tradition, that love was itself a way of knowing (“*Amor ipse notitia est*” [84]) to any sharp dichotomizing of knowledge and love. Though he made no pretensions to being a systematic theologian himself, Merton makes clear in these lectures that he considers solid systematic theology neither a threat nor a distraction to contemplation, but its vitally necessary foundation.

At the same time, however, Merton is just as clear that neither theology nor mysticism can be reduced to a neat, tidy collection of precise, logically articulated concepts. Hence the central

importance of the *via negativa*, the apophatic dimension, in these notes as in Merton's work as a whole. The Christian life culminates in an encounter with the divine mystery that infinitely transcends words, images and ideas. Hence the importance of the teaching of Gregory of Nyssa, Pseudo-Dionysius, Meister Eckhart, John of the Cross and other teachers of the negative way in these pages, and hence also the critique of Dom Cuthbert Butler's thesis of a tradition of "Western Mysticism" that is basically cataphatic and untouched by the Dionysian emphasis on the luminous darkness in which God must be encountered (168–70), as well as the hint of impatience evident in his discussions of the plethora of labels for degrees of spiritual attainment among later commentators on Teresa of Avila (241). Early in his introductory remarks, Merton states that "the apophatic (dark) tradition . . . is equally important in the East and in the West" (17), and shortly afterwards he expands on this observation in relation to the position of Butler:

He stresses the special character of *Western mysticism as a mysticism of light*, as opposed to *Eastern mysticism as a mysticism of "night,"* and he concludes that the genuine Western mystical tradition is represented by pre-Dionysian authors: Augustine, Gregory, and Bernard. The later Western mystics, influenced by the introduction of the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius into the West, are, he says, not true to the Western tradition. (This is aimed especially at St. John of the Cross, but also people like Tauler, Ruysbroeck, etc.)

He observes, "This distinction is important and we shall see that it comes close to the heart of the matter in these conferences of ours" (30–31). While he perhaps overstates the polemical nature of Butler's approach (the abbot draws liberally on John of the Cross and even cites Pseudo-Dionysius in his opening descriptions of mysticism as well as in the "afterthoughts" that are included in the second edition of his book), Merton does raise valid questions, both historical and theological, about any approach to mysticism that would exclude or subordinate the way of

“unknowing” in contemplative experience. In writing of Gregory of Nyssa, he points out that the emphasis on the divine darkness in his writings is both doctrinal and experiential: it is a refutation of the radical Arian (Anomoean) contention of Eunomius and Aetius that the being of God is intellectually comprehensible (and so incompatible with orthodox Trinitarian dogma) (76–77), and is a description of “an existential contact and communion with the very being of God, which remains unknowable in all its fullness,” a darkness that is not mere agnosticism but a recognition, an experience, of the infinite reality of God that is therefore “a *positive reality and a light*” and thus “*more true than any determinate conceptual knowledge of God*” (79). Likewise the teaching of the *Mystical Theology* of Pseudo-Dionysius is not the opposite of the cataphatic approach found in the author’s other works but its completion. “The originality of his theology is also contingent upon its *unity*. The *Mystical Theology* must not be separated from all the rest of his works. . . . It presupposes all the other Dionysian writings. It presupposes the theology of light and darkness in the *Hierarchies* and the *Divine Names*. It presupposes a strong emphasis on *symbolic and sacramental* theology” (137). Merton attributes the fissure between scholastic and spiritual theology not to the “invasion” of Dionysian thought into the West but to an artificial separation of the *Mystical Theology* from the rest of the Dionysian corpus: “It is quite likely that the writers of the late Middle Ages who, following Denys, broke away from scholastic theology to become professional ‘mystical theologians’ made this mistake to a great extent” (137). The *Mystical Theology* teaches not just a denial of the adequacy of all conceptual articulations of the divine attributes, but the need to transcend even the very categories of positive and negative theology, which are themselves conceptual expressions that circumscribe the infinite reality of God. Mystical theology is not talk about God, it is encountering a God who cannot be conceptualized; it is, Merton writes,

beyond both forms of discursive theology, cataphatic and apophatic. It is the FULFILLMENT OF BOTH AND THEIR JUS-

TIFICATION FOR EXISTING. It is a transcendent and experiential theology beyond symbols and discourse. It is not relative (apophatic theology is in relation to the cataphatic which it completes and corrects). Mystical theology stands in relation to no other theology. {It} is a pure immaterial vision beyond intelligence, beyond reflection and self-correction. It is beyond the division of intelligence and will: hence it is not to be called primarily a matter of intelligence or primarily a matter of love: the followers of Dionysius in the West emphasize it as an act of will and thus tend to diminish it. {It is} passive, beyond activity, {at} the summit of the spirit, invaded and possessed by ecstatic love directly given by God, a pure grace, pure love, {which} contacts God in ecstasy. *Ecstasy* {is} a complete break with sense, with intelligence and WITH THE SELF. Here Dionysius goes beyond Gregory and Evagrius: {it is} outside the intelligence, the will, all created beings and the self. This is the important contribution of Dionysius—the full meaning of ecstasy, not just a going out from all things other than the self, but out of the self also. (142–43)

But Merton is also convinced that the tendency on the part of some spiritual theologians to deemphasize or to skip over completely the intermediate levels of symbolic theology has been just as harmful to a full and adequate theology of mystical experience as the unwillingness to move beyond the level of images and ideas into the darkness of unknowing. This accounts for the emphasis in these conferences on *theoria physike*—natural contemplation²⁹—the intermediate stage in the model of spiritual

29. On September 24, 1961 Merton writes to Abdul Aziz that “the intermediate realm of what the Greek Fathers called *theoria physike* (natural contemplation) . . . deals with the symbols and images of things and their character as words or manifestations of God the Creator, whose wisdom is in them” (*Hidden Ground of Love*, 50). Merton initially provides a brief discussion of *theoria physike* (or *physica*, as he calls it there) in *The Ascent to Truth* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1951), 27–28, and again in *The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation*, ed. William H. Shannon (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2003), 67–68.

development first formulated by Evagrius, between the ascetical effort of *praktike* and the contemplative heights of *theologia*—imageless contemplation of the Trinity. As he points out in connection with Dionysius, “both in the West and in the East there developed a tendency to go directly from the ascetic life to contemplation without forms, without passing through *theoria physike*, in the Middle Ages. This is certainly as meaningful a fact as the separation between spirituality and scientific theology, probably much more meaningful. It is here really that the separation has its most disastrous effect” (137).

With their affirmation of the goodness of creation, their appeal to a “sophianic” consciousness, their attentiveness to the “epiphanies” of the hidden *logos*, the principle of order, in Shaker handicrafts and in the primitivist art of the Douanier Rousseau, Merton’s reflections on *theoria physike*, drawn particularly from the writings of Maximus the Confessor (as interpreted by Hans Urs von Balthasar), are unquestionably among the most evocative and fully realized sections of this entire set of conferences, and not surprisingly the section that has attracted the most attention from scholars.³⁰ Merton defines *theoria physike* as “a contemplation according to nature (*physis*) . . . a contemplation of God

30. See Donald P. St. John, “The Flowering of Natural Contemplation: Some Notes on *Theoria Physike* in Thomas Merton’s Unpublished *An Introduction to Christian Mysticism*,” *The Merton Seasonal*, 23.2 (Summer 1998), 13–16; and A. M. Allchin, “The Prayer of the Heart and Natural Contemplation: A Foreword to Thomas Merton’s Lecture Notes on St. Maximus,” in Bernadette Dieker and Jonathan Montaldo, eds., *Merton and Hesychasm: The Prayer of the Heart* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2003), 419–29. Kramer’s article, though more a survey of the set of conferences as a whole, also devotes particular attention to this section (347–51), as do Allchin in his earlier article, “The Worship of the Whole Creation: Merton & the Eastern Fathers,” *The Merton Annual*, 5 (1992), 189–204 (see 195–98), reprinted in *Merton & Hesychasm*, 103–20 (see 109–12); and Basil Pennington in “Thomas Merton and Byzantine Spirituality,” *Toward an Integrated Humanity: Thomas Merton’s Journey*, ed. M. Basil Pennington, ocsa, Cistercian Studies [CS], vol. 103 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1988), 132–48 (see 135–38), reprinted in *Merton & Hesychasm*, 153–68 (see 155–58). This is also the only section of these notes that has been previously published: *Merton &*

in and through nature, in and through things He has created, in history. . . . the *gnosis* that apprehends the wisdom and glory of God, especially His wisdom as *Creator* and *Redeemer*" (122). It is a recognition of the inner coherence, the *logos*, of creatures and of the creation as a whole, a recognition and appreciation of the loving presence of the Creator in the creature; it is the transition point between active and contemplative lives, arising from a synergy between human effort and divine gift, providing "penetrating intuitions" (122) into the intelligibility of all that God has made. While in Evagrius and Maximus *theoria physike* culminates in awareness of pure intelligences, the angelic realm, Merton's focus is above all on the natural world as an epiphany of the divine, on the "sophianic" vision of God's active presence in the world that results not simply in insight but in personal transformation:

Man by *theoria* is able to unite the hidden wisdom of God in things with the hidden light of wisdom in himself. The meeting and marriage of these two brings about a *resplendent clarity* within man himself, and this clarity is the presence of Divine Wisdom fully recognized and active in him. Thus man becomes a mirror of the divine glory, and is resplendent with divine truth not only in his *mind* but in his *life*. He is filled with the light of wisdom which shines forth in him, and thus God is glorified in him. (125–26)

This indwelling wisdom is not only the source of reformation of the being of the person as reflecting and participating in the divine likeness, but of human activity as sharing in the divine creativity.³¹ The human person does not merely observe the

Hesychasm, 431–45 (along with the table of contents of the entire text up to but not including the material on spiritual direction: 409–18).

31. The perspective here is very similar to that found in Merton's essay "Theology of Creativity" (Thomas Merton, *Literary Essays*, ed. Brother Patrick Hart [New York: New Directions, 1981], 355–70), first published as part of a three-part symposium in *The American Benedictine Review*, 11 (Sept.–Dec., 1960), 197–213.

sacramentality of God's works but "exercises a spiritualizing influence in the world by the work of his hands which is in accord with *the creative wisdom of God* in things and in history" (126). *Theoria physike* is at the heart of a genuine theology of creativity, which is thus an intrinsic element of the mystical journey to union with God. "God Himself hands over to man, when he is thus purified and enlightened, and united with the divine will, a certain creative initiative of his own, in political life, in art, in spiritual life, in worship: man is then endowed with a *causality* of his own" (126). Conversely, the absence of this sapiential perception of the material world, a purely instrumental relationship to nature, leads to a degradation of creation through an "impersonal, pragmatic, quantitative *exploitation and manipulation* of things" which "is deliberately indifferent to their *logoi* . . . a demonic cult of change, and 'exchange'—consumption, production, destruction, for their own sakes" (130). Hence authentic contemplation, the cultivation of a consciousness oriented to wisdom, is of tremendous practical importance in a world increasingly tempted by a "demonic pseudo-contemplation, {a} mystique of technics and production" (130).

Merton's emphasis on the importance of *theoria physike* and his characterization of it as "*partly mystical and partly natural*," marked by "a manifest synergy of God and man in its action" (123) is in accord with his support of the position that the separation of asceticism and mysticism, the *bios praktikos* and the *bios theoretikos*, is "an unfortunate modern development" (21) that treats contemplation as a rarified experience that is limited to the lives of a select few. He rejects the notion that there are "two kinds of Christian perfection, *one ordinary, for all: ascetic perfection; the other extraordinary, abnormal, unique, for very few special souls: the mystical way*" and affirms that "Mysticism and asceticism form an organic whole. . . . Asceticism leads normally to mystical life; at least it disposes for it, though of course the mystical life, its normal fulfillment, remains a pure gift of God" (22). He is thus in sympathy with the position taken by Canon Saudreau and the Dominican school in the early twentieth-century controversy

with Poulain about the relationship between asceticism and mysticism that “contemplation is the normal flowering of the Baptismal vocation” (27) (though he would not endorse the conclusion of the former group that the reason that most people do not reach the heights of contemplative union in this life is due to their own culpable failure to respond to grace). The central truth for Merton is that participation in the divine life (*theosis*, divinization) has already been made possible for all through Christ’s life, death and resurrection, and the manner in which, or even the degree to which, one experiences this participation in the present life is less significant than the fact that one has responded to the invitation to life in Christ and has committed oneself to the process of journeying with Christ into the infinite abyss of divine love, a journey that according to Gregory of Nyssa’s idea of *epektasis*, or unending progress (82), begins in this world but will continue for all eternity. Calculating stages of spiritual development is of limited value when the goal infinitely transcends all limits. Hence Merton’s impatience with the myriad and ultimately unsatisfying classifications devised by commentators on St. Teresa of Avila (241), or even with the sharp distinction drawn between acquired and infused contemplation,³² a distinction unknown to patristic and medieval theologians that “really obscures the essential issue” (121), and can be applied only awkwardly and artificially to such crucial phases of the spiritual life as *theoria physike*. Grace is operative along the entire spectrum of authentic religious experience, and trying to determine at exactly what point that experience can officially be termed “mystical” can be both

32. For a thorough recent survey of this issue, strongly critical of the traditional notion of acquired contemplation, see James Arraj, *From St. John of the Cross to Us: The Story of a 400 Year Long Misunderstanding and What it Means for the Future of Christian Mysticism* (Chiloquin, OR: Inner Growth Books, 1999), which includes a brief discussion of Merton’s *Ascent to Truth* (202–204); a moderate, non-polemical presentation of the Carmelite position in favor of acquired contemplation is provided by Gabriel of Saint Mary Magdalene, ocd, in “Acquired Contemplation,” available in English as the second part of his *St. John of the Cross: Doctor of Divine Love and Contemplation* (Westminster, MD: Newman, 1946).

misleading and harmful. As he remarks concerning the spiritual senses, "It would be fatal for directors to systematically seek out manifestations of each spiritual sense in order to determine whether or not they were dealing with 'a mystic' (!!)" (89).

While Merton affirms the universal call to contemplation in these conferences, he is also particularly concerned to explore how that call is heard and followed in the monastic context in which he and his audience are living. Even though only two of the figures to whom he gives extended attention are monks, and both of these—Evagrius and Maximus—are from the Eastern Church, and although he is quite critical of Dom Butler's efforts to identify a distinctive "Western" mystical tradition based on what he admits "is most familiar in our own Benedictine family" (31), from the outset Merton identifies the purpose of the conferences as "an effort to broaden the horizons and deepen the perspectives of mystical theology in a monastic setting" (3). He is intent on countering any sort of "monastic parochialism" that would restrict the focus of a monk's knowledge and reading to works emanating from the cloister. Having been thoroughly formed in their own Benedictine and Cistercian tradition in the novitiate and juniorate, these students of pastoral theology are ready to have their horizons broadened to encompass the entire mystical tradition of the Church as an integral part of their religious inheritance and a crucial part of their spiritual formation. It is worth noting that Merton's approach to the material leading up to the period of the high Middle Ages, the era of the founding of the Cistercians in 1098, tends to be largely, though not exclusively, thematic, covering as it does the patristic period and the "monastic centuries" that his students would be already familiar with from previous courses, while the material on the later Middle Ages (thirteenth through fifteenth centuries) is more a chronological survey that acquaints the audience with key figures and movements with more breadth and rather less depth. This approach is perhaps due to some extent to the pressures of time, but also makes sure the students have at least some basic familiarity with how the spiritual tradition develops after the "golden

age" of Cistercian writers in the twelfth century. The approach changes yet again when Merton reaches the sixteenth century, with a detailed study of Teresa of Avila's teaching on contemplation, which has been so influential on the modern theory and practice of the spiritual life. If Merton thought that this was as far as he would get in the course, as apparently he did, he decided to give his students a thorough exposure to this classic teaching rather than racing to reach the present in what could only have been a superficial and unsatisfying overview. When the classes were unexpectedly extended, rather than resume the chronological survey he elected to turn his attention to the issue of spiritual direction that he had already been researching for the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, which had the advantage of having practical relevance to a class of monastic priests whose "pastoral" responsibilities would be largely if not exclusively focused on providing direction, to other members of the community and perhaps to non-monastic retreatants and correspondents. Hence the "monastic" focus of these final sections becomes more explicit and prominent, as Merton highlights the value, indeed the superior value, of the "moderate . . . traditional and monastic" approach to spiritual direction, with its emphasis on "both the *spiritual* authority (as opposed to *juridical* authority) of the director and the spontaneity of the relationship between the one directed and the director" (260), as compared with the highly institutionalized and overly casual approaches to direction he labels "type A" and "type B." After this thematic and historical overview of spiritual direction, Merton was able to integrate this material with his earlier discussion of St. Teresa by examining the role of direction in "the crises of the mystical life" (294) as exemplified by Teresa's own experiences, positive and negative, with her directors and to move from there to the teaching of John of the Cross on direction, and more broadly to his teaching on the nights of sense and spirit that have at best an indirect connection with the ostensible topic of spiritual direction, but which enable him to bring the set of conferences to an appropriate conclusion by giving the young monks at least some exposure to a figure of such formative

significance to his own spiritual development, and so prominent and influential a “modern” representative of the ancient apophatic tradition of mysticism that Merton had highlighted in earlier sections of the course.

Apparently prompted by factors extrinsic to the course as initially planned, the abrupt shift of subject matter in the two final sections, while ultimately woven, somewhat tenuously, into the overall design, is a reminder that *An Introduction to Christian Mysticism* should not be approached or evaluated as a finished product but as the record of a process, an opportunity to discover what Fr. Louis considered to be essential materials on the Christian mystical tradition with which fully formed members of his monastic community should have at least a basic familiarity. In the absence of recordings of the actual classes,³³ it provides the only access to this unique occasion when Gethsemani’s novice master instructed a group composed of professed and ordained monks. As such it occupies a singular place in the series of Merton’s monastic conferences. Because of the subject matter it has attracted, and perhaps will continue to attract, somewhat more attention than the novitiate conferences on various aspects of the specifically monastic tradition. But it is important to keep in mind the character of the material as lecture notes and so to avoid higher expectations of consistency, completeness or stylistic polish than such a “genre” is intended to provide. In the section on the spiritual senses, for example, Merton initially states, “When we talk of the spiritual senses we are talking of a very special apprehension of God which is *in no way dependent on* the bodily or interior senses” (83). This is to guard against any inclination simply to identify mystical experience with visions, auditions and other “paranormal” experiences. Yet he later cites with evident agreement the position of Dom Anselm Stolz that “the exercise of the spiritual senses is not a matter of an extraordinary

33. Merton’s novitiate classes began to be taped only in late April 1962 (for details see *Cassian and the Fathers*, xlvii).

psychological act, nor is it a matter of special spiritual senses in the soul which are *opposed to the bodily senses*, but rather an exercise of the *spiritualized senses* on a mystical level" (91), and sees this approach as in accord with the teachers of the Oriental Church, who "do not try to *account for mystical apprehensions* by pointing to the senses; rather they try to account for the *share of the senses* in mystical experience. Mystical experience is spiritual, and it *reaches the senses in a spiritual way* through and in the spirit. The 'spiritual senses' are thus the senses themselves, but spiritualized and under the sway of the spirit, rather than new spiritual faculties" (91). There is an inconsistency, in fact a flat contradiction, between Merton's initial statement and these later comments, part of a handwritten insert that was not part of the original discussion of the spiritual senses. Had these notes been prepared for publication, Merton would surely have rewritten this section to remove the incompatibility between these statements; as it was, his discovery of new sources providing new perspectives and insights prompted him to incorporate them into the notes without attempting to reconcile them with what had been said earlier. It is interesting to note that it is the class on the spiritual senses that Merton mentions as prompting a lively discussion at the hermitage—perhaps it was consideration of the inconsistency between these positions that accounted for part of the liveliness. In any case, this example makes clear that the notes are a work in progress and need to be regarded as such. This does not diminish the value of these lectures if they are approached as a record of Thomas Merton's ongoing engagement with the Christian contemplative tradition and of his role in communicating the riches of this tradition to other members of his monastic community, rather than as any sort of definitive treatment of Christian mysticism or as a definitive statement of Merton's own knowledge and evaluation of the mystics.

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In fact it is clear that preparing and teaching this course was as much a stimulus to as a product of Merton's engagement with

the mystical tradition. As so often, his enthusiasm for a particular figure or topic drew him into deeper exploration. One such figure is the fourteenth-century Flemish Béguine mystic Hadewijch of Brabant; Merton's friend, the Carthusian Jean-Baptiste Porion,³⁴ had evidently sent Merton his translation of Hadewijch soon after it was published in 1955, but until now Merton had not paid it much attention. On May 7, shortly before the "official" course ends, he comments in the journal, "Have finally after five—no, seven, years got down to work on the remarkable little book of Dom . . . Porion on Hadewijch. The introduction is full of information and of sagacious remarks. A really new and clear perspective." He adds, "I am more and more fascinated by the mysticism of the late Middle Ages, with its defects and its qualities. The whole scope of the vast movement going back to the Cistercians, Joachim [de {Fiore}], St. Francis, the Béguines, the Cathari, the Spirituals, *assimilated* fully by the Church in the great Rhenish mystics . . . We have not even begun to understand all this, or appreciate its purport."³⁵ Merton relied heavily on Porion's introduction for his discussion not only of Hadewijch but of the entire period, and ended up inserting two handwritten pages of

34. Porion was a Carthusian monk of La Grande Chartreuse who later became the Procurator General of the Order—two letters from Merton's correspondence with him are included in Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity: Letters on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction*, ed. Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1990): the first, from February 9, 1952, in which he comments, "You are Carthusian precisely because you are yourself: you are a man who loves God, in sympathy with Ruysbroeck and Hadjewish [*sic*], etc., in a Charterhouse" (33); the second (*School of Charity*, 210–11), written March 22, 1964, concerns Merton's dedication to him of his translation of a letter of Guigo the Carthusian (*The Solitary Life* [Worcester: Stanbrook Abbey Press, 1963]). Dom Porion later collaborated with Merton and Dom André Louf on the statement entitled "Contemplatives and the Crisis of Faith," addressed to the Synod of Bishops meeting in Rome in October 1967 (published in Thomas Merton, *The Monastic Journey*, ed. Brother Patrick Hart [Kansas City: Sheed, Andrews & McMeel, 1977], 174–78).

35. *Turning Toward the World*, 117 (text reads "Fione").

translated excerpts from the poems of Hadewijch into his conference notes.

Other new or renewed engagement with primary sources had less impact on the actual text of the conferences. On April 2, Easter Sunday, he writes in his journal of beginning to read Gregory of Nyssa's *Homilies on the Canticle of Canticles*³⁶—this was apparently after he had discussed Gregory with the class, since the material on Gregory precedes (and overlaps with) the topic of the spiritual senses that was the focus of the March 24 class at the hermitage. On August 19 he records that he has begun to read the *Theologia Germanica*, which the library had just purchased,³⁷ and eight days later, on the fourth Sunday of August, he mentions the book's teaching "on the heaven and hell we carry about within us, and how it is good to experience within one or the other of these, for there one is in God's hands."³⁸ While it is unclear exactly where Merton would have been in the now extended mystical theology course, it seems probable that his interest in the work was prompted by his reading of secondary sources in preparing for his classes, rather than his having obtained the text for the purpose of teaching about it, since it is discussed in fairly summary fashion, amounting only to a paragraph, in the notes, and the three brief quotations from the work are not drawn from the translation he read.

36. *Turning Toward the World*, 105; Merton will return to Gregory of Nyssa at the end of the year when a new anthology (*From Glory to Glory: Texts from Gregory of Nyssa's Mystical Writings*) arrives; he writes to Etta Gullick on December 22, "The new book on Gregory of Nyssa by Danielou and Musurillo has been sent me for review by Scribner's. I wonder if it is published in England. It is excellent as far as I have gone with it. A good clear introduction by Danielou and plenty of the best texts, though unfortunately they are all from the old Migne edition and not from the new critical edition of Werner Jaeger" (*Hidden Ground of Love*, 348). Apparently he never wrote a review of the book.

37. *Turning Toward the World*, 153.

38. *Turning Toward the World*, 157; see also the revised version of this passage in Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 165.

A more extensive example of his work on the course leading to deeper knowledge of a writer is Clement of Alexandria. All the citations from Clement in the notes depend on secondary sources, but on the same day he finishes the “official” course (May 19), he records in his journal, “Enjoy Clement of Alexandria. He is underrated and ignored. A great mind and a great Christian, noble and broad and belonging to antiquity, yet new.”³⁹ On August 19 he writes that he has finished reading Clement’s *Protreptikos* and has begun his second work, the *Pedagogue*, and adds, “He is certainly one of the Fathers I like best, and with whom I feel the closest affinity.”⁴⁰ Three days later he writes to Edward Deming Andrews, “I am currently very interested in Clement of Alexandria, one of the earliest Christian ‘Gnostics,’ and his spirit has much in common with that of Shaker simplicity and joy.”⁴¹ By mid-November he has reached the *Stromateis*, the third book of Clement’s “trilogy,” and on November 14 he contrasts Adolf Eichmann’s “sanity” with “the true sanity of Clement of Alexandria. His beautiful, clear, clean doctrines full of peace and light. That we are planted in Christ as in Paradise. His realization of hope in Christ, Life in the Spirit. There is no other true sanity. *Epistemonike Theosebeia* [Understanding fear of God].”⁴² Five days later he notes that he is reading the *Stromateis* “with comfort and consolation” and adds, “I see no problem at all in his ‘esotericism.’ Obviously one cannot tell everybody everything, and there are certain truths for which the vast majority are not and never will be prepared. I cannot talk to the novices about the things which are central in my own spiritual life—or not about many of them, and about none of them directly.”⁴³ He is still reading

39. *Turning Toward the World*, 120.

40. *Turning Toward the World*, 154.

41. *Hidden Ground of Love*, 35.

42. *Turning Toward the World*, 179.

43. *Turning Toward the World*, 181; see also the entry for November 21: “Once again I am in favor of the esoteric principles of Clement of Alexandria” (*Turning Toward the World*, 182).

Clement on December 4,⁴⁴ and on December 13 writes to Bruno Schlesinger of St. Mary's College at Notre Dame concerning the proposed Christian Culture program at the college:

Here I might mention someone who I think ought to be known and consulted as a choragos for our music, and that is Clement of Alexandria. In fact I think one might profitably concentrate a great deal of attention on the Alexandrian school, not only the Christians, but all that extraordinary complex of trends, the Jewish and gnostic and neo-Platonist, Philo above all, and then the Desert Fathers too, just outside. And Origen. And the Palestinians who reacted against Alexandria, and the Antiochians. Here we have a crucially important seedbed of future developments. . . . Here again we rejoin the Alexandrians and Greeks. The purpose of a Christian humanism should be to liberate man from the mere status of *animalis homo* (sarkikos) to at least the level of *rationalis* (psuchicos) and better still spiritual, gnostic or pneumatic.⁴⁵

His interest in Clement led not just to an extended program of reading. On August 7 he had remarked on "the marvelous opening of the *Protreptikos* . . . the 'new song'—the splendid image of the cricket flying to replace by his song the broken string in the Lyre of Eunomos at Delphi. Though he repudiates the myth he uses it splendidly. Humanity a musical instrument for God."⁴⁶ Four days later he writes, "The other morning I translated a bit from Clement of Alex. about Zeus being dead as swan, dead as

44. *Turning Toward the World*, 184; it is not clear whether Merton ever finished the lengthy *Stromateis*: on December 31, 1961 he writes in his journal, "I haven't read enough of the things I should be reading and want to read: Clement, Gregory of Nyssa" (*Turning Toward the World*, 190).

45. *Hidden Ground of Love*, 543.

46. *Turning Toward the World*, 149; see also the revised version of this passage: *Conjectures*, 170.

eagle, dead as *δρακῶν*,⁴⁷ and at some point he translated the passage about the new song as well. He initially thought he might send these excerpts to Robert Lax for his little poetry broadside *Pax*,⁴⁸ but eventually it developed into a small book of selections, the original prose transformed into verse, with an introduction.⁴⁹ On October 20 Merton noted in his journal, “Worked a little this morning on Clement of Alexandria—the selections and preface. This is satisfying work, because of my love for him.”⁵⁰ Four days later, he writes to his friend and publisher James Laughlin of New Directions, “Man is now typing a little book I got for you[:] *Clement of Alexandria*, introduction and translations about twenty five pages, selections from his *Protrepitkos*, most interesting both to philosophers, religion people, Zens, and Classical scholars. I think you will like this. I think of it as a small format, discreet little book. . . . It could be very attractive. The ms. will be along in a few days.”⁵¹ On January 19, 1962 he notes that Laughlin had been to Gethsemani on a visit and agreed to “do the little book on

47. *Turning Toward the World*, 150; see also the revised version of this passage: *Conjectures*, 172.

48. “Maybe for Paxo translate some Clements of Alexandria” (*When Prophecy Still Had a Voice*, 226 [8/16/61 letter]); another letter a week later reports: “Working on Clement of Alexandria” (*When Prophecy Still Had a Voice*, 227).

49. Thomas Merton, *Clement of Alexandria: Selections from the Protrepitkos* (New York: New Directions, 1962); the selections, without the introduction, are also found in the translations section of Thomas Merton, *Collected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1977), 934–42.

50. *Turning Toward the World*, 171.

51. Thomas Merton and James Laughlin, *Selected Letters*, ed. David D. Cooper (New York: Norton, 1997), 181; on November 10 Merton sends the material to Lax, commenting, “Here Clammish of Alexandrig. Too long for Pax after all. Think I do another for Pax, Clammish short introduction with funny sayings about two pages. This too long. This make book for New Directions. Maybe Pax take little bit, like last page. Maybe Jubiless take a little bit. . . . This is just a quick to tell about Clammish” (*When Prophecy Still Had a Voice*, 229–30). There is no indication he ever produced additional material for *Pax*.

Clement and the *Protreptikos*, which is a project I like."⁵² Proofs for the book arrived in mid-March,⁵³ and by the beginning of November it had appeared and was pronounced by Merton to be a "most handsome" volume that made him "very pleased."⁵⁴

While it did not result in any publication, or even find extensive expression in the mystical theology notes themselves, it is clear that Merton's acquaintance with and appreciation of Meister Eckhart developed significantly as a consequence of his involvement with the conferences. In a letter to Dona Luisa Coomaraswamy shortly before the course began, Merton had made a rather general comment on Eckhart, apparently in response to a question from her: "Eckhart I know. We have here a popular edition of him, and I have something in French of his. I like him, and Tauler and Ruysbroeck."⁵⁵ It is apparent from subsequent correspondence, however, that even after the "official" conferences have concluded he is still somewhat ambivalent about Eckhart, about whom he writes to his Anglican friend Etta Gullick on June 10, "I like him, but now and again he leaves one with a sense of being let down, when he goes beyond all bounds. He is more brilliant than all the other Rhenish mystics and really more interesting. Yet I like Tauler for a more steady diet."⁵⁶ But

52. *Turning Toward the World*, 195; six days later, however, he comments in his journal, "I can perhaps withdraw from publication and write only what I deeply need to write. What is that? The little Clement of Alex. book is not it, I think. Not the way it stands. But it is to be published" (*Turning Toward the World*, 197).

53. Merton writes to Laughlin on March 16, "The Clement [of Alexandria] just got in this morning, I don't know how it got held up so long, maybe Fr. Abbot wanted to read it or something. But anyway I will look over the suggestions and shoot it back to you" (*Selected Letters*, 197).

54. Merton to Laughlin, November 2, 1962 (*Selected Letters*, 211); see also his November 17 letter to Ernesto Cardenal (Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers*, ed. Christine M. Bochen [New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1993], 136).

55. *Hidden Ground of Love*, 129 [2/12/61].

56. *Hidden Ground of Love*, 342; see also his May 13 letter to his Pakistani correspondent Abdul Aziz, in which he compares the Islamic doctrine of Tawhid (unity) to the idea of "the 'Godhead' beyond 'God'" in Eckhart and the

Mrs. Gullick is an advocate for Eckhart, and sends along an article on him by a former Benedictine, C. F. Kelley, and eventually a book by Vladimir Lossky, already a favorite author of Merton.⁵⁷ On July 1 Merton writes to Mrs. Gullick, "And you are of course right about Eckhart. He is more and more wonderful, and when properly interpreted, becomes less 'way out' as our beats say. There is more in one sermon of Eckhart than in volumes of other people. There is so much packed in between the lines."⁵⁸ Three days later his journal entry reveals that he is fully drawn into Eckhart's work for the first time:

I am becoming entranced with Eckhart: I have been won by the brevity, the incisiveness of his sermons, his way of piercing straight to the heart of the inner life, the awakened spark, the creative and redeeming word, God born in us. He is a great man who was pulled down by little men who thought they could destroy him. Who thought they could take him to Avignon and have him ruined and indeed he was ruined in 28 propositions which did not altogether resemble his joy and his energy and his freedom, but which could be brought to coincide with words he had uttered.⁵⁹

Rhenish mystics, which he describes as "a distinction which caused trouble to many theologians in the Middle Ages and is not accepted without qualifications" and "a subtle and difficult theology," adding "I don't venture into it without necessity" (*Hidden Ground of Love*, 49).

57. See *Hidden Ground of Love*, 343 [letter of July 1, 1961], 344 [letter of July 25, 1961]; *Turning Toward the World*, 145 [July 26, 1961], 147 [August 3, 1961].

58. *Hidden Ground of Love*, 343; see also his journal entry for August 6: "Today I read the wonderful sermon on the divine truth in which Eckhart says that as a person about to be struck by a thunderbolt turns toward it, and all the leaves of a tree about to be struck turn toward it, so one in whom the divine birth is to take place turns, without realizing, completely toward it" (*Turning Toward the World*, 148; see as well the revised version of this passage: *Conjectures*, 169).

59. *Turning Toward the World*, 137; see also the revised version of this passage: *Conjectures*, 42–43. On September 16 Merton writes to Pablo Antonio Cuadra, "I have been studying Meister Eckhart, who is tremendous" (*Courage for Truth*, 189).

Thus Merton's engagement with a figure who will be of increasing importance for his work in the last years of his life⁶⁰ begins during the course of, though not to any significant extent in the actual text of, his mystical theology conferences.

The expansion of Merton's interest in mystical writers during the months of the mystical theology conferences extended even beyond the authors discussed in the text. He becomes increasingly intrigued with the hitherto anonymous fourteenth-century text *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, mentioned only in passing in the conferences (183–84), and particularly with the possibility (now generally accepted) that it was written by the Béguine Marguerite Porete, who was burned as a heretic at Paris in 1310. Etta Gullick, once again, seems to have called his attention to the book, as he writes to her on May 15, "I have heard of *The Mirror of Simple Souls*."

60. Merton will return to Eckhart particularly during the spring and summer of 1966, during his time at the hospital for back surgery and its tumultuous aftermath. See Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom. Journals, vol. 6: 1966–1967*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: Harper-Collins, 1997), 38: "The best thing of all was lying reading Eckhart, or sitting up, when I finally could, copying sentences from the sermons that I can use if I write on him. It was this that saved me, and when I got back to the hermitage last evening to say the Easter offices everything else drained off and Eckhart remained as real. The rest was like something I had imagined" [April 10, 1966—Easter Sunday]; two days later, he again writes of Eckhart, transposing his thought, interestingly, into a more "paschal" mode: "Christ died for all that we *might no longer live for ourselves but for him who died for us and rose again*. This is the heart of Eckhart, and remains that in spite of all confusions. At least that is the way I understand him, though he does speak of the Godhead, and living 'in' the Godhead rather than 'for Christ'" (*Learning to Love*, 39); see also the references to "Eckhart's Castle" and the "little spark" in Merton's hospital poem, "With the World in My Bloodstream" (*Collected Poems*, 615–18). On Merton and Eckhart, see: Oliver Davies, "Thomas Merton and Meister Eckhart," *The Merton Journal*, 4.2 (Advent 1997), 15–24; Robert Faricy, SJ, "On Understanding Thomas Merton: Merton, Zen, and Eckhart," *Studies in Spirituality*, 9 (1999), 189–202; Thomas O'Meara, OP, "Meister Eckhart's Destiny: In Memory of Thomas Merton," *Spirituality Today*, 30 (Sept. 1978), 348–59; Erlinda Paguio, "Blazing in the Spark of God: Thomas Merton's References to Meister Eckhart," *The Merton Annual*, 5 (1992), 247–62.

It is attributed to Marguerite Porete, an unfortunate Beguine who was burned for some very innocent statements. I would like to get to know this book."⁶¹ On July 1 he writes to her, "It would be nice if the *Mirror* were by Marguerite Porete, I feel sorry for her, and would be pleased if it turned out she had after all written a very orthodox spiritual 'classic.'"⁶² Early the following year he again refers to the *Mirror* and the question of authorship in letters to Mrs. Gullick,⁶³ and later that year she secures a copy of it and sends it to Merton, who reflects in a journal entry for October 7, "What a charming and wise book! Yet I think it is Marguerite Porete who wrote it, and she was burned. What sad, impossible things have happened in this holy Church!"⁶⁴ Writing to Mrs. Gullick later that month to express his gratitude for the gift, Merton remarks: "Thanks so much for *The Mirror of Simple Souls*. I am really enjoying it, though I find that I have a hard time getting anywhere for great lengths in such books. A little goes a long way. It is an admirable book, but one which one does not really 'read.' I hold it in my hand walking about in the woods, as if I were reading. But it is charming and bold and right."⁶⁵ Apparently he does eventually finish reading it, as he writes to E. I. Watkin in May, 1963: "Recently I have read *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, which Etta Gullick lent me. It is a marvelous book, and has some magnificent and original things in it. And is so splendidly written. I understand it is by Marguerite Porete, who was burned at the stake. . . . There is no question that the mystics are the ones who have kept Christianity going, if anyone has."⁶⁶

61. *Hidden Ground of Love*, 341; see also his letter to her of June 10 (342).

62. *Hidden Ground of Love*, 343.

63. *Hidden Ground of Love*, 350 [January 29, 1962], 351 [March 30, 1962].

64. *Turning Toward the World*, 254.

65. *Hidden Ground of Love*, 355.

66. *Hidden Ground of Love*, 583; see also his letter to Etta Gullick of March 24, 1963: "how much I love the *Mirror* and how much I thank you for letting me keep it. It is really one of my favorite books. . . . The language is wonderful, the expressions are charming, and of course I like the doctrine. But I can see how it could have got poor Marguerite in trouble (you see, I am convinced that she

At the very outset of the mystical theology course, no doubt reflecting on his reading in preparation for the conferences, Merton had described himself as “still a 14th century man: the century of Eckhart, Ruysbroeck, Tauler, the English recluses, the author of the *Cloud*, Langland and Chaucer—more an independent and a hermit than a community man, by no means an ascetic, interested in psychology, a lover of the dark cloud in which God is found by love.”⁶⁷ His interest in Marguerite Porete is part of the same fascination with this era.⁶⁸ But even more significant is the blossoming of his love for the English mystics during this same period, prompted by his preparation of a review of a new book by David Knowles,⁶⁹ but also in part by his immersion in

is the author). As you say, one must fear delusion and heresy in such matters as this, but great simplicity, humility and purity of faith, and above all detachment from a self that experiences itself in prayer, or a self that desires anything for itself, is a sure safeguard” (*Hidden Ground of Love*, 358–59).

67. *Turning Toward the World*, 99.

68. See also his lengthy reflection five days later on the great figures from the following century, who are discussed only briefly in the conference notes: “The saints of the 15th century—are among those who most move me. The collapse of medieval society, corruption of the clergy, decadence of conventual life—and there emerge men and women of the laity *supremely obedient to God*. Especially Nicholas of Flue and Joan of Arc. Complete and simple signs of contradiction to worldliness and system and convention and prejudiced interest. *Not* rebels at all, but completely meek and submissive instruments of God. In them you see clearly and movingly revealed what it is *not* to be a mere rebel but to be obedient to God as a sign to men, a sign of mercy, a revelation of truth and of power. I am drawn to these ‘signs’ of God with all the love of my heart, trusting above all in their love and their intercession, for they live in the glory of God, and I would not love them if God had not made them ‘sacraments’ to me. St. Catherine of Genoa also, whom Natasha Spender loves (she keeps wanting me to write about C. of G.). Note especially the fabulous supernatural providence with which St. Joan remained obedient to the *church* while resisting her judges who seemed to be and claimed to be speaking entirely for the Church” (*Turning Toward the World*, 100; see also the revised version of this passage: *Conjectures*, 145).

69. Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1967), 128–53; this is a revised version of the review article that first appeared in *Jubilee* (Sept. 1961), 36–40. It is a review not only of David Knowles,

the period for his conferences, though they are mentioned only in passing there. Already on Easter (April 2) he speaks of “reading bits of Dame Julian of Norwich”⁷⁰ the day before, and his quotation of her most famous phrase in a journal entry at the end of the same month shows he is still reading her: “There is the level of faith, on which nothing is seen, and yet there peace is evident, and it is no self-delusion to say ‘all manner of thing shall be well’ because experience has repeatedly proved it.”⁷¹ A week later, in the same entry in which he mentions that he has completed his review, he tells himself, “Must get to know Hilton. Have been put off by the {Goad} of Love, which is not really his.”⁷² The faithful Etta Gullick sends him a new translation of *The Cloud of Unknowing* in June, and Merton comments in a letter to her of reading both it and Hilton: “I like the Penguin edition of the *Cloud*. It is clear and easy for the contemporary reader. Yet it does lose some of the richness of the older more concrete English. I like the fourteenth-century English mystics more and more. I am reading [Walter Hilton’s] *The Scale [of Perfection]*, which has such a great deal in it.”⁷³ In late August he quotes from “three wonderful chapters in the *Cloud of Unknowing* on Martha and Mary,”⁷⁴ but it is above all to Julian that he is drawn: “all this year I have been more and more attracted to her,”⁷⁵ he writes in late October.

The English Mystical Tradition (New York: Harper, 1961) but of Eric Colledge’s anthology *The Medieval Mystics of England* (New York: Scribner’s, 1961) and of Thomas Traherne, *Centuries of Meditations* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960).

70. *Turning Toward the World*, 105.

71. *Turning Toward the World*, 113 [April 29, 1961].

72. *Turning Toward the World*, 117 [May 7, 1961] (text reads “Guard”).

73. *Hidden Ground of Love*, 343 [July 1, 1961].

74. *Turning Toward the World*, 156 [August 26, 1961]; on the *Cloud*, see also Merton’s Foreword to William Johnston, *The Mysticism of the Cloud of Unknowing: A Modern Interpretation* (New York: Desclée, 1967), ix–xiv; second ed. (St. Meinrad, IN: Abbey Press, 1975), vii–xii.

75. *Turning Toward the World*, 173 [October 23, 1961]. On Merton and Julian, see Thomas Del Prete, “‘All Shall Be Well’: Merton’s Admiration for Julian of Norwich,” *Spiritual Life*, 39.4 (Winter 1993), 209–17.

On Christmas day his journal reflection is based on Julian: “the main thought of my heart (it has been a thought of the heart and not of the head) is that while Christ is given to me as my life, I also am given to Him as His joy and His crown (Julian of Norwich) and that he wills to take delight in saving and loving me.”⁷⁶ Two days later, in a long passage, he declares, “I think the gift of this Christmas has been the real discovery of Julian of Norwich. I have long been around her, and hovered at her door, and known that she was one of my best friends, and just because I was so sure of her wise friendship I did not make haste to seek what I now find.” He describes her as “a true theologian, with a greater clarity and organization and depth even than St. Theresa,” and praises the way in which she ponders the meaning of her visionary experience: “she really elaborates the content of revelation as deeply experienced. It is first experienced, then thought, and the thought deepens again into life, so that all her life the content of her vision was penetrating her through and through.” He is struck above all about the way in which she is able peacefully to live in the midst of the “apparent contradiction” between her confidence in the ultimate eschatological conviction that “all shall be made well” and her submission to the Church’s doctrine of the damnation of the reprobate. This steadfastness serves as an inspiration and a model for Merton: “I believe that this ‘wise heart’ I have prayed for is precisely in this—to stay in this hope and this contradiction, fixed on the certainty of the ‘great deed’—which alone gives the Christian and spiritual life its true, full dimension.”⁷⁷ In a letter to Clare Boothe Luce written this same week he calls Julian “a mighty theologian, in all her simplicity and love,”⁷⁸ and in March of 1962, writing to Sr. Madeleva to explain why Julian and the other English mystics were omitted from the mystical theology notes, he calls her “without doubt

76. *Turning Toward the World*, 189.

77. *Turning Toward the World*, 189; see also the revised version of this passage: *Conjectures*, 191–92.

78. *Witness to Freedom*, 26.

one of the most wonderful of all Christian voices” and “with Newman, the greatest English theologian,” above all because she has grounded her thinking and writing in “her experience of the substantial center of the great Christian mystery of Redemption. . . . the objective mystery of Christ as apprehended by her, with the mind and formation of a fourteenth-century English woman.”⁷⁹ She has become, as Merton writes to Jacques Maritain at the end of 1962 (comparing her to Maritain’s wife Raïssa): “that mystic that I love above all others.”⁸⁰ It is somewhat ironic that in a text entitled *An Introduction to Christian Mysticism* the mystic he loves above all others is not even mentioned, but it was a love that developed during and after the time when the conferences were given, and, one may presume, a love that was prepared for and nourished by the process of researching, composing and delivering these conferences, particularly those focused on the fourteenth century.

As this series of journal and correspondence comments on Julian suggests, for a full appreciation of the mystical theology notes it is important that they be situated in the context of the time frame in which they were composed and delivered. The course was given during the period when Merton was engaged in revising his early writings on contemplation, a process that began in 1958 with his essay “Poetry and Contemplation: A Re-appraisal,”⁸¹ a reworking of his 1947 essay “Poetry and the Contemplative Life,”⁸² continued with the drafting in 1959 of what became *The Inner Experience*, developed from the pamphlet *What*

79. *Witness to Freedom*, 43.

80. *Courage for Truth*, 33.

81. Thomas Merton, *Literary Essays*, 338-54; first published in *Commonweal*, October 24, 1958.

82. Thomas Merton, *Figures for an Apocalypse* (New York: New Directions, 1947), 95–111; first published in *The Commonweal*, July 4, 1947. For a comparison of the two versions, see Patrick F. O’Connell, “Poetry & Contemplation: The Evolution of Thomas Merton’s Aesthetic,” *The Merton Journal*, 8.1 (Easter 2001), 2–11.

Is Contemplation? of 1947,⁸³ and culminated in the transformation of *Seeds of Contemplation*⁸⁴ into *New Seeds of Contemplation*,⁸⁵ an undertaking that Merton was working on at the very time that the mystical theology conferences were being developed and given.⁸⁶ Like the new versions of these works, *An Introduction to Christian Mysticism* provides evidence of Merton's mature view of the contemplative life, seen no longer "as a separate department of life" but as all of life viewed and lived in the context of God's love, "the very fullness of a fully integrated life," as the new "Author's Note" to the poetry essay strikingly puts it.⁸⁷ The classes also overlap, if only slightly, what William Shannon has called "the Year of the Cold War Letters," (October 1961–October 1962),⁸⁸

83. Thomas Merton, *What Is Contemplation?* (Holy Cross, IN: St. Mary's College, 1948); a revised version, published in England by Burns & Oates in 1950, is readily available: Thomas Merton, *What Is Contemplation?* (Springfield, IL: Templegate, 1981). For a discussion of this work and its relationship to *The Inner Experience*, see William H. Shannon, *Thomas Merton's Dark Path: The Inner Experience of a Contemplative* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1982), 17–33, 72–113, and his introduction to *The Inner Experience*, vii–xvi.

84. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1949).

85. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961); for a comparison of the various versions of *Seeds/New Seeds*, see Donald Grayston, *Thomas Merton: The Development of a Spiritual Theologian* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1985) and Ruth Fox, osb, "Merton's Journey from *Seeds* to *New Seeds*," *The Merton Annual*, 1 (1988), 249–70; see also Grayston's parallel-text edition of the versions: *Thomas Merton's Rewritings: The Five Versions of Seeds/New Seeds of Contemplation as a Key to the Development of His Thought* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1989).

86. See the journal entry for September 23, 1961: "This week—finished quickly the galley proofs of *New Seeds of Contemplation*" (*Turning Toward the World*, 164).

87. *Literary Essays*, 339.

88. William H. Shannon, *Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 215; note also that at the very time that Merton and James Laughlin were discussing the publication of Merton's selections from Clement they were also preparing his collection of articles by various authors on the atomic threat, *Breakthrough to Peace: Twelve Views on the Threat of Thermonuclear*

when Merton's newly reawakened social conscience first began to find expression in articles on war, non-violence, and eventually race, poverty and the environment. In fact, the very first of the 111 letters collected and distributed in mimeographed form⁸⁹ is one from late October to Etta Gullick in which Merton thanks her for sending articles on Eckhart and E. I. Watkin's *Poets and Mystics*, with its "chapter on Julian, whom I love dearly";⁹⁰ the collection also includes three later letters to Mrs. Gullick, all of which include material related to the mystics,⁹¹ along with two to Bruno Schlesinger, including the one recommending Clement of Alexandria,⁹² and the letter to Sr. Madeleva on the mystical theology notes themselves and on Julian,⁹³ clear evidence that for Merton contemplation and action, an interest in mysticism and a passion for justice, were not alternative but correlative, both essential ways of being faithful to God's will for humanity.

An Introduction to Christian Mysticism is not a definitive or exhaustive treatment of its subject. It is, as the title indicates, an introduction, and is even, as its Foreword states, "imperfect and incomplete." But it does provide, as the Foreword also states, by far the most extensive "historical and positive" treatment in all of Merton's writings of the "rich thought" of the Christian mysti-

Extermination (New York: New Directions, 1962); see *Turning Toward the World*, 195: "J. Laughlin was here Tuesday and Wednesday and we worked on the Peace paperback. He will also do the little book on Clement and the *Protrepitkos*, which is a project I like" [January 19, 1962].

89. These letters, hitherto available scattered through the five volumes of Merton's collected letters, have now been published together: Thomas Merton, *The Cold War Letters*, ed. William H. Shannon and Christine M. Bochen (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006).

90. *Hidden Ground of Love*, 346-47.

91. *Hidden Ground of Love*, 348-50 [December 22, 1961], 350-53 [March 30, 1962], 355-56 [October 29, 1962].

92. *Hidden Ground of Love*, 541-43 [December 13, 1961], 543-45 [February 10, 1962].

93. *Witness to Freedom*, 43-44.

cal tradition, and is therefore a valuable witness both to Merton's own knowledge of and interest in that tradition, and to what topics, figures and movements he considered it important for contemporary monks, and by extension contemporary educated Christians, to be aware of. *An Introduction to Christian Mysticism* is thus both a complement to the other writings of its period and a uniquely significant document in its own right.

* * * * *

The text of *An Introduction to Christian Mysticism* exists in two versions. Included in Volume 13 of Merton's "Collected Essays," the 24-volume compendium of published and unpublished materials assembled and bound at the Abbey of Gethsemani some time after Merton's death and now available at the abbey and at the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University in Louisville, is a 188-page mimeographed text headed "AN INTRODUCTION TO CHRISTIAN / MYSTICISM / (From the Apostolic Fathers to the Council of Trent.) / Lectures given at the Abbey of Gethsemani." It consists of the unnumbered title page; an unnumbered "Foreword" page; seven unnumbered "Table of Contents" pages, headed "ASCETICAL & MYSTICAL THEOLOGY"; 170 numbered pages of the body of the text; one unnumbered title page reading "APPENDIX TO MYSTICAL THEOLOGY / Appendix I. / The SCALA CLAUSTRALIUM."; four numbered pages of Appendix 1; four numbered pages of Appendix 2. Except for the title and Foreword pages, the fifth page of the table of contents, and the Appendix 1 title page, all the mimeographed pages are two-sided. This version of the text would have been distributed to the students at some point towards the end of the course or shortly after it was finished, and was also sent to other monasteries and various correspondents.

Also at the Bellarmine Merton Center is the original text of *An Introduction to Christian Mysticism*, composed by Merton himself, which he would have had in front of him as he was giving the conferences and which was the basic source for the retyped mimeographed text. It consists of 156 pages, partly typed and

partly handwritten, on unlined three-ring paper, heavily modified by handwritten additions included both on the pages of text themselves and on the otherwise blank verso pages, with passages marked for insertion on the recto pages opposite. One hundred ten of the pages are typed, 44 are handwritten, and two are partly handwritten and partly typed. The text begins with three preliminary handwritten pages: an epigraph from Evelyn Underhill; the title and Foreword page (marked to be typed as two separate pages); an outline of the course (later version). Then follow 141 pages of the text proper: the numbering runs from page 1 to page 121 (the number "77" is skipped but number "82" is used twice),⁹⁴ with twenty additional pages inserted with numbers followed by letters.⁹⁵ The final twelve pages, all handwritten, consist of a title page for Appendix 1, four pages of Appendix 1, five pages of Appendix 2, and two additional pages of notes on Gordon Zahn's book *German Catholics and Hitler's Wars*.⁹⁶ In addition, a preliminary handwritten outline of the course is inserted after page 69.

94. Pages 1–7 (the first two unnumbered) are typed; 8–9 (handwritten), 10–23 (typed; # 18 handwritten; # 22 corrected by hand for typed # 20), 24 (typed), 25 (handwritten), 26–60 (typed; # 46 handwritten; ## 59, 60 corrected by hand for typed ## 58, 59), 61 (partly handwritten, partly typed), 62–67 (typed), 68 (partly handwritten, partly typed), 69 (typed), 70–72 (handwritten), 73–74 (typed), 75–76, 78 (handwritten), 79–82 (typed), 82–86 (handwritten), 87–105 (typed; # 90 corrected by hand for typed # 89), 106–10 (handwritten), 111–21 (typed).

95. Pages 7a-b (handwritten), 9a-b (typed), 23a-b (handwritten), 27a (handwritten; unnumbered, but referred to as 27a in a note on the previous page), 66a-c (handwritten), 68a-b (handwritten), 78a-b (typed), 98a-d (typed), 115a-b (typed).

96. See Merton's March 1962 letter to Frank Sheed praising this book, published by Sheed and Ward, as "a most important and very well-done job of work" (*Witness to Freedom*, 45); Merton perhaps associated it with Lifton's book on brainwashing and so inserted his notes on it at the back of the mystical theology notes, but the material is not labeled an appendix and is not included in the mimeograph, so it does not seem to have been considered an actual part of the mystical theology material.

This version of the text, typed and handwritten by Merton himself, serves as copy text for the present edition of *An Introduction to Christian Mysticism*, with the following modifications: the epigraph, which Merton subsequently incorporated into the Foreword, the two versions of the outline of the course, and the two pages of notes on the Zahn book have not been included as part of the text; they have been transcribed and included in the Textual Notes found in Appendix A; Merton's occasional jotted notes for announcements to the class are not considered text material and are included neither in the text nor in the textual notes;⁹⁷ the Table of Contents from the mimeograph and the occasional places in the mimeograph where the typist has followed Merton's directions to incorporate quotations from printed material that he did not type or write out himself are included in the text—these latter additions are listed in the Textual Notes in Appendix A.

All substantive additions made to the text, in order to turn elliptical or fragmentary statements into complete sentences, are included in braces, as are the few emendations incorporated directly into the text, so that the reader can always determine exactly what Merton himself wrote. No effort is made to reproduce Merton's rather inconsistent punctuation, paragraphing, abbreviations and typographical features; a standardized format for these features is established that in the judgement of the editor best represents a synthesis of Merton's own practice and contemporary usage: e.g., all Latin passages are italicized unless specific parts of a longer passage are underlined by Merton, in which case the underlined section of the passage is in roman type; all other passages underlined by Merton are italicized; words in upper case in the text are printed in small caps; periods and commas are uniformly included within quotation marks; patterns of abbreviation and capitalization, very inconsistent in the copy text, are regularized. Latin passages in the original text

97. These are found on verso pages opposite pages 15, 23, 41, 43, 49, 57, 94, 98a, 100, 118, and the third page of Appendix 1.

are left in Latin but translated by the editor in the notes. All references to primary and secondary sources are cited in the notes. All identified errors in Merton's text are noted and if possible corrected. All instances where subsequent research and expanded knowledge affect Merton's accuracy are discussed in the notes.

The textual apparatus does not attempt to record every variation between the different versions of the text. Errors, whether of omission or of mistranscription, in the mimeograph version of the text where this is not being used as copy text, are not recorded since they have no independent authority vis-à-vis the copy text. Notes on the text record:

- a) all cases in which a reading from the mimeograph version is substituted for the copy text—generally limited to the typist following Merton's own instructions for expanding the text; in those cases where Merton's direction to expand the text is not followed, the text is left as it is, the direction is recorded in the textual apparatus, and the addition is included in the explanatory notes;
- b) all on-line corrections Merton made in the process of typing (i.e., crossing out one word or phrase and immediately substituting another);
- c) all handwritten additions or alterations to the original text.

Thus the textual notes allow the interested reader to distinguish between the preliminary draft of Merton's notes and the additions that he made, presumably before actually delivering the conference lectures. Since these conferences were given only once, the additions were made during the same general period as the original drafting of the text, but they do serve to indicate how Merton continued to rework his material as he prepared the conferences.

A list of suggestions for further reading is included as a second appendix, consisting first of other sources in Merton's published works where figures and topics from this volume are discussed, followed by a list of important recent studies on the

major figures and topics of this volume, that will provide helpful updating on material discussed by Merton.

* * * * *

In conclusion I would like to express my gratitude to all those who have made this volume possible:

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- to the late Robert E. Daggy, former director of the Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine College (now University), Louisville, KY, for first alerting me to the project of editing Merton's monastic conferences, and for his encouragement in this and other efforts in Merton studies;
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AN INTRODUCTION TO CHRISTIAN MYSTICISM

(From the Apostolic Fathers to the Council of Trent)

Lectures given at the Abbey of Gethsemani

FOREWORD

These notes are imperfect and incomplete and probably contain many errors. It has not been possible to carry out our original intention to discuss St. John of the Cross and the Byzantine mystical tradition. Hence the series is unfinished. These lectures represent an effort to broaden the horizons and deepen the perspectives of mystical theology in a monastic setting. The approach has been mainly historical and positive in an attempt to recover some of the rich thought of the patristic and medieval periods, and especially material that has not hitherto been available in English. The lectures were intended primarily for monastic priests in a course of “pastoral” theology – that is to say for monks who sought background and contact with sources that would enable them to be of benefit to their brethren in spiritual direction or in that *sapientiae doctrina* which St. Benedict looks for in superiors.¹ The guiding principle underlying all that is said here may be expressed in words borrowed from a non-Catholic writer who has not otherwise been quoted or consulted by us – namely, Evelyn Underhill: “The essence of mysticism being not a doctrine but a way of life, its interests require {the existence of} groups of persons who put its principles into effect.”² The idea

1. *The Rule of St. Benedict in Latin and English*, ed. and trans. Justin McCann, OSB (London: Burns, Oates, 1952), c. 64: “*Vitae autem merito et sapientiae doctrina eligatur*” (144); (“Let him [the abbot] be chosen for the worthiness of his life and for the instruction of his wisdom”) (McCann translates: “the merit of his life and his enlightened wisdom” [145]).

2. Evelyn Underhill, “Medieval Mysticism,” *The Cambridge Medieval History*, ed. J. R. Tanner, C. W. Previté-Orton, Z. N. Brooke, vol. 7, ch. 26 (Cambridge:

that mysticism has “principles” which one can, of set purpose, “put into effect” may be a little misleading: but in any case, the Christian mystical tradition is something that has been handed down not only to be talked about but to be *lived*.

Vigil of the Assumption, 1961

Cambridge University Press, 1932), 781; the bracketed words are missing in the Foreword but were included in the quotation of the same sentence that had originally been placed as the epigraph for the entire volume, apparently before the Foreword was written.