TURNING TO THE MYSTICS

Thomas Merton

James Finley

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Introduction

Encountering the Mystics

As we look back over Christian mystics down through the centuries—that is, mystic teachers who offer trustworthy guidance to people who feel interiorly drawn toward a deeper unitive experience of God's presence in their life—we might well ask: "Well, who are these people?" How can we understand what makes them—whether John of the Cross, Meister Eckhart, or Thomas Merton—a mystic? What is the nature of the teachings that they are offering us?

A mystic is a person who has come to a habituated state we can call Christ Consciousness, or God Consciousness. They bear witness to the Godly nature of the intimate immediacy of ourselves, of everybody, of all things.

The mystic teacher, having traveled this path and then awakened to it, wants to offer guidance to people who are just beginning to get a taste of this, because they know from their own experience how very bewildering this can be at first. They know how easy it is to become confused

and disheartened, asking: *What is this path and where can we find trustworthy guidance?*

To approach the teaching of the Christian mystics it is helpful to note that they assume several things about reality and about the people they are writing to. First of all, they assume there's the dignity, the reality, and the complexity of the human experience. Second, they assume that the human experience, illumined by faith, and specifically as revealed in Christ and all of the Scriptures, shows us that we're living our life in a relationship with God, and that God is in a relationship with us, that God's relatedness to us is one of oneness, and that this oneness with us is our essential reality. That is, God is perpetually creating us breath by breath, heartbeat by heartbeat. Third, they assume that the people they are counseling are living a Christian life of discipleship. That discipleship, as they understand it in its deepest sense, is intimacy with Christ. It is the mystery that we're called through Christ to share in Christ's own union with the Father. To participate in that union is our destiny. It is in this reality that we discover the ultimate meaning of our life.

In this Christian life of discipleship, a life of goodwill illumined by faith, the measure of holiness is love. Yet we know that on this earth we see God's oneness with us "as in a mirror darkly." It's like an obscure certainty in our heart. But we trust that when death comes, when we pass through the veil of death, we will not be annihilated but

consummated. No longer will we know God's oneness with us as mediated through faith, through consolations, or through insights. It will be unmediated divinity forever. Then we will be sharing in God's own life as God shares in that life as our destiny. And so we live by hope in this ultimate fulfillment. That's the Christian life.

The mystics also assume that it isn't just when we pass through the veil of death that God will be all in all, but that even now God is all in all, that even now the infinite presence of God is making itself present in and as the presence of myself, of others, and of all things, and that it's possible to experience that. That is, it's possible to experience this one life that is at once God's and my own; I can experience the oneness prior to the difference. And these are moments of religious experience. These are moments where we're like a momentary mystic, where we and God disappear as other than each other in a moment of oneness.

We would also say that the mystics assume everybody, certainly any person of faith, has little flashes of this in prayer, or sometimes in loving somebody, or having a child, or spending a long time alone in the midst of nature. Everyone has little moments of this kind of miraculous quality, an experience of this already holy nature of life itself. But what happens for some people is that these momentary flashes, even as they dissipate, can start to create a longing to abide in that oneness. Having

experienced this fleeting taste of divinity, there's growing in me a desire to abide in that oneness. That desire itself becomes a path. The mystics then are men and women who bear witness to that possibility. They are men and women who have come to a habituated state of Christ Consciousness. They bear witness to the God-given Godly nature of all things.

That, I would say, is the shared feeling tone of the mystics, though each mystic has their own genius, their own way to articulate this and offer guidance. And it is this tradition we will now consider.

The Language of the Mystics

Now, as we approach the mystics, we must accustom ourselves to a new way of thinking, a new use of language, a language that is steeped in paradox and metaphor.

There's a primary distinction in Jacques Maritain, the Thomistic philosopher, who said, "In the problematic order, the mind moves in a horizontal line to come to rest in a conclusion." So one plus one equals two. That's the order of objective knowledge, of objective reality, in which we come to conceptual conclusions. And then we apply that to life. So that's the pragmatic order of life.

When it comes to the mystics, we are really dealing with incarnate infinity, which doesn't fit into our logical,

paradigmatic consciousness. It's like, you can't get the ocean into a thimble, but you can drop the thimble into the ocean. We can't get the vastness of God's love into our finite conceptual mind by trying to grasp it, but we can drop the thimble into the ocean. And when we drop the thimble into the ocean, what kind of language can we use?

In philosophy class at the monastery where I was a novice, Dan Walsh used to say, "I know what I know, and I know that I know it. The problem is, it is only I who knows that I know it. There's a deep conviction in my heart, but when I try to explain it to anyone words fail me." And that causes us to consider different modes of language. As we read the mystics, we will see that they often resort to paradox. A paradox is an apparent contradiction. The logical mind momentarily comes to an impasse. But then sitting patiently in the impasse, the mind breaks into a qualitatively richer way to understand the question itself. And so, I think the use of paradox slows down the logical mind from seeking a conclusion so that, resting in the impasse, it might come to a kind of enigmatic certainty in the heart. I think that's the role of paradox.

As for metaphor, I like what Pastor Eugene Peterson says, speaking of the prophets: "A metaphor is a really remarkable kind of formation, because it both means what it says and what it doesn't say, and so those two

things come together."[1] So when Thomas Merton says in *New Seeds of Contemplation*, "The world and time are the dance of the Lord in emptiness,"[2] the logical mind wonders what's happening. In some sense, it's saying what it means; namely, the divinity of what is. But it doesn't say what it means. And, therefore, I'm drawn in to come closer so that I might realize what this language is saying.

I think there are other modes of this metaphoric language. I think the language of lovers is this language, because the language of lovers is not the language of explaining anything. The language lovers speak are words that express the deepest reality of their oneness with each other. I also think it's the language of the cry of the poor. The ones who cry out in pain are not looking for an explanation; they're looking for help. I also think it's the language of poets. I think poetic language, love language, the language of healing—these are all ways that language can be used to communicate and to convey these things to us.

Yet as we look at these mystics, we see that they do offer practical help. Let's say I have my rendezvous with God, and I'm sitting in meditation or prayer seeking this. What happens when I actually try to do that? Let's say I'm

[1] Eugene Peterson, interview by Krista Tippett, *On Being with Krista Tippett*, "Answering God," American Public Media, February 4, 2016.

[2] Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1972), 296.

sitting there reading a mystic or the Scriptures, and in the reading of it, I find solace in it, I rest in it. The mystics would invite us to see that solace as God's presence being conveyed to us in the cadences of the mystic's voice, like, "This is the way." They would also invite us to see that since that solace is finite, although God is present in the momentary touch of consolation, we need to be grateful for it without clinging to it, because the love of God is infinitely greater than what the solace can offer.

Likewise, we can be sitting there and get an insight, and the insight we recognize would be an insight from God. We'd also know that the mystery we seek is infinitely beyond that insight. St. John of the Cross says, "God grants it to some people to understand clearly that everything remains to be understood."[3] I'm grateful for it, but I'm always looking over it or past it toward something that's not reducible to this insight, this consolation, or anything at all. My attitude is one of gratitude in a detached openness. Likewise, let's say I'm confused. I just feel stuck, like my mind's racing. I think the mystics would say, "Well, do your best with that. Would it help you to get up and walk around for a while?"

[3] John of the Cross, *The Sayings of Light and Love* (Saying 7), in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1991), 505.

But I think the mystic would also say this: "Know that your confusion is no hindrance right in this very moment to God loving you through and through, as unexplainably precious in the mystery of your confusion. Your confusion does not have the authority to name who you are. Your confusion is no hindrance to God loving you in your confusion. Therefore, if you could learn to place your trust in God who is sustaining you in your confusion—breathing deeply into it and listening to it—your confusion, deeply accepted, is humility. Your confusion, deeply accepted, unites you with the confusion of the whole human family in the presence of God. So, I think they're always bringing that balance to joyful solace, to sorrow, and confusion. They're trying to see the divinity that permeates all that we experience.

And notice the paradox of what they're saying. Let's say you're holding a small pebble in your hand. And we would say that God is creating that pebble right at the moment you're holding it. So if God would cease loving the pebble into your hand, it would disappear. But the mystics are also saying that the infinite love of God is infinitely giving the infinity of itself away completely as that pebble. And so the smallest of things can break your heart open. Like a single glance or a look at something that causes us to recognize everything is boundaryless in all directions in the concrete simplicity of it all. And that's the paradox.

Thomas Merton

So who was Thomas Merton? Merton saw the deepest evidence of God's presence as our own life. And so there's a kind of autobiographical nature to his writing; in sharing his own life, he invites us to see God's presence in our life. Here I am giving you a simple, short version of his story. Thomas Merton was born in 1915 in France. His father was an artist. He had one brother. For all practical purposes, there was no religious upbringing in the home. If anything, there was a kind of suspicion of religion or a distance from it. Both parents died of cancer when he was young. He went to Cambridge University for one year, 1933–34. He was drinking a lot and people were concerned about him, about his kind of wildness, and so they sent him to New York to be with other relatives who would watch over him.

While he was in New York he went to Columbia University (1935–38), and while he was there, he had a series of religious experiences. He ultimately underwent a profound religious conversion and felt interiorly drawn to be baptized as a Catholic. At the time he was wondering what to do with his life. He was very involved with literature and was deeply drawn, for example, to the poetry of William Blake. He also considered the possibility of

a religious vocation, perhaps as a Franciscan. Then after meeting Catherine de Hueck Doherty, he was inspired to spend time working with her in the interracial community she had founded in Harlem called Friendship House.

Then his former philosophy professor Dan Walsh introduced him to the Trappists—the cloistered, Cistercian monks at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky. He encouraged Merton to go down for a retreat, and it had a very profound effect on Merton, and he felt called to join the community there. And so at twenty-six years old, in 1941, he left a promising career in literature and entered this cloistered Trappist monastery. In that monastery, he wrote his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, and it went onto the *New York Times* Best Sellers List. He then went on to become one of the most prolific and widely read spiritual writers in our time. As time went on, and as his own life kept evolving, in the 1960s he got involved in the contemplative wisdom of the non-Christian traditions. He carried on serious dialogue with the Muslim Sufis, with Zen Buddhists, with the Jewish tradition, and the Protestant Christian Tradition. People would come to Gethsemani and visit him. Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Buddhist Zen master, who, like Merton, was an outspoken voice for peace in his land, came to visit him there. Abraham Joshua Heschel, the great Jewish scholar, came to visit him. Bede Griffiths, the English Benedictine

monk who became a pioneer of Christian-Hindu practice, came from his ashram in India to visit Merton.

Merton also got involved in the relationship between mystical union and social justice. He wrote articles about the threat of nuclear war, about racism, and about the Vietnam War. He wrote a book called *Seeds of Destruction*. And eventually, because of his interest in Asian religion, he was invited to attend an international conference of monastics in Bangkok, Thailand. The abbey gave him permission to go. While on that trip, on December 10, 1968, he died under suspicious circumstances—perhaps electrocuted in the room where he was staying by a faulty fan. He was fifty-three years old. His body was flown back to Gethsemani. Ironically, in light of his peace witness, the flight that carried him also carried the caskets of US soldiers killed in Vietnam. And so he's now buried at Gethsemani. That's Merton.

Meeting Merton

How did he enter my life? As a boy growing up in Akron, Ohio, I had a violent, alcoholic father, who subjected me to ongoing abuse. I was in the ninth grade at an all-boys Catholic school, Archbishop Hoban High School, when one of the instructors in the religion class mentioned monasteries. I'd never heard of monasteries before.

Because of the role prayer played in my life to help me survive the abuse at home, I was already starting to get opened up that way. I was very taken by this idea of monasteries, that there were places you could go to seek God.

He also talked about Thomas Merton. So I went to the school library that very day, and they had one book by Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, which is a journal he wrote in the monastery. On the first page of that journal, he writes, "As for me, I have but one desire, the desire for solitude, to be lost in the secret of God's face." At fourteen years old, I didn't know what it meant, but something in me did, and inwardly I found myself saying "me too." So I took the book out, and then I got my own copy, and I read it over and over. I thought it was so beautiful. I just sensed how true it was. Therefore, in the four years of high school, as the violence at home was still going on, I started writing to the monastery, the Abbey of Gethsemani, where Merton lived. I wanted to enter the monastery. And when I graduated from high school, I went there and entered. Merton at that time was novice master. That's how he got to be my spiritual director. I was eighteen years old.

The first time I went to see Merton, I was simply overwhelmed. The reality of being in the presence of Thomas Merton made God's unreality impossible to me. That is, his very reality was to me the presence of God as a transformed person. I was so nervous, and when he asked me what was going on, my voice was shaking, and

I said, "I'm scared because you're Thomas Merton." Then I was embarrassed because I wanted him to think well of me, and here he was seeing what I was really like, this traumatized person.

Then he made an intervention. He said to me, "Every day before vespers, I want you to come in from your afternoon work at the pig barn, and I want you to tell me something that happened at the pig barn that day." It was a brilliant intervention, really, because I can remember thinking, "I can do that."

So I would knock on his door before vespers, and he was always writing a book, and he would sit and listen to me talk, and it leveled the playing field for me, in terms of compassion. And then out of that compassion, I told him about my desire for God. That's what opened it up to me. Then he told me, "Once in a while, you'll find somebody to talk to about this, but they're really hard to find. The purpose of this monastery is to protect and preserve and cultivate this radical desire for God, as a charism in the world." And then he offered me guidance in my own prayer and led me to the classical texts of the mystics who we'll be looking at.

He introduced me to John of the Cross, Teresa of Ávila, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and others. It was just one of these life-changing experiences for me. When I left the monastery, I went up to his hermitage the night I left. I said I needed to go home and deal with my father's

abuse. I needed to face it. He thought that after I took care of that, I had a vocation to solitude. So he gave me the address of a hermit in Nova Scotia, and I thought that's what I would do. I thought I was going to square off with my dad and then go to Nova Scotia. I didn't end up doing any of that. But that was the last time I saw Thomas Merton, in the hermitage at Gethsemani. He died a year after I left. Someone called me from the monastery and told me that he died in Asia.

Of all the mystics that we'll be sharing, Merton was the only one with whom I had a personal relationship, and that does make a difference. When you're with somebody like this, their presence is precious to you. It's uncontrived. They're not trying to be that way. They just are that way. It's like a treasure. So in that sense it is different. But on the other hand, I think this is key to these teachings. I can recall sitting with Thomas Merton in spiritual direction, when I first started reading St. John of the Cross. I walked out into the woods with my copy of John of the Cross, *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, and I sat down at the base of a tree, and I started reading it out loud to myself. And it was the same voice; that is, the mystic voice that I heard in Merton was the voice that was echoing in John of the Cross. So it's like the deathless presence of the teacher. Also, what I think about these mystics is that they're the kind of person where everything they say counts. And, therefore, in a sense, they are present in their words.

They're not reducible to nor are they distinct from their words, and the depth and beauty of their words is the depth and beauty of God's words to us uniquely expressed in that mystic.

Beginning

As we begin our reflections on Merton, and you listen to his words, you might say, "This is not for me." You might think, "I don't get it. Life's too short. Why bother with it?" My advice is to stay with it for a while. Perhaps you will hear a word or a phrase, and you can tell it is offering something you're looking for, something that has been missing. You can call it a sense of depth or a word of encouragement. My next thought would be, to the extent that's true, be patient with it. Be very patient with it, because what it's really doing is recalibrating your consciousness.

As you listen, or then go to the text itself, it's a matter of sustained exposure. The cumulative effect of sustained exposure in a vulnerable sincerity brings about transformation. Once someone came to see me who wanted to learn how to meditate, and I asked him if he had ever meditated before, and he said, "I did, I tried it once five years ago and nothing happened." Meditation, like reading the mystics, doesn't work like that. It's more like learning to do oil painting or watercolors. You don't go out and

get art supplies and sit down in three minutes, and say, "I can't do this." You have to be drawn to do it and stay with it under the guidance of a teacher. And little, by little you can see if there's a connection there, or not.

I think reading mystics is very much like that. Be very patient with yourself. Another thing that I suggest is to take just one thing that rang true, one saying or one word, and write it out. Fold it up and keep it in your pocket over your heart. You could also keep a journal where you write it out, and then ask yourself. "What does that say to me," or "Where am I at with that," or "What's that asking of me?" Because when we do that, we're starting to read the mystic at the level at which the mystic was writing. The encounter happens in that resonance of sincerity to sincerity. And the more you just stay with it, it'll get clearer and clearer, as time goes on.

With that, we may begin.