MYSTICS

WILLIAM HARMLESS, S.J.

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I

A Theology Called Mystical: Jean Gerson and William James

The word "mysticism" is not only widely used, but also widely abused. So let me begin by defining, in a rough, preliminary way, what it is and what it is not. First, the negative side: The mystic is often—and mistakenly—portrayed as an otherworldly, dreamy-eyed figure who lapses into ecstatic trances or levitates during prayer, who beholds strange visions or hears heavenly voices, who works miracles, foretells the future, or communes with the dead. I grant that one finds reports of such things—and stranger—in some mystical texts. Such oddities are perhaps what draw some readers to the subject. But that is not what mysticism is about. As we will see, mystics themselves often regard such phenomena as peripheral to the deeper spiritual quest. They may simply be distractions. They can become barriers to real spiritual progress and, in some cases, be judged demonic. According to commonplace mystical wisdom, such experiences should not be sought after, encouraged, or cultivated; if they come, they come, but one is not to chase after them.

If you wander into your local Barnes & Noble or Border's, you soon discover whole shelves devoted to what booksellers catalog as "mysticism." There you usually find legitimate books on mysticism mixed in with stuff on the occult and witchcraft, fortune-telling, mind reading, and alien abductions. Mysticism, of course, has nothing to do with such matters, but the confusion on the shelves illustrates how in popular parlance "mysticism" can become a catch-all for religious weirdness. In the 1960s it became fashionable to suggest

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that mystics experienced altered states of consciousness and that such states could be reproduced with drugs or other mind-altering techniques. Much earlier, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, philosophers tended to write off mystics as either gullible cranks or deluded neurotics. I grant that not all mystics have been paradigms of psychological integration, but they are not crazy. Many have not even been otherworldly. More than a few have been hard-nosed practical thinkers, respectful of intellect and education. Many have possessed a healthy, down-to-earth sense of people and politics and have often been movers and shakers in the world of their day.

So if mysticism has little to do with the stereotypes some readers associate with the term, then what is it? To begin to answer that question, I want to begin with brief case studies of two thinkers who pioneered the study of what we call mysticism: the late medieval theologian and churchman Jean Gerson and the twentieth-century philosopher and psychologist William James. These two forged classic definitions. Their definitions will give us a first, not the final, word on mysticism. They provide us points of entry into the discussion, and even if we end up disagreeing with facets of their work, they will prove to be thoughtful debating partners.

MYSTICISM AS EXPERIENTIAL THEOLOGY

Jean Gerson (1363–1429) was a man of wide-ranging talents. In 1395—only one year after receiving his doctorate in theology—he was appointed chancellor of the University of Paris. His was a meteoric rise, and it meant that he held the most prestigious academic post at the most influential educational institution in Europe. But Gerson was more than a talented academic. In the years that followed, he made his name as one of those fearless churchmen who helped end the scandal of the Great Schism. For over a generation, Christendom had been divided between two, and eventually three, rival popes. Gerson threw his lot in with the conciliarists, arguing that supreme authority in the Church lay not in the papacy, but in ecumenical councils. He further insisted that if the warring popes refused to recognize the authority of a council that truly represented the breadth of Christendom, they could legitimately be deposed, imprisoned, and, if need be, executed. Gerson's formidable skills, both as a theologian and a diplomat, came into full display at the Council of Constance (1414–1418), where he and his colleagues engineered the deposition of the three rival claimants to the papal throne and oversaw the election of a new pope, Martin V, which marked the formal end of the schism.

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On Mystical Theology

This practical side of Gerson's career is what shows up in the history books. But he had many sides, and one was a long-standing interest in mystics and mysticism. In the early 1400s he authored a two-volume treatise entitled *On Mystical Theology* (*De mystica theologia*).[1] Through this work he sprinkled various definitions of mysticism. One would become classic: "Mystical theology is an experiential knowledge of God that comes through the embrace of unitive love" (*theologia mystica est cognitio experimentalis habita de Deo per amoris unitivi complexum*).[2]

To appreciate Gerson's cogent definition, we need to spend a little time taking it apart. Note first that Gerson speaks not of "mysticism," as we do today. The term "mysticism" is of more recent vintage, dating from the seventeenth century.[3] Instead he speaks of "mystical *theology*." And he means "theology" in the literal sense, "a speaking of God"—as opposed to the looser ways we use the term today when we speak of a "theology of Church" or a "theology of sacrament." For Gerson, theology is God-talk, and as he saw it, the God-talk of the mystics offers us some genuine insight into God. What makes the mystics' knowledge of God unique is its roots: it is *experiential*. Gerson, in his prologue, lists forms of experience that he was familiar with:

> The saints use various names to describe these interior forms of experiential knowledge of God . . . They speak of contemplation, ecstasy, rapture, liquefaction, transformation, union, exultation. They talk of a jubilation beyond the spirit, of being taken into a divine darkness, of tasting God, of embracing the bridegroom, of kissing him, of being born of God, of obeying his word, of being brought into the divine cellars, of being drunk in a torrent of delight, of running into an odor of his perfumes, of hearing his voice, and entering into the bedroom, and of finding sleep and rest in peace in him.[4]

Scholastic Theology

Gerson contrasts this experiential mystical theology with the theology he knew best: scholastic theology. Scholastic theology is, quite literally, a theology done in schools. And it has all the elements and methods of an academic discipline: it is done by professors who lecture and by students who take notes and tests; it takes place in classrooms; it has textbooks; it uses literary methods to analyze texts and scientific methods to discover and weigh evidence and philosophic

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methods to assess arguments; it employs a sophisticated technical terminology; and it relies on erudite debate between experts to sort out contested issues. This way of doing theology is still with us today and is so firmly entrenched that we may not realize that it is neither the only nor was it the earliest way to do theology. School-centered theology is a medieval creation, forged and refined by Gerson's predecessors there at the University of Paris.

In the early Christian centuries, theology was done, above all, by bishops, whether in the daily routine of preaching or, more rarely but more decisively, in the doctrine-shaping debates of ecumenical councils, from Nicaea to Chalcedon. In the first half of the Middle Ages, theology as a discipline moved from the cathedral to the monastery. Leading theologians tended to be monks rather than bishops, and theology served and expressed monastic concerns about prayer and spirituality and community life. In the twelfth century, theology moved again, from the monasteries to the newly emerging schools in and around Paris. There in Paris, Gerson's thirteenth-century predecessors—Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure, Duns Scotus—created encyclopedic textbooks, or summae. These cathedrals of the mind welded together biblical texts and patristic snippets, definition and disputation, into intricately detailed and philosophically coherent systems.

A Theology of the Heart

Gerson did not deny the value of scholastic theology and of the whole scholastic enterprise. He was an expert scholastic theologian himself and practiced it well. But he thought that mystical theology, this other theology, had gotten neglected along the way. Where scholastic theology was public and exterior, mystical theology was personal and interior. Where scholastic theology focused on the mind, mystical theology sprang primarily from the heart, the *affectus*.

Note his definition again, the way he says that mystical theology offers a knowledge of God that comes from love. Think about the knowledge that married people have of one another. They have not read books about one another. They have not studied each other academically. They know one another through the union of their lives, an intimacy that touches heart and mind and body. There is certainly a cognitive element in their knowledge of each other, but it is not what we would call an intellectual knowledge. It is certainly not theoretical. Instead, it is a love-wrought knowledge. It is knowledge of this sort that Gerson is referring to when he speaks of the mystic's knowledge of God coming about "through the embrace of unitive love." Gerson is playing on a dictum from the seventh-century pope, Gregory the Great, that "love itself is a

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knowledge of sorts."[5] The mystic possesses his or her knowledge of God not from books or academic study, but from experience, from the experience of being loved intimately, intensely, by God. The implications of this are breathtaking. Why? Because Gerson believed that the mystic's love-wrought knowledge of God gave him or her a measure of theological authority comparable in certain ways to the academic theologian's. The mystic—or, in Gerson's terminology, the mystical theologian—had a knowledge of God that belonged not simply to himself or herself. The mystic's voice was needed in the theological marketplace.

Gerson recognized what has become obvious to us: that scholastic theology, in its efforts to be scientific, unwittingly severed the intimate link between theology and spirituality, between theologians' public thinking about what the Church believes and believers' personal encounters with God in prayer and worship. Scholastic theology seemed abstract, devoid of devotion, cut off from the heart and from the personal. As Gerson argued, "It is better to have the knowledge of God through a repentant affectivity than through an investigative intellect."[6] That judgment may be unfair to scholastics such as Thomas Aquinas, who were personally moved by great devotion and whose devotion subtly but profoundly shaped their theology. But when scholastics did their theology, they used an objective voice and spoke with professional detachment. In proposing this project called "mystical theology," Gerson sought to repair the split. The split he sensed has, of course, not gone away.[7]

A World of Mystics

Gerson's interest in mystical theology came from his reading of the signs of the times. He knew that he lived in an era of great mystical movements. A century earlier, Meister Eckhart had taught a striking and controversial brand of mystical theology. (We will look at it later.) Certain of Eckhart's teachings were declared by Pope John XXII to be tainted by the "stain of heresy" or at least "evil-sounding and very rash and suspect of heresy."[8] Despite condemnation, Eckhart's works would be much copied and read and spread by circles in Cologne and Strasbourg, by clusters of the mystically minded such as Margaret Ebner's Friends of God. Some of them were perfectly orthodox, such as Eckhart's disciples Johannes Tauler and Heinrich Suso, but they had to work hard to defend their legitimacy. Gerson was attuned to such movements. He appreciated but was also openly critical of one influenced by Eckhart, Jan van Ruusbroec (d. 1381). Gerson thought Ruusbroec's way of speaking about mystical union risked erasing any distinction between God and the soul. He

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knew of extremists of the recent past, such as the Beguine Marguerite Porete, who was burned at the stake in 1310 for her mystical views. At the same time, he defended the visionary Joan of Arc and thought highly of new movements such as the Brethren of the Common Life.

Gerson knew that, for better or worse, he moved in an age brimming with mystics. And he hoped that such movements and their formidable energies could be re-engaged with theology and with the Church at large. He worried that theology as a discipline had become too elitist. He noted that whereas scholastic theology was practiced by only a handful, mystical theology was much more widespread. Mystical theology could be and in fact was done by the unlearned as well as the learned, by laypeople as well as by clerics, by women as well as by men.[9] Gerson himself was one of the pioneers of writing about mysticism in the vernacular. His early work *The Mountain of Contemplation* (*Montaigne de contemplation*) was written not in Latin, but in French—composed ostensibly for his two sisters, but intended for a wide lay audience.

Recovering Ancient Voices

Gerson did not see himself proposing something new. Quite the opposite: He was convinced that mystical theology was as old as the Church itself. It could be traced, he believed, back to the time of the apostles, back to Dionysius, whom St. Paul had met and converted at the Aeropagus in Athens (Acts 17:34). This Dionysius the Areopagite was believed by Gerson and his medieval colleagues to have authored an extraordinary collection of treatises, including *On Mystical Theology*, the treatise from which Gerson took the title of his own work. This ancient collection, originally written in Greek, had passed to the Latin West in the eighth century. It touched theologians, such as Bonaventure and Aquinas, as well as mystical writers, such as the anonymous English author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*. Gerson and his contemporaries did not realize these writings came *not* from Paul's first-century convert, but from a sixth-century Syrian who had adopted Dionysius as a pen name. In other words, Dionysius the Areopagite was actually Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. This masterful forgery would not be uncovered for another fifty years, not until the remarkable philological researches of early Renaissance scholar Lorenzo Valla (d. 1457). I should add that the fact of the pen name did not (and does not) diminish the power of these extraordinary writings.

But Dionysius was hardly Gerson's only, or even his primary, influence. Gerson saw himself as one in a long list of Christian theologians concerned about mystical theology. At the end of the treatise, he appended what we would call a bibliography, listing "some who have spoken of contemplation":

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Augustine, John Cassian, John Climacus, Gregory the Great, Bernard of Clairvaux, Hugh and Richard of St. Victor, and Bonaventure.[10]

Issues

Gerson's definition of mystical theology—this "experiential knowledge that comes from God through the embrace of unitive love"—offers us a point of entry. It also alerts us to a knot of issues that underlies any exploration of mysticism:

- What precisely is religious experience? What does it mean to say that one has experienced God?
- How does such an experience—whatever its form—give one knowledge of God?
- What is the link between love of God and knowledge of God? Which is prior or more important? Or are they one and the same?
- Does mystical union happen all at once or in stages?
- Does the person seeking God do something to make union possible, or is it solely God's initiative?
- Is union required for a person to be called a mystic? How long does union last? Briefly? Constantly?
- Is union even the best way to describe mystical experience? How does one unite with God? That is, how does a finite human being unite with the Infinity that God is?

And then there are the thorny issues of false mysticism that so concerned Gerson and should concern us:

- How do we discern a genuine experience of God from the delusional?
- How does one assess claimants? How do we know that those who claim to have had an experience did so?
- And even if a person has had a genuine experience, how do we discern the conclusions that he or she draws from it? Can one distinguish between the experience itself and the interpretation of that experience?
- What happens when mystics contradict one another? What happens when they contradict religious authorities?
- What authority does mystical experience have as theology? Is it on par with the theology of professional scholars, whether medieval or modern? Do mystics—however unschooled in the public discourse of theology—teach a legitimate theology?

All these issues mattered to Gerson. Their poignancy has not lessened.

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MYSTICISM AS RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Let us turn now from a medieval theorist to a modern one, the American psychologist and philosopher William James (1842–1910). My choice is not arbitrary. James's classic study, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), has in many ways set the terms and trajectory of the modern study of mysticism.

Career

William James came from an illustrious, if eccentric, American family. His brother, the novelist Henry James, is its most renowned member. James's grandfather, an Irish immigrant, was a self-made millionaire; his father, a gentleman of means and no job, was a self-proclaimed spiritual seeker and devotee of Emanuel Swedenborg, the eighteenth-century Swedish mystic. James's father pursued and befriended leading intellectuals of the day, including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Horace Greeley, Alfred Lord Tennyson, and John Stuart Mill. James grew up in a heady intellectual atmosphere, first in New York, later in England, France, and finally Boston.

William James showed aptitude as a painter and for a time considered a career in art. In the end, he decided to focus on science. He studied medicine and graduated from Harvard in 1869 with an M.D. Three years later he began his academic career, teaching anatomy and physiology at Harvard. His research focus soon shifted from medicine to the newly emerging discipline of psychology. James is now numbered as one of its great pioneers. In 1875 he established the world's first laboratory devoted to psychological research, and in 1890 he published his pathbreaking and magisterial *Principles of Psychology*. It is now considered "the single greatest work in American psychology"; in terms of its foundational importance to psychology, "its only rival is Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*."[11]

The same year he established his psychology lab, James began teaching courses in philosophy. His first articles appeared a few years later, in 1878, and these would be collected and published in 1898 as *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*. James was an American original and stood at the center of a self-consciously American circle of philosophers that included friends—and friendly rivals—Josiah Royce and Charles Sanders Peirce. James helped formulate that most American of philosophic outlooks, pragmatism. The term, coined originally by Peirce, became popular thanks in large part to James's essays.

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James owed his popularity, in part, to his gifts as a writer. In 1916 the novelist Rebecca West remarked that James's brother Henry "grew up to write fiction as though it were philosophy," while William wrote "philosophy as though it were fiction."[12] Unlike most academics, William James had an uncanny ability to address both academic peers and the wider literate public. James's popularity stemmed not merely from his luminous prose and quotable turns of phrase. As a student of his once remarked, James "felt with all sorts of men. He understood their demand for immediate answers to the great speculative questions of life. God, freedom, immortality, nature as moral or non-moral—these were for him not matters of idle scientific wonder, but of urgent need."[13]

The Varieties of Religious Experience

In 1901–1902 James delivered the prestigious Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion at the University of Edinburgh and published them under the title *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. It was a groundbreaking work. James stated his bias at the outset: that he approached the topic not as a theologian nor as a historian of religion, but as a psychologist, and "to the psychologist the religious propensities of man must be at least as interesting as any other of the facts pertaining to his mental constitution."[14] James was convinced that "religious feelings" were more than "interesting"; they were, in fact, central to human existence. It is no accident that he subtitled his work *A Study in Human Nature*.

James took religious experience seriously and knew that such an opinion went against the intellectual grain of many in his Edinburgh audience. Science and religion were then bitter antagonists. And so in his opening lecture, he took pains to justify his study of religious experience against scientific detractors, whom he labeled "medical materialists." He knew that many dismissed religious experiences as either undiagnosed medical pathology or psychosexual obsession:

> Medical materialism seems indeed a good appellation for the too simple-minded system of thought which we are considering. Medical materialism finishes up Saint Paul by calling his vision on the road to Damascus a discharging lesion of the occipital cortex, he being an epileptic. It snuffs our Saint Teresa as a hysteric, Saint Francis of Assisi as a hereditary degenerate . . . All such mental overtensions, it says, are, when you come to the bottom of the matter, mere affairs of diathesis (auto-intoxications most probably), due to the perverted actions of various glands which physiology will yet discover.[15]

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James did not deny that pathologies, whether physical or psychological, might play a role. But reductionism—discarding religious experiences "by calling them 'nothing but' expressions of our organic disposition"—suffers a logical fallacy.[16] Truth, James argued, is measured not by origin, but by outcome. As James puts it, "Saint Teresa might have had the nervous system of the placidest cow, and it would not now save her theology"; on the other hand, "if her theology can stand" certain pragmatic tests, "it will make no difference how hysterical or nervously off her balance Saint Teresa may have been when she was with us here below."[17] James the empiricist argued that one needed to measure truth claims by pragmatic outcomes. Pragmatic standards, he believed, got rid of "the bugaboo of morbid origin."[18]

James the psychologist was interested in individuals, not institutions. He stated his bias and his method at the outset: "I must confine myself to those more developed subjective phenomena recorded in literature produced by articulate and fully self-conscious men, in works of piety and autobiography."[19] Note his emphasis on the subjective and the autobiographical. What makes *Varieties* so engaging, in part, is the way James weaves a many-threaded tapestry of testimonial and analysis. He draws his first-person testimonials—what he calls *documents humains*—both from spiritual classics and from (often unnamed) contemporary witnesses. Note also James's emphasis on "articulate and fully self-conscious men." Ordinary believers concerned him less than "geniuses," those "pattern-setters . . . for whom religion exists not as a dull habit, but as an acute fever."[20] This focus sprang from his estimate of institutional religion. He was convinced that behind or beneath the vast artifice of religion—its institutions, its rituals, its dogmas—were mystical roots: "Churches, when once established, live at second-hand upon tradition; but the *founders* of every church owed their power originally to the fact of their direct personal communion with the divine. Not only the superhuman founders, the Christ, the Buddha, Mahomet, but all the originators of Christian sects have been in this case."[21] It is a point James makes again and again. In a letter to a friend, written midway through the Gifford Lectures, James remarked: "The mother sea and fountain-head of all religions lie in the mystical experiences of the individual."[22]

Defining the Mystical Experience

James's enormously influential discussion of mysticism appears near the end of *Varieties* and is arguably the climax of his study. James denied that he himself experienced mystical states: "My constitution shuts me out from their

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enjoyment almost entirely, and I can speak of them only at second hand."[23] He felt the terms "mysticism" and "mystical" were too loosely used in his day, too "vague and vast and sentimental." To give them precision, he suggested four qualities that pragmatically define and delimit the mystical experience:

1. *Ineffability*. According to James, the mystical experience "defies expression, that no adequate report of its content can be given in words"—that mystical experience is, in a word, "ineffable."[24] James compared the mystic's experience to the lover's and the musician's: "One must have musical ears to know the value of a symphony; one must have been in love one's self to understand a lover's state of mind. Lacking the heart or ear, we cannot interpret the musician or the lover justly."[25]
2. *Noetic quality*. Mystics stress that their experiences give them "insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect." James referred to this as the "noetic" (or intellectual) "quality" of the mystical. There is a built-in paradox here: although mystics lay claim to illuminations and revelations, these experiences both reveal and hide, both speak and remain inarticulate. Even so, the mystic is convinced and guided by their "curious sense of authority."[26]
3. *Transiency*. James noted in most cases mystical experiences are brief, lasting no longer than an hour, usually less. They are, in other words, "transient." Although "they fade into the light of common day," their effect persists; but should they recur, they are "susceptible of continuous development in what is felt as inner richness and importance."[27]
4. *Passivity*. James stressed that mystics come to their peak experiences not as active seekers, but as passive recipients. In the thrall of such mystical moments, the mystic "feels as if his own will were in abeyance, and indeed sometimes as if he were grasped and held by a superior power."[28]

James knew that mystics had constructed complex typologies to map the variety of mystical states. But he was suspicious of tidy schemes and, following his usual methodological bent, stressed the pluralism of phenomena, observing that "the range of mystical experience is very wide."[29] For James, there is a "*more*" to human experience in general, something that defies intellectual categories and verbal analysis, and that "*more*" is equally, indeed especially, true with mystical experiences.[30] He saw a broad continuum, beginning with epiphanic experiences with "no special religious significance," when "single words, and conjunctions of words, effects of light on land and sea, odors and musical

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sounds" coalescence into world-shifting insights.[31] He cited a chain of first-person accounts from contemporaries, some describing poignant responses to natural beauty, others describing religious breakthroughs; some he leaves anonymous, others he draws from well-known figures of his day, such as the poet Walt Whitman and the physician Richard Bucke, author of *Cosmic Consciousness.* James also included reports of experiments with drugs and intoxicants, such as chloroform and nitrous oxide. He even mentioned his personal experiments, which convinced him that "our normal waking consciousness, rational consciousness as we call it, is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different."[32]

After this, James shifts his focus from "sporadic mysticism" to its "methodical cultivation," surveying examples from Hinduism, Buddhism, and the Sufis of Islam. He then quotes autobiographical accounts from Christian mystics, such as Ignatius of Loyola, Teresa of Ávila, and John of the Cross, as well as mystical teachings from Pseudo-Dionysius and Meister Eckhart. James was of two minds. On the one hand, he recognized the wide-ranging mystical schools and conflicting mystical doctrines both within and between religions. But he also shared with thinkers of his era the conviction that beneath the variety could be carved out a certain mystical unanimity, that mystics shared certain common perceptions of the divine, however different their religion or historical epoch:

> In mystic states we both become one with the Absolute and we become aware of our oneness. This is the everlasting and triumphant mystical tradition, hardly altered by differences of clime or creed. In Hinduism, in Neoplatonism, in Sufism, in Christian mysticism, in Whitmanism, we find the same recurring note, so that there is about mystical utterances an eternal unanimity which ought to make a critic stop and think, and which bring it about that the mystical classics have, as has been said, neither birthday nor native land.[33]

An Underlying Philosophy of Religion

James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* was an instant classic. It helped put mysticism on the academic map, sparking a spate of scholarly studies in psychology and physiology, sociology and history, literature and philosophy. Not all agreed with James's analysis of this or that question, but his study set a clear trajectory in the modern study of mysticism. It is important for us to be alert to that trajectory.

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First, James defined mysticism as “experience”—something subjective, best seen in psychological terms. James’s vantage point led him to focus on first-person testimonials. It also led him—and the many who followed his lead—to concentrate on peak experiences, often to the neglect of a mystic’s overall biography. We saw that Gerson too stressed personal experience, but with a difference. Gerson saw the mystical as a form of theology—theology with experiential roots. For Gerson, “experience” is the adjective; for James, it is the noun. And that difference is decisive. For James, there was nothing inherently theological in or about mystical experience. On the contrary, he felt it legitimate to shear off the mystic’s experience from the theological claims that the mystic—or anyone else—might attribute to it. The experientialist bias that James set in motion raises questions for our investigation:

- Is mysticism best seen in terms of “experiences,” as something best studied as psychological phenomena?
- Are first-person narratives or autobiographies the best genre or even the sole genre to study? What about others, such as poems or sermons, aphorisms or biblical commentaries, literature without obvious autobiographical content?
- Does the mystical report make the mystic? What happens if writers do not report their mystical experiences in first-person narratives? Are they disqualified as mystics? If first-person reports make the mystic, then many writers classified as “mystics” would be disqualified—including some cited by James himself.
- How do mystical experiences link to the mystic’s life as a whole? How does the mystical experience fit in with the larger question of holiness—or simply with human integrity?
- What if the subject of a mystical experience suffers some pathology, whether physiological or psychological? Does that invalidate the experience? Is James’s appeal to results (and not origin) sufficient?

Second, James defined mystical experiences as “religious” experiences. That, in itself, is not a problem. However, James worked from a quite precise but quite unusual definition of religion. When James thought of religion, he did not think in terms of the great world religions—Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and so on. Nor did he approach religion in either historical, institutional, or social terms. Early in *Varieties,* he defined “religion” as “the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.”[34]

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What is missing here? Lots of things, important things. First, James limits religion to the "experiences of individual men" and to what they experience "in their solitude." In a single stroke, James has set aside, indeed denied, one of the most central facts of religion: that religion is practiced by people in groups and that it is often and sometimes best practiced in public. For a pragmatist and empiricist like James, this is a breathtaking denial. His bias leads to other silences. James ignored the fact of ritual; he has nothing to say about corporate worship. He likewise ignored the fact of scriptures, writings that most religions and most religious regard as sacred, even as God-given, writings to be prayed over, meditated on, sung, analyzed and argued over, preached and lived. He also ignored the fact of history—that religions have histories, and history, for those who practice religion, survives in the form of "tradition," that vast and often hard-to-define web of practices and beliefs, of venerable institutions and venerated texts. James treats history as though it were a stream to be stepped over instead of an ocean we swim in. To ignore history, with its many-layered depths and hidden eddies, means missing what mystics do when they dive deep into their traditions and bring to the surface hidden or lost treasures.

Finally, James's definition ignores theology. This is not simply because he was interested in a purely psychological analysis. It was because he doubted, indeed denied, the intellectual claims of theology. For James, religion is about "feelings." Later in *Varieties*, he spells out his perspective: "I do believe that feeling is the deeper source of religion, and that philosophic and theological formulas are secondary products, like translations of a text into another tongue."[35] He admitted that of itself "feeling is private and dumb" and thus needs reason "to redeem religion from unwholesome privacy, and to give public status and universal right of way to its deliverances."[36] Even so, he did not give truth value to religious claims. James tended to be suspicious of verbal formulas as a clear and distinct guide to truth. He sensed that we do not reason our way to significant things. Rather, we intuit them with an immediacy of feeling, grasping the whole in a way that defies any final verbal formula. James held this view not only about religion, but also about much else, including philosophy. But James held a particular animus against systematic theologians. He compared them to weekend naturalists who neatly collect and pedantically classify dead skins and bleached skeletons. Theologians, in his opinion, lack the courage to venture deep into the great and terrifying wilderness of the human spirit.[37]

Although there is much provocative and stimulating in James's philosophy of religion, his approach as it applies to mysticism is at once too vague and too dismissive of important matters. But it does raise important questions:

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- Can mysticism be interpreted rightly if one ignores rituals and scriptures?
- Is mysticism a purely private affair, or is it, like other elements of religion, public in crucial ways? What is one to make of mystical "schools," of organized communities that consciously cultivate ascetic practices and mystical doctrines?
- How do mystics manage history, both the wider traditions of the religion to which they belong and the more specific mystical traditions they inherit? How do they take that religious or mystical inheritance and make it their own?
- Is there an intellectual content to mysticism? Do mystics' theological claims have any merits, any truth value? Or are they purely "secondary products," reason's halting efforts to give voice to "dumb" but powerful feelings?

One last matter: James gave voice to the not uncommon claim that all religions are the same at the top—that mystics speak with a certain unanimity, that one can glide easily from Christian mystics to Islamic mystics to Buddhist mystics, and that, once one prunes off that extraneous overgrowth called theology, one uncovers an irreducible common core. That notion—popular even today—cannot be presumed. It must be tested. In the meantime, we need to bear in mind an obvious but little appreciated fact—one aptly articulated by Bernard McGinn: that "no mystic (at least before the present century) believed in or practiced 'mysticism.' They believed in and practiced Christianity (or Judaism, or Islam, or Hinduism), that is, religions that contained mystical elements as parts of a wider historical whole."[38]

Readers may feel that this first attempt to define mysticism, drawing on Gerson and James, has been a little abstract. That feeling is understandable. It is difficult to look at mysticism before one looks at mystics. But it was important, I believe, to set out key issues, at least in a preliminary way. We can now begin to flesh things out by looking at individual mystics, at their lives and their mystical theologies. What follows will be, in a sense, a Jamesian investigation, a series of case studies. But it will be broader. I do not think it sufficient to limit oneself to autobiography and to reports of peak experiences. It is Jamesian in another sense as well: I did not want to impose a definition of mysticism, but hope to draw one out from empirical studies of individual cases. We will look at figures commonly classified as mystics, and from these cases, taken as a whole, we will be in a better position to address some of the questions raised here. Let me close with one final snippet from James. In a poetic

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turn of phrase, he noted the way mystics' experiences and insights, though they often "stir chords within" us, escape any easy definition or classification: "There is a verge of the mind which these things haunt; and whispers therefrom mingle with the operations of our understanding, even as the waters of the infinite ocean send their waves to break among the pebbles that lie upon our shores."[39]

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2

Mystic as Fire Watcher: Thomas Merton

Thomas Merton had a knack for getting the mystical to speak to the modern. In 1968, the year of his death, Merton wrote an essay at the request of a student literary magazine at nearby University of Louisville. In it he addressed—in the parlance of the 1960s—the "relevance" of monastic life. The title of the essay, "Contemplation in a World of Action," names both his perspective and dilemma. He begins by posing tough questions for himself: "What does the contemplative life or the life of prayer, solitude, silence, meditation, mean to man in the atomic age? What can it mean? Has it lost all meaning whatever?"[1] Merton was temperamentally impatient with run-of-the-mill pieties and warned that "real Christian living is stunted and frustrated if it remains content with the bare externals of worship, with 'saying prayers' and 'going to church,' with fulfilling one's external duties and merely being respectable."[2] He insisted not on saying prayers, but on *prayer*, and prayer meant "the awareness of God . . . even if sometimes this awareness may amount to a negative factor, a seeming 'absence.' " He was aware of fads among college students, their dabblings in Oriental meditation, and argued that "the real purpose of meditation . . . is the exploration and discovery of new dimensions of freedom, illumination and love, in deepening our awareness of our life in Christ." He then returned to his central question:

> What is the relation of this to action? Simply this. He who attempts to act and do things for others or for the world

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> without deepening his own self-understanding, freedom and integrity and capacity to love, will not have anything to give others. He will communicate to them nothing but the contagion of his own obsessions, his aggressiveness, his ego-centeredness, his delusions about ends and means, his doctrinaire prejudices and ideas.[3]

The year 1968 was one of extraordinary political ferment. Activism was sweeping college campuses, and Merton himself was an activist of long standing, an outspoken critic of nuclear war, racism, consumerism, and mass culture. He called on his youthful readers to stop—to understand how activism, despite lofty intentions, can do real harm because it is so oblivious to its own subtle egotism. He warned of these matters because he knew he himself could be equally guilty of them.

In this chapter we will explore mystical elements in Thomas Merton's life and writings. I begin with an extended biographical sketch and follow with an analysis of a few elements of Merton's mystical theology. This two-part pattern—biography first, mystical theology second—will serve as a template for subsequent case studies.

KNOWING THE CHRIST OF BURNT MEN

Family and Education

Merton was born in France in 1915. As he notes in the opening page of his acclaimed autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, it was "the year of a war"—World War I, that most bloody of modern wars—and "not many hundreds of miles away from the house where I was born, they were picking up the men who rotted in the rainy ditches among the dead horses."[4] Merton, a lifelong pacifist, savored the brutal irony of his own coming to life so near the terrible trenches of World War I. Merton's father, Owen, a painter, was from New Zealand; his mother, Ruth, was an American. Merton's mother died of cancer when he was only six, leaving him and his younger brother, John Paul, devastated. His early education took place in boarding schools, first in France and later in England. Not long after beginning high school, his father was diagnosed with a brain tumor; he died a few years later. So by age sixteen, Merton found himself an orphan. A couple of years later, he graduated and received a scholarship to attend Cambridge University. There, not unlike some freshmen before and after, he frittered away his first year drinking and partying. He also got a young girl pregnant. Merton's American guardian stepped in, a legal settlement of some sort was apparently made, and the young Merton

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was yanked back to the United States. One sometimes comes across the report that the young woman, together with her and Merton's child, died during World War II in the firebombing of London; however, this often-repeated report has been recently challenged.[5]

In 1935 Merton enrolled at Columbia University in New York. There he studied literature and came under the spell of Mark Van Doren, an accomplished poet and nationally renowned poetry critic. Van Doren helped Merton appreciate a range of authors, including John Donne, William Blake, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and Franz Kafka. Also at Columbia Merton met a circle of friends with whom he remained close the rest of his life. They were a talented group. Robert Giroux, for instance, would later become one of the top editors in the United States (of Farrar, Straus, and Giroux), while Adolph Reinhardt would become a well-known painter, a member of the New York school of abstract expressionism.

In his autobiography, Merton recounts a spiritual turning point during his college years. He and his college roommates befriended and ended up housing a wandering Hindu monk named Bramachari. Merton, who always had an eye for the humorous, delights in telling of his first meeting with Bramachari, who combined traditional and modern dress: a yellow turban and sneakers. Merton and Bramachari hit it off and talked at length. Merton had been reading Aldous Huxley's *Ends and Means*, which sparked an interest in mysticism, East and West, and asked Bramachari about Hindu mysticism. Bramachari sagely advised Merton to begin with the Western tradition, with Augustine's *Confessions* and Thomas à Kempis's *Imitation of Christ*.

Conversion to Catholicism

In 1938 Merton completed his bachelor's degree at Columbia. He immediately began work on a master's in literature. It was during this period that he converted to Catholicism. Merton had been under the sway of Catholic thinkers such as Jacques Maritain and Étienne Gilson for a while and had occasionally attended Mass at a parish not far from Columbia. The turnabout took place in September 1938 on a dreary Sunday afternoon. Merton was in his room reading a book on the Jesuit poet Gerald Manley Hopkins (d. 1889). What grabbed his attention was way that Hopkins (an Anglican at the time) had written to John Henry Newman (d. 1890), the onetime leader of the Oxford Movement and a recent Catholic convert, seeking his advice on the Catholic Church. Then, as Merton recounts it: "All of a sudden, something began to stir within me, something began to push me, to prompt me. It was a movement that spoke like a voice. 'What are you waiting for?' it said. 'Why are you sitting here? Why do

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you still hesitate? You know what you ought to do? Why don't you do it?' "[6] He got up, walked nine rainy blocks to a local parish, and there chanced upon the priest and professed his desire to become Catholic. Merton was baptized not long after, in November.

Merton's spiritual quest was just beginning. He thought of becoming a priest and applied to the Franciscans. After he confessed his past—presumably his Cambridge misadventures—he was asked to withdraw his application. The rejection left him disoriented, adrift. In the meantime, he was busy as a teacher. He also worked as a volunteer with the poor in Harlem, at a center run by a Russian émigré and recent Catholic convert, Baroness Catherine de Hueck. This period was crucial, for it attuned Merton to the plight of the poor. He would later write eloquently on race matters well before the civil rights movement became popular.

The Cistercians

During Holy Week of 1941 Merton made a retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky. The monastery was run by the Cistercians of the Strict Observance, better known as Trappists. The Trappists were a seventeenth-century French reform of the Cistercians, who were in turn a twelfth-century reform of the Benedictines. Merton, in *The Sign of Jonas,* offers a capsule description of Cistercian life:

> The average Cistercian monastery is a quiet, out-of-the-way place—usually somewhere in France—occupied by a community of seventy or eighty men who lead a silent energetic life consecrated entirely to God. It is a life of prayer and penance, of liturgy, study, and manual labor. The monks are supposed to exercise no exterior ministry—no preaching, teaching, or the rest . . . The life is physically hard, but compensation for this hardship is interior peace. In any case, one soon becomes used to the hardships and finds that they are not hard after all. Seven hours of sleep are normally enough. The monks' diet is extremely plain, but is ordinarily enough to keep a man healthy for long years, and monks traditionally die of old age. One soon gets used to sleeping on straw and boards . . . The life is quiet. There is no conversation. The monks talk to their superiors or spiritual directors when necessary. In the average monastery, Cistercian silence is an all-pervading thing that seeps into the very stones of the place and saturates the men who live there. Farm labor is the monks' support, and the ordinary thing is for all the monks to

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> work outdoors for five or six hours a day. When they are not working, or praying in choir, the monks devote their time to reading, meditation, contemplative prayer.[7]

The monks at Gethsemani, their demeanor, and their way of life deeply impressed Merton. In his retreat journal, he recorded his first fervor: "This is the center of America. I had wondered what was holding the country together, what has been keeping the universe from cracking and falling apart. It is this monastery if only this one . . . This is the only real city in America—in a desert."[8] The retreat moved Merton in a new direction and toward a new decision: to become a monk. Merton formally entered the Monastery of Gethsemani nine months later, on December 10, 1941, three days after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. He followed the normal course of formation, officially becoming a novice in early 1942 and taking simple vows in 1944. During this time, he endured one more family tragedy when his brother John Paul, a pilot in the Canadian Air Force, died in a plane crash in the English Channel.

In the years before his ordination and with the encouragement of the abbot, Merton began writing an autobiography. He entitled it *The Seven Storey Mountain*, alluding to Dante's image of the seven-tiered mountain of purgatory. Merton's autobiography, published in 1948, became a best seller, selling 600,000 hardback copies. Merton found himself a celebrity almost overnight. The book touched something deep in America's shattered postwar psyche. One early reviewer described it as "a hymn of positive faith sung in the midst of a purposeless world searching for purpose, a book that can be read by men of any faith or none at all."[9] For all its narrative power and rich human textures, it offered a vision of monastic life and of the wider world that Merton would later reject. Toward the end of his life, Merton looked back and satirized his youthful self-righteousness, describing himself as one "who spurned New York, spat on Chicago, and tromped on Louisville, heading for the woods with Thoreau in one pocket, John of the Cross in another, and holding the Bible open to the Apocalypse."[10]

The Seven Storey Mountain was the first of many books that poured from Merton's pen. Others quickly followed: *What Is Contemplation?* (1948), *Seeds of Contemplation* (1949), *The Ascent to Truth* (1951), *The Sign of Jonas* (1953), *No Man Is an Island* (1955). Alongside these ran a parallel stream of poems and essays. Merton knew he was a born writer: "It is possible to doubt whether I have become a monk (a doubt I have to live with) but it is not possible to doubt that I am a writer, that I was born one and will most probably die as one. Disconcerting, disedifying as it is, this seems to be my lot and my vocation. It is what God has given to me that I might give it back to him."[11] Writing clashed

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in certain ways with his Cistercian vocation. As he once remarked, "An author in a Trappist monastery is like a duck in a chicken coop."[12] Yet over the years Merton's superiors made accommodations, allowing their suddenly famous monk the space and time he needed to write. Merton was also given key roles within the monastery. He had taken final vows in 1947 and was ordained to the priesthood in 1949. In 1951 he was appointed master of scholastics, which meant that he oversaw the theological and spiritual education of the young monks; and in 1955 Merton was appointed master of novices, a position he held for the next ten years.

Pacifist and Social Critic

In the mid-1950s Merton's outlook began shifting, at first subtly, then profoundly. He began to make his peace with the world he left behind. A new vision would crystallize in what some scholars see as a mystical experience. It took place in March 1958 in Louisville as Merton stood on the corner of Fourth Street and Walnut. (More on this incident in a moment.) Merton's turn to the world—a turn at once compassionate and critical—shaped what he wrote about and how he wrote about it. Merton took on social issues—writing, for example, on civil rights and against racism—long before such things were fashionable. His outlook struck a chord. Eldridge Cleaver, the former Black Panther leader and author of *Soul on Ice,* noted that no white man wrote with such a sympathetic eye on the plight and poignancy of Harlem as Merton did.[13] During this time Merton befriended Dorothy Day, the New York–based social justice activist, and contributed regular columns to her publication, *Catholic Worker.*

Merton was a committed pacifist. In October 1961 he published in *Catholic Worker* an article entitled "The Root of War Is Fear," giving public voice to what had long been his private stance. He became increasingly vocal about matters of war and peace and harshly critical of the American nuclear arsenal and the whole cold-war culture. This heightened long-standing tensions with censors in the Cistercian order, who had earlier marred *The Seven Storey Mountain* by chopping out any mention of Merton's fathering a child. Things came to a head in 1961–1962 when the abbot general of the order personally intervened, ordering Merton to stop publishing on war and peace. While Merton officially obeyed, he also adopted an underground publication tactic. He put antiwar reflections into private correspondence, which were then collected under the title *The Cold War Letters* and circulated in mimeograph. A vindication for his outspoken anti-nuclear views came when Pope John XXIII issued the encyclical *Peace on Earth* (*Pacem in Terris,* 1963). After this, Merton was allowed to

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publish openly. Works he had written earlier but left on the shelf, such as *Seeds of Destruction*, were published. As the 1960s progressed, Merton came to correspond with and befriend antiwar activists such as Daniel and Philip Berrigan. Mahatma Gandhi, the twentieth century's patron saint of nonviolence, had been Merton's hero since his high school days. In 1965 he put together an anthology of Gandhi's writings under the title *Gandhi on Non-Violence* (1965), prefacing it with an essay on the spirituality of nonviolence.

While Merton remained physically within the confines of his Kentucky monastery, his correspondence embraced the globe. The sheer volume of his correspondence—over 4,000 letters—and the range and fame of his correspondents are astonishing. He exchanged views with leading theologians and religious scholars, including Jacques Maritain, Jean Leclerq, Martin Marty, John Tracy Ellis, Jean Danielou, Bernard Häring, Paul Tillich, and Rosemary Radford Reuther. Merton also kept in close touch with leading literary figures around the world, from the Russian novelist Boris Pasternak to the Polish poet Czesław Miłosz to the Nicaraguan poet Nicanor Parra. He befriended writers in the United States as well, including the novelists Henry Miller and Walker Percy and the poets William Carlos Williams and Lawrence Ferlinghetti. Merton also wrote letters to and received letters from two popes, John XXIII and Paul VI.

Merton's turn to the larger world included a strong commitment to ecumenism. As he noted in his *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*:

> If I can unite in myself the thought and the devotion of Eastern and Western Christendom, the Greek and the Latin Fathers, the Russians with the Spanish mystics, I can prepare in myself the reunion of divided Christians. From that secret and unspoken unity in myself can eventually come a visible and manifest unity of all Christians . . . We must contain all divided worlds in ourselves and transcend them in Christ.[14]

Merton's turn went beyond Christianity to a dialogue with the world religions, especially their monastic and mystical traditions. This turn is evident in his wide-ranging correspondence: for instance, with the great Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel; with a leading Islamic scholar, Louis Massignon, and a Pakistani Sufi, Abdul Aziz; with Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Buddhist monk, and D. T. Suzuki, the famous Japanese expert on Zen. Merton was a pioneer in what we now call interreligious dialogue. He became deeply conversant in and published essays on the most varied spiritual traditions: on the Jewish Hasidim, on the Sufis of Islam, on Protestant Shakers and Russian Orthodox startsy, on Chinese Taoists and Japanese Buddhists. Zen especially

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fascinated Merton, and his essays on it appear in two late works, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (1967) and *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (1968). Merton had learned much from Suzuki's works. The two not only corresponded; in 1964, Merton was given permission to make his first long trip away from the monastery to go to New York City, where he and the elderly Suzuki were able to meet face to face.

Solitude

Merton's outward turn to the world was matched, paradoxically, by an inward quest for solitude. Contrary to what many would suspect, Cistercian lifestyle, at least in the 1940s and 1950s, allowed little time or leeway for solitude. This had long been a problem for Merton. Merton's research into the early history of the Cistercian order alerted him to forgotten traditions of hermitage. Making his case with these historical precedents, he began pleading for greater opportunities to be alone and in 1953 was granted permission to use a small building, "nothing more than a toolshed." In 1960 Merton and his novices built a cabin that was to be used as an occasional hermitage and also a center for ecumenical discussions. In August 1965 Merton officially began his life as a hermit. A Latin American journal asked Merton to describe his experience in solitude, and he replied with an eloquent essay, "Day of a Stranger." He first described the physical layout and how he shared his wooded confines with birds:

> I exist under trees. I walk in the woods out of necessity. I am both a prisoner and an escaped prisoner. I cannot tell you why, born in France, my journey ended here in Kentucky . . . Do I have a "day"? Do I spend my "day" in a "place"? I know there are trees here. I know there are birds here. I know the birds in fact very well, for there are precise pairs of birds (two each of fifteen or twenty species) living in the immediate area of my cabin. I share this particular place with them: we form an ecological balance. This harmony gives the idea of "place" a new configuration. As to the crows, they form part of a different pattern. They are vociferous and self-justifying, like humans. They are not two, they are many. They fight each other and the other birds, in a constant state of war.[15]

This passage lets one see the various threads of Merton's inner life: his eye for nature, his taste for contemporary literature, his thoughts on prayer and contemplation, even his social protest. At one point he mentions seeing American bombers flying overhead:

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> I have seen the SAC plane, with the bomb in it, fly low over me and I have looked up out of the woods directly at the closed bay of the metal bird with a scientific egg in its breast! A womb easily and mechanically opened! I do not consider this technological mother to be the friend of anything I believe in. However, like everyone else, I live in the shadow of the apocalyptic cherub.[16]

Just as Merton was settling into a hermit's life, he fell deeply, madly in love. Around Easter 1966 Merton had to undergo back surgery in a Louisville hospital. There he met a young nurse nearly thirty years his junior. They began an intense relationship, exchanging love letters, calling surreptitiously on the phone, meeting secretly. Throughout the affair, Merton recorded his intense, almost overwhelming feelings in his private journals, which have only recently been published. It lasted roughly six months. Merton and "M"—as she is called in the journals—may not have had sexual intercourse, but the temptation was certainly there. Merton discovered both the fragility of his own integrity and the depths of his sexual yearnings. He also rediscovered how deeply committed he was to his vocation as a monk and a contemplative. It proved, in the end, a momentous and difficult voyage of self-discovery, both disconcerting and healing.[17]

Late in life Merton took up photography, and with encouragement from friends who were professional photographers, such John Howard Griffin, the camera became for Merton a contemplative discipline. It offered him a new medium for "natural contemplation," that "intuition of divine things in and through the reflection of God in nature."[18] Merton's surviving photos, done during these years, explore the play of light and dark on objects both ordinary and ignored.

Pilgrimage to Asia

In 1968 Merton received an invitation to attend a conference of Western and Eastern monks in Bangkok. It offered him a chance to see Asia and its monasticism at first hand for the first time. It was also his longest extended departure from the monastery in twenty-six years. On his way to Asia, he meandered, stopping first in New Mexico, California, and Alaska, scouting possible sites for a future hermitage. He also used the opportunity to visit friends, staying with the Beat poet and founder of City Lights Lawrence Ferlinghetti in San Francisco. Once in Asia, Merton spent almost two months traveling in and around India. In a talk delivered in Calcutta in October, he described his outlook and hopes:

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> I have left my monastery to come here not just as a research scholar or even as an author (which I also happen to be). I come as a pilgrim who is anxious to obtain not just information, not just "facts" about other monastic traditions, but to drink from ancient sources of monastic vision and experience. I seek not only to learn more (quantitively) about religion and about monastic life, but to become a better and more enlightened monk (qualitatively) myself.[19]

One pivotal meeting was with the young Dalai Lama in Dharamsala near the Himalayas in northern India. Another key moment was a visit to Sri Lanka, to the ancient ruins of Polonnaruwa, famous for its great reclining Buddha and other magnificent Buddhist sculptures. The site provoked a powerful spiritual and aesthetic experience:

> Looking at these figures I was suddenly, almost forcibly, jerked clean out of the habitual, half-tied vision of things, and an inner cleanness, as if exploding from the rocks themselves, became evident and obvious . . . The thing about all this is that there is no puzzle, no problem, and really no "mystery." All problems are resolved and everything is clear, simply because what matters is clear. The rock, all matter, all life is charged with *dharmakaya* . . . everything is emptiness and everything is compassion. I don't know when in my life I have ever had such a sense of beauty and spiritual validity running together in one aesthetic illumination. Surely, with Mahabalipuram and Polonnaruwa my Asian pilgrimage has become clear and purified itself. I mean, I know and have seen what I was obscurely looking for. I don't know what else remains but I have now seen and have pierced through the surface and have got beyond the shadow and the disguise.[20]

Merton arrived for the conference in Bangkok on December 7. On the morning of December 10 Merton delivered his paper "Marxism and Monastic Perspectives" to the gathered monks and scholars. A question-and-answer session was scheduled after lunch, but Merton did not appear. Several people went searching for him and discovered him dead in his room. It appears that he had taken a shower after lunch and was fatally electrocuted when he turned on the electric fan—which, it turns out, had a short. His body was flown back to the United States aboard a military aircraft, together with the bodies of American soldiers killed in Vietnam. The irony of this final flight, given Merton's outspoken antiwar stance, has not been lost on later observers.

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At his funeral, the final pages of *The Seven Storey Mountain* were read aloud. In these pages, the "I" who speaks is not Merton, but Christ, who speaks prophetically to young Merton about his future and his death:

> I will give you what you desire. I will lead you into solitude. I will lead you by the way that you cannot possibly understand, because I want it to be the quickest way . . . Everything that touches you shall burn you, and you will draw your hand away in pain, until you have withdrawn yourself from all things. Then you will be all alone . . . Do not ask when it will be or where it will be or how it will be: On a mountain or in a prison, in a desert or in a concentration camp or in a hospital or at Gethsemani. It does not matter. So do not ask me, because I am not going to tell you. You will not know until you are in it. But you shall taste the true solitude of my anguish and my poverty and I shall lead you into the high places of my joy and you shall die in Me and find all things in My Mercy which has created you for this end . . . That you may become the brother of God and learn to know the Christ of the burnt men.[21]

MYSTICISM OF A GUILTY BYSTANDER

This biographical sketch should forewarn us that there was nothing simple about Merton. He was at once a monk and a spiritual director, a social critic and an ecumenist. But above all, he was a writer: a prolific—even obsessive—essayist, poet, letter writer, and journal keeper. And for one who spent the bulk of his adult life in one place, in an isolated monastery in the hills of Kentucky, his intellectual and imaginative world was vast. It moved backward in time, to studies on the early desert fathers and medieval Cistercian hermits; it moved outward to newspaper headlines, to burning social issues such as nuclear weapons, the Vietnam War, and the civil rights movement; and it moved across the globe, to a religious landscape that included Sufi mystics and Taoist solitaries, Hasidic rabbis and Zen masters. All of this fed into and shaped his mystical theology. His mystical theology is a remarkable synthesis—made all the more remarkable by the fact that his work remains so immensely readable.

Merton's synthesis could only have appeared in the modern world. He encapsulated his unique vantage point in the title of one of his finest works, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. As a monk, he had consciously chosen to stand on the world's sidelines. Yet as one born in a bloodstained age, he shared

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humanity's collective guilt. What he offered were not answers, but conjectures—questions and queries, perspectives from a sidelined but deeply committed watcher. I will not try and summarize Merton's mystical spirituality here. Others have done that better and in a depth appropriate to the scale of his corpus. I will focus, rather, on a few of his most famous passages to draw out what he says about God, about prayer, and about our hard-to-read hearts.

Fourth and Walnut

Merton does not seem the stereotypical mystic. He reports no visions or voices and, in fact, was openly skeptical of such things. But in his journals he records both extraordinary experiences and remarkable reflections on them. These detail his profound sense of God's presence in—and absence from—the world around him. Merton experts have singled out several accounts that could be designated "mystical." I mentioned one earlier, his experience at Polonnaruwa. But the most famous is an incident that took place on March 18, 1958, while he happened to be in Louisville running an errand. Standing at the intersection of Fourth and Walnut, he had a sudden, extraordinary epiphany. Merton's account of it, which appears in his *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, is memorable and needs to be quoted at length:

> In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness. The whole illusion of a separate holy existence is a dream. Not that I question the reality of my vocation, or of my monastic life; but the conception of "separation from the world" that we have in the monastery too easily presents itself as a complete illusion: the illusion that by making vows we become a different species of being, pseudo-angels, "spiritual men," men of interior life, what have you . . . This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud. And I suppose my happiness could have taken form in the words: "Thank God, thank God that I *am* like other men, that I am only a man among others." To think that for sixteen or seventeen years I have been taking seriously this pure illusion that is implicit in so much of our monastic thinking. It is a glorious destiny to be a

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member of the human race, though it is a race dedicated to many absurdities and one which makes many terrible mistakes; yet, with all that, God Himself gloried in becoming a member of the human race. A member of the human race! To think that such a commonplace realization should suddenly seem like news that one holds the winning ticket in a cosmic sweepstake. I have the immense joy of being *man*, a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate . . . My solitude, however, is not my own, for I see now how much it belongs to them—and that I have a responsibility for it in their regard, not just in my own. It is because I am one with them that I owe it to them to be alone, and when I am alone they are not "they" but my own self. There are no strangers! Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God's eyes. If only they could all see themselves as they really *are*. If only we could see each other that way all the time. There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed . . . Again, that expression, *le point vierge* (I cannot translate it), comes in here. At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will. This little point of nothingness and of *absolute poverty* is the pure glory of God in us. It is so to speak His name written in us, as our poverty, as our indigence, as our dependence, as our sonship. It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody, and if we could see it we would see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely . . . I have no program for this seeing. It is only given. But the gate of heaven is everywhere.[22]

This famous passage can be read psychologically, as a breakthrough. It is important to remember Merton's background. The young Merton, the Merton of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, had been a world-denier. To use the rhetoric of old-school monasticism, he had fled the world to save his soul. Yet here in this midlife moment, he recognized that all that was an illusion, that for sixteen or seventeen years he had lived a lie of sorts, that he had fashioned his religious identity around a "dream of separateness," as he now called it. He celebrated

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now not his separateness, but his solidarity, his "immense joy of being *man*." That meant that he had to recenter his identity. He now had to live his solitude not over against, but for the sake of, others. But there is something more at play here. This is not simply an intellectual insight, but something deeper—intuitive, instantaneous. He sees, knows, feels, all at once, his solidarity with others, that "they are not 'they' but my own self."

But the passage describes something more than a psychological breakthrough. It voices a profound and fundamental religious insight: one should see in each person a God-given dignity. In many mouths, that insight might be no more than a well-worn truism. But Merton speaks of it here as an experience pungently savored. The very force of the telling seems to point to the unexpected depths, indeed, to a mystical source for this realization. He speaks of seeing "the secret beauty of their hearts, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God's eyes." Notice that Merton makes no mention here of a "vision" in imaginative terms. He is not seeing something inside his head. It is not an innerworldly nor an otherworldly experience. There is no mention of ecstasy, no trance or out-of-body experience. There is nothing dreamlike about it. On the contrary, it is a seeing that makes ordinary seeing seem dreamlike. He sees people with his senses fully operative. At the same time, he sees them in a way that breaks through the surface of things, seeing them not simply with his senses, but seeing them as they are in their truest identities, as images of God who walk around the streets oblivious to their God-given beauty. That is the mystical here. Note the way he says that if others could see what he was seeing, there would be no more war, no more hatred. The seeing is the breakthrough. The mystical here is not about visions; it is not seeing another world or an inner world. The mystical is seeing this world in a God-given light. And in this seeing, as he says at the end, "the gate of heaven is everywhere."

Was this a mystical experience? In the preface, I noted that we cannot be naive in the way we understand mystics, that we meet mystics and their experiences via texts that have come down to us and that we need to be alert to mystical texts, first of all, as texts. This passage is a good example. The publication a few years ago of Merton's private journals enabled scholars to compare this famous version in *Conjectures* with the original journal entry, written eight years earlier on the very day of the event. The private journal version is much simpler, much shorter, with little mystical language.[23] This raises a key question: Do we presume that the early, simpler version records the real event and therefore interpret the mystical language of the *Conjectures* version as a later overlay? Or, on the other hand, do we read the later version as the more authentic—that Merton's own mystical insight has awakened and deepened

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over time? This is a key question, and one that occurs with other famous mystics such as Julian of Norwich.[24]

Merton was a longtime reader of mystical authors, and his language in this passage owes much to earlier mystical texts. But Merton does not parade his sources. They lie beneath the surface, within his seemingly spontaneous word choice and imagery. But one instance leaps out, his phrase *le point vierge* (virginal point). Merton says, "I cannot translate it," not because he cannot produce a literal translation, but because the phrase held such a rich cluster of meanings. It came from Louis Massignon, a French specialist in the mystical thought of Islam. Massignon wrote extensively on the tenth-century Sufi mystic and martyr al-Hallāj and regularly quoted one of al-Hallāj's sayings: "our hearts are a virgin that God's truth alone opens." [25] The "virginal point" refers to the mystic's inner depths where, according to al-Hallāj, "no dreamer's dream penetrates, . . . where the presence of the Lord alone penetrates." Massignon, in an essay on medieval Christian and Muslim mystics, remarked that "introspection must guide us to tear through the concentric 'veils' which ensheathe the heart, and hid from the virginal point (*le point vierge*), the secret wherein God manifests Himself."[26] This passage shaped Merton's language here. Merton and Massignon began corresponding in 1959, one year after Merton's Fourth-and-Walnut experience. They became friends, and Merton—who was fluent in French—read Massignon's works extensively. He found Massignon's terminology (and, behind it, the Muslim mystic's terminology) a cogent way to express his earlier experience.

What does one make of all of this—the two accounts of the event, the borrowed phraseology? Does all this disqualify it as a "mystical experience"? Some might think so. I would argue, rather, that hindsight, combined with reading, taught Merton how to speak more precisely about the mystical element in his own experience. His readings of Massignon and Sufi mysticism had increased his vocabulary, so to speak, enabling him to better articulate his experience. Even if one grants this, was the incident at Fourth and Walnut "mystical" in the sense of being an experience of God? We saw how Gerson spoke of the mystical as an experiential knowledge of God that came through "unitive love." Was this an experience of "unitive love"? It was certainly an experience of Merton's unitive love with his fellow human beings. He experienced the people he saw around him as sacred, as bearers of the divine stamp. Some might argue that the incident is not, per se, a *direct* experience of God. This, of course, presumes that God can be experienced *directly*, without any mediation whatsoever. The incident at Fourth and Walnut was clearly an epiphany, and on reflection, Merton saw it as a profound experience of God's presence. Does this answer the question? Perhaps not. But it does show how

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tricky it is to single out this experience—and possibly any experience—as unequivocally "mystical."

Contemplation

William Shannon, one of Merton's finest interpreters, has remarked out that "contemplation was not one of many topics in Merton's field of vision, it was the focal point . . . the center from which his reflections on the human condition came forth and the goal to which they returned. It is no exaggeration to say that contemplation was the explicit theme, or at least the implied background, of everything that Merton wrote."[27] Merton addressed the issue of contemplation over the breadth of his career, from one of his first books (*What Is Contemplation?*, 1948) to one of his last (*Contemplation in a World of Action*, 1971).

Merton gives a cogent exposition in what many consider his best book, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (1962). In its opening chapters, Merton spells out what contemplation is and what it isn't. Contemplation, he argues, "is not trance or ecstasy, nor the hearing of sudden unutterable words, nor the imagination of lights"; it is not "emotional fire" nor the "sweetness" of religious exultation; nor is it the gift of prophecy; a contemplative is not a thinker per se, "still less one who sits around with a vacant stare."[28] Contemplation—defined positively—"is the highest expression of man's intellectual and spiritual life"; it is "that life itself, fully awake, fully active, fully aware that it is alive"; it is "a vivid realization of the fact that life and being in us proceed from an invisible, transcendent and infinitely abundant Source"; it "*knows* the Source, obscurely, inexplicably, but with a certitude that goes beyond both reason and beyond simple faith."[29] These may sound like definitions, but the way that Merton piles one definition upon another makes it clear that he is trying not to define contemplation but to point to it as a lived reality, as an experience that defies definition. He often resorts to paradox, even oxymoron. He admits, for instance, that contemplation is a "kind of spiritual vision," but then he retracts the claim, arguing that contemplation is "not vision because it sees 'without seeing' and knows 'without knowing.'" He says that it offers knowledge, but "a knowledge too deep to be grasped in images, in words, or even in clear concepts."[30]

Merton admits that poets, musicians, and artists taste something like the contemplative experience. But Merton is a theist and a Christian, and for him, contemplation involves a this-worldly encounter with God: "Contemplation reaches out to the knowledge and even to the experience of the transcendent and inexpressible God. It knows God by seeming to touch Him. Or rather it

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knows Him as if it had been invisibly touched by Him . . . Hence contemplation is a sudden gift of awareness, an awakening to the Real within all that is real. A vivid awareness of infinite Being at the roots of our own limited being."[31] Merton here captures the paradox. The God whom the contemplative seeks is both experienced and beyond experience, is both knowable and unknowable. Merton makes this point more precisely in a late essay: "The heart of the Christian mystical experience is that it experiences the ineffable reality of what is beyond experience. It 'knows' the presence of God, not in clear vision but 'as unknown.'"[32] Note also that Merton says that in contemplation one knows "as if . . . invisibly touched by Him." Merton the Christian insists that we do not touch God; God touches us. William James had spoken of mystical experience as "passive." For Merton, contemplative experience is not passive, but graced, "a sudden gift of awareness." In Christian mysticism, the initiative always comes from God. Merton makes this point later, shifting metaphors from touch to hearing: "Contemplation is also the response to a call: a call from Him who has no voice, and yet Who speaks in everything that is, and Who, most of all, speaks in the depths of our own being: for we ourselves are words of His."[33] Again Merton resorts to paradox. Contemplation is a "call" from One-with-No-Voice. How does one hear God? Here he points to two places: outward to creation, where God "speaks in everything that is," and inward to our own heart, where we discover that "we ourselves are words of His." Merton draws on here—yet leaves unnamed—two distinct Christian mystical traditions, the Franciscan (finding God in creation) and the Augustinian (finding God within).

What does contemplation feel like? What is the experience? Merton offered many descriptions over the course of his career, but in *New Seeds* he gives his most striking. He begins by contrasting ordinary seeing with contemplative seeing, noting that "the sharpest of natural experiences is like sleep, compared with the awakening which is contemplation." He then points out that the way upward to God is really inward, and that at one's deepest center one discovers a sort of trapdoor:

> A door swings open in the center of our being and we seem to fall through it into immense depths which, although they are infinite, are all accessible to us; all eternity seems to have become ours in this one placid and breathless contact. God touches us with a touch that is emptiness and empties us. He moves us with a simplicity that simplifies us. All variety, all complexity, all paradox, all multiplicity cease. Our mind swims in the air of understanding, a reality that is dark and serene and includes in itself everything. Nothing more is

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> desired. Nothing more is wanting. Our only sorrow, if sorrow be possible at all, is the awareness that we ourselves still live outside of God.[34]

Toward the end of *New Seeds,* Merton offers still another definition of contemplation: "The union of the simple light of God with the simple light of man's spirit, in love, is contemplation."[35] Note the stress on "union," on "love." This echoes Gerson's definition, but where Gerson spoke of "mystical theology" Merton speaks of "contemplation." The difference in terminology is conscious. Merton preferred to speak the language of contemplation. The word "mysticism" simply carried too much baggage. It also tended to be limited to "peak experiences." Merton thought of contemplative experience not simply as "peak experiences" (such as the Fourth-and-Walnut episode)—it was broader, more routine, finding God's presence in the ordinary and the everyday. There are other convergences between Gerson and Merton. Like Gerson, Merton pleads for a reunion of theology and the mystical:

> Contemplation, far from being opposed to theology, is in fact the normal perfection of theology. We must not separate intellectual study of divinely revealed truth and contemplative experience of that truth as if they could never have anything to do with one another. On the contrary, they are simply two aspects of the same thing. Dogmatic and mystical theology, or theology and "spirituality," are not to be set apart in mutually exclusive categories, as if mysticism were for saintly women and theological study were for practical but, alas, unsaintly men. This fallacious division perhaps explains much that is actually lacking both in theology and spirituality. But the two belong together. Unless they are united there is no fervour, no life and no spiritual value in theology, no substance, no meaning and no sure orientation in the contemplative life.[36]

In Merton's day, as in Gerson's, scholastic theology (what Merton calls here "dogmatic theology") still held the field. And like Gerson, he was critical of its lack of fervour and appalled that theology and holiness would somehow seem like contrary vocations.

Seeking One's True Face

One of Merton's most poignant themes concerns the notion of the "false self." For Merton, sin is not so much doing bad things as it is living an illusion. In *New Seeds,* Merton argues that "for me to be a saint means to be myself.

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MYSTICS

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