

Turning to the Mystics



Thomas Merton: Session 7

with James Finley

Jim Finley: Greetings. I'm Jim Finley. Welcome to Turning to the Mystics.

Jim Finley: Greetings, everyone, and welcome to our time here together turning to the Christian mystic Thomas Merton to help us deepen our experience of and response to God's presence in our lives. In this session, we're coming to the end of this initial series here on Thomas Merton, the session following this one being a kind of, not a summary, but to get kind of an overview of like the spiritual worldview of contemplative Christianity and following the path of learning to live in fidelity to it. I believe too there's be an opportunity for you to ask questions over the site here, and Kirsten will come and interview me based on the questions that you might have on this initial series here on Thomas Merton.

Jim Finley: I've decided in this session as our text to choose a passage, which is chapter six in Thomas Merton's book *The Inner Experience*. It's a significant book in that it's the book that he was still in the midst of doing the final edits of when he died in Asia. He wrote *The Asian Journal* on the trip to Asia where he met the Dalai Lama and so on, but this was back in his hermitage at Gethsemani. He was writing this as kind of the mystical lineage of the Christian tradition.

Jim Finley: In chapter six of *The Inner Experience*¹ on infused contemplation, or as I say mystical contemplation, he has a series of very succinct statements to bear witness to what infused or mystical contemplation is. I think what I'd like to do here, these are so poetic, they're so intuitively pure that I want to just kind of poetically reflect out loud with you for a little bit with each one to kind of move into the spirit of the subtlety of this.

Jim Finley: I think here what he's doing, he's kind of assuming. He's in the spirit of what we've been saying before in the previous sessions, that as you're living your day-by-day life and you have a daily rendezvous with God, kind of a prayer devotional sincerity, and in that devotional sincerity and in that prayer, you can begin to discern the beginnings of something starting to happen to you in prayer, which is this mystical or infused contemplation. He lists 11 points. I'd like to go over a number of them here and kind of prayerfully reflect on it together. As I go through this, I encourage you to, as you listen to this, to ask, have you ever experienced or ever had intimations of this? Or as you listen to it, that you're drawn to this so that in prayer and your further readings of Scripture and Merton and your other sources, you might open your heart to this kind of deepened, infused, mystical way of experiencing this communion with God in your daily life.

Jim Finley: Merton writes, chapter six, *The Inner Experience*, Merton writes, "*We are now in a position to summarize the essential elements of mystical contemplation. Number one, it is an intuition that at its lower level transcends the senses. On its higher level, it transcends the intellect itself.*"

Jim Finley: You're sitting in prayer, just kind of being quietly attentive in the presence of God, and there begins to emerge within you a certain kind of grace state of consciousness which in the beginning can be kind of likened to intuition, kind of an intuitive knowing or an intuitive way of being present or being present to God in prayer. This emerging intuitive state transcends the senses. That is to say, the senses are still there. This is not a state of trance, though that can happen in prayer, but you're still sitting there and there's still your senses in which you're sitting there. If you're sitting there looking out the window, or you're sitting

1 All quotes here are from the latest publication in 2003 by HarperOne.

there looking at the crucifix, or you're looking at a burning candle, or you're aware of your presence in the room, any sounds that are there, all of that is still there. But what you're beginning to experience cannot be in so far as it hasn't a feeling of an experience. We might say here also any sense of a consolation here in terms of affect, like a sense of inner warmth or a sense of the felt sense of the presence of God, that might be there. But you get the feeling there's the beginning of an intuitive way of knowing or experiencing God's presence that qualitatively transcends the senses, what can adequately be understood in terms of sensory experience.

Jim Finley: At a higher level, it transcends the intellect itself. That is while sitting there reading Scripture or Merton, whatever, you may be in the midst of very moving, very profound thoughts about God, profound insights into the nature of God or God's presence in your life. But you feel that in this emerging intuitive state, it's a state of consciousness that transcends all those thoughts, regardless of how profound they might be. It's kind of a trans-conceptual state of knowing beyond the conceptual thinking reflecting mind. It's a kind of non-reflective intimate immediacy beyond all concepts of God, yourself, the world. The thinking self and all that it thinks is being very so subtly transcended in this moment.

Jim Finley: By the way, this shift into this qualitatively richer state might be quite dramatic. I mean it might be kind of startling, take you by surprise. But very often, like water filling the marshlands, it's very subtle, like very, very delicate. It may be going on so much so that this infused contemplation of which he speaks may be occurring quite some time before it reaches the threshold of your conscious awareness that it's occurring, such as the delicacy of this experience.

Jim Finley: Second point, the quality of mystical contemplation, infused contemplation, "*Hence,*" that is because it transcends the senses, transcends the intellect, "*It is characterized by a quality of light and darkness, of knowing and unknowing. It is beyond feeling, even beyond concepts.*" That is to say it is a quality of light. It has about it a kind of luminosity, a kind of an unseen light that can't be seen with the eyes of the body. The qualitative richness of that light, which is ultimately the light of God, because being infinite it's divine, it transcends the capacity of the senses to grasp it. Therefore, at one level you're being qualitatively illuminated in a way, with respect to your finite self you're being darkened in that the finite aspects of yourself can't go into the realm that's now beginning to happen to you.

Jim Finley: It's also then a kind of a knowing and unknowing. That is it's a very kind of obscure and deep sense of knowing God, of knowing God, but in a way that's unknowing in that any attempts in reflective consciousness to articulate what's happening to you or to grasp it in conceptual terms, you realize it's not possible to do that. It transcends that.

Jim Finley: I might have said it in an earlier conference here or session. I love where Merton once said in the monastery, he said that the most important thing in your life is something you don't know and don't need to know because God loves you. This is the love of God being infused into the depths of your soul, qualitatively transcending anything you could conceptually grasp or comprehend the gift that's occurring to you.

Jim Finley: He once said, Thomas Merton once said the most important things in life are things we simply have to accept or we'll go crazy inside, and they're the things we can't explain to anybody, including ourselves. That's the solitary subtle nature here. We're kind of beyond the frontiers of our own ability to comprehend or to articulate what's happening. Yet even though we can't comprehend it or grasp it, it's happening anyway. We're suddenly in this kind of graced state in the subtlety of our body, the subtlety of our mind and of our heart, this knowing and unknowing.

Jim Finley: Number three, the third point, *"In this contact with God in darkness, there must be a certain activity of love on both sides. On the side of the soul, there must be a withdrawal from attachment to sensible things, a liberation of the mind and the imagination from all strong emotional and passionate clinging to sensible realities. Passionate thinking distorts our intellectual vision, preventing us from seeing things as they are. But also, we must go beyond intelligence itself and not be attached even to simple intuitive thoughts. All thoughts, no matter how pure, are transcended in contemplation."*

Jim Finley: "In this contact with God in darkness, there must be a certain activity of love on both sides." Now, from God's side, this activity is perpetually and endlessly occurring. As we saw in a previous session on creation, that the infinite presence of God is presenting itself, is pouring itself out and giving itself away in and as the intimate immediacy of the gift and the miracle of our very presence and our nothingness without God. We think of God as generosity. The generosity of the infinite is infinite. God is an infinite love, a kind of a self-donating love, giving itself to us as the mystery of our very self, as a person created by God in the image and likeness of God. From God's side, the self-donating generosity is being achieved as a transcendental quality of our very being, the ultimately nature of each passing moment of our life.

Jim Finley: But from our side, the act of love on our part is first to quietly stand beyond the realm of intense conflicted thinking. If there's anything going on in our life, and maybe it might be all kinds of things might be going on, but here at least in your intention you let them fall into the background. You don't actively entertain thoughts, or images, or ideas that generate conflicted feelings within yourself.

Jim Finley: But even at a more subtle level, you also as an act of love, you actively choose to let go of identifying with any thoughts that arise, endure, and pass away within you. That is you're sitting there, thoughts continue to arise, the thoughts endures. As a thought arises, you let it arise. You're aware that a thought is arising. If it lingers, you let it linger for as long as it lingers and you let it pass away. No matter how profound the thought is, no matter how true the thought is, you do not cling to it, because being finite is an infinite ... it's a finite idea of the infinite, but in its finiteness, it's infinitely less than what you're looking for and it's infinitely less than the infused knowledge of the presence of God that's being pouted quietly into your soul as you sit there, so you do not cling to it.

Jim Finley: Likewise, no matter how confusing it is, you just notice that it's confusing. Notice whatever it is about it that's troubling that you can't grasp it. You just let it go over your shoulder. You don't get caught up in letting conceptualizations, no matter how refined, be your base of operation. Your primary base of operation is a kind

of obediential fidelity to this emergence of this ever so delicate, quiet love that's emerging within you. For the sake of that love, you leave behind or pass beyond or let go of all that rises and falls within you as this deepening love is so subtly occurring.

Jim Finley: The contemplative must then keep alert and detached from sensible and from even spiritual attachments. Saint John of the Cross teaches us that the contemplative should turn away from even seemingly supernatural visions of God and of his saints in order to remain in the darkness of unknowing. In any event, contemplation presupposed a generous and total effort of ascetic self-denial. But the final ecstatic movement by which the contemplative goes beyond all things is passive and beyond his own control. It's passive in that God achieves it in you, and therefore it is beyond what you can attain or need to attain.

Jim Finley: This is very subtle here. I also think for a time right at the edge here of spiritual direction and how this goes, sometimes I think we're kind of just emerged in it in a kind of a sustained state of wordless clarity, a void of thought. But most often, the thoughts and the emotions continue to rise and fall within us. We keep noticing them, but we notice them kind of out of the corner of our eye, kind of aware that in their finiteness they're infinitely less than what we're looking for. Furthermore, what is already beginning to grant itself to us unexplainably beyond words, beyond thought, beyond emotion.

Jim Finley: Fourth point. *"Contemplation is the work of love, and the contemplative proves his love by leaving all things, even the most spiritual things, for God in nothingness, detachment, and night. But the deciding factor in contemplation is the free and unpredictable action of God. He alone can grant the gift of mystical grace and makes himself known by secret, ineffable contact that reveals his presence in the depths of the soul. What counts is not the soul's love for God, but God's love for the soul."*

Jim Finley: I'll tell you something that helps me to see this, I think of this, is in a way we could ask this question, why is it that we can't see the dead? Thomas Merton said once in the monastery when one of the monks died, he realized that when we die we don't go anywhere. In God we live and move and have our being. That all the dead are right here, all the angels are here, God is here, all about us and within us. As Augustine said, closer to us than we are to ourselves. But why can't we see them? Because with our finite eyes, our finite thought, through the mediations of faith, the mediations of insight, consolations, and so on kind of in this temple realm of this earth illumined by grace.

Jim Finley: But here, there's a kind of a premonition of death that we're here by kind of dying to everything that's less than God, through quiet purity of love, we're passing through the veil of death. By dying to everything less than an infinite union with the infinite love of God infinitely giving itself to us as the very depths of ourself, we're in water way over our head in some quiet, delicate, and ever so mysterious way. There just may be subtle waves of this, and then we return back to our customary way of meditating and so on, but the sustained states of it may become more and more sustained, more and more kind of an underlying, pervasive attitude, an ungraspable communal clarity that's beginning to emerge within our heart in prayer and then throughout the

moments of our day.

Jim Finley: What counts then is not my love for God. I'm not trying to measure up to something. I'm not trying to reach some attained state of loving God I can't attain. Rather, I'm trying to realize that God in my inability to attain this love is attaining me and taking me to itself as infinitely precious in my inability to attain it. Hence the gift of tears. Hence the gift of experiential salvation, this luminous deification through love in this obscurity and subtlety of interior prayer.

Fifth point. *"This knowledge of God in unknowing is not intellectual, nor even in the strict sense affective," as in the emotions. "It is not the work of one faculty or another uniting the soul with an object outside of itself. It is a work of interior union and of identification in divine charity," as in divine infinite love. "One knows God by becoming one with him. One apprehends him by becoming the object of his infinite mercies."* What I say is infinite merciful subjectivity.

In other words, when Jesus says, "I come that you might have life and have it more abundantly," that life is the life that is at once God's and our own. What we're realizing here is that one life, at once God's and our own, in a state of trans-subjective communion beyond thought, beyond emotion, beyond memory. In the midst of the ongoing memories and thoughts continue to rise and fall within us, but in this subtle, qualitative, interior, rich state, ever so delicate, this union arises unexplainably within us.

Jim Finley: Sixth point. He puts it in all capital letters. The whole thing belongs in capital letters. *"CONTEMPLATION IS A SUPERNATURAL LOVE AND KNOWLEDGE OF GOD, SIMPLE AND OBSCURE, INFUSED BY GOD INTO THE SUMMIT OF THE SOUL, GIVING IT A DIRECT AND EXPERIENTIAL CONTACT WITH HIM."*

Here's how it helps me to see this poetically. Let's say that the poetic image, this poetic mandala, is that the infinite abyss of God is surrounding us and all about us. Then within this circle is ourself, like our customary sense of ourself. Then in the inner most center of ourself, in the hidden ... Where Teresa of Avila would be the seventh mansion, in the hidden most center of ourself, the innermost summit of the soul, innermost hidden center of the soul. What tends to happen is that God infuses herself and grants herself mediated through insights, through consolations, through intensions, through discipleship, a daily life of discipleship in this world, the measure of which is love. We live our life efficacious unto holiness.

But here what happens is, we might say, is that the infinite love of God that's all about us in a certain sense passes right through the circle of our finite ego self and goes directly into the innermost center of ourself. God in the innermost center of ourself and God transcending us and all about us, the ego self is sweetly transfixed betwixt and between this all-encompassing divinity that it can neither define nor explain. It's a state of kind of resting in God resting in you unexplainably.

I want to share something else too I think from a practical point. As Thomas Merton once said to the novices, he said, "You know, there are people who are called to this, but because it's so subtle, they have no one to bear witness to them that it's happening." Also, because of the ego's capacity for self deception to offer guidance. If you're fortunate enough to have

someone who's well seasoned in these things, just a man or woman of prayer who kind of lives this way or is acclimated to these modes of divine union, that's a real gift. But we otherwise, I think most of us who walk this way, we depend on God to guide us. We depend on prayer to guide us. We depend on our daily life to guide us on the quality of our love for ourself, for other people, for the world, for God, our discipleship.

Jim Finley: Also, in texts like in every word of Jesus and the words of Scripture, also in the words of these mystics, because the deathless presence of the mystics resonates in their words and they're offering here trustworthy guidance that we can quietly sit with this, resonate with this, and know the very reason it speaks to us or the very reason it resonates with us is itself a sign that we're already on the way of being called to this. As we continue our reading and prayer, trust the Scripture that God who begun this work in us will bring it to completion.

This is the sixth point. *"Mystical contemplation is an intuition of God born of pure love. It is a gift of God that absolutely transcends all the natural capacities of the soul and which no man can acquire by any effort of his own. But God gives it to the soul in proportion as it is clean and emptied of all affection for things outside of himself. In other words, it is God manifesting himself, according to the promise of Christ, to those who love him. Yet the love with which they love him is also his gift. We only love him because he first loves us. We seek him because he has already found us."*

I'd like to reflect on this. I don't think for sure it does not mean that God's being infused into our soul in this mystical, unitive way beyond thoughts and images, but we experience it in proportion he says, in proportion as the soul is clean and emptied of all affection. I don't think we should take this at all as some kind of perfectionism, that somehow we're to overcome our faults and frailties. I think that would be ... I don't think it means that at all.

What I think is much closer, it's in direct proportion to where our inner peace is no longer dependent on the degree to which we're able to follow or live up to this, but rather is solely, is more and more founded in the infinite love of God that infinitely loves us so in our inability to live up to this. It's being transfixed that way by kind of a holy indifference to measurements of attainable and instead a kind of a graced enrichment of a boundary-less gratitude or state of amazement, of being so incomprehensively loved by God in this intimate, so subtle way.

"But the thing that must be stressed is that contemplation is itself a development and a perfection of pure charity," that is of infinite love. "He who loves God realizes that the greatest joy, the perfection of beatitude is to love God and to renounce all things for the sake of God alone."

Here I think too, it's like in the gospels when they ask Jesus, "What is the greatest commandment?" In other words, "Teacher, out of all the things that you say, what is the one thing that if we devote ourself to it, everything else you say will fall into place?" Jesus doesn't say to believe that God exists. He doesn't say to believe in God. He doesn't say to love God. He says but to love God with all your heart, all your mind, all your strength. In other words, to give yourself in a complete, self-donating abandonment in love to the infinite love of God, that is abandoning and pouring itself out and giving itself to you. What's happening in this prayer is that in the reciprocity of love, the fulfillment of our ultimate destiny in God is realized, for God is love.

Jim Finley: Tenth point. *"Infused contemplation, then, sooner or later brings with it a terrible interior revolution. Gone is the sweetness of prayer. Meditation becomes impossible, even hateful. Liturgical functions seem to be an insupportable burden. The mind cannot think. The will seems unable to love. The interior life is filled with darkness, and dryness, and pain. The soul is tempted to think that all is over and that, in punishment for its infidelity, all spiritual life has come to an end. This is a crucial point in the life of*

prayer. It is very often here that souls called by God to contemplation are repelled by this hard saying, turn back and walk no more with him. But God has illumined their hearts with a ray of his light. But because they are blinded by the intensity, it proves to be for them a ray of darkness. They rebel against that. They do not want to believe and remain in obscurity. They want to see. They want to walk ... They do not want to walk in emptiness with blind trust. They want to know where they are going. They want to be able to depend on themselves. They want to trust their own minds, and their own wills, and their own judgment, and their own decisions. They want to be their own guides. they are therefore sensual men who do not perceive the things that are of the Spirit of God. To them, this darkness and helplessness is foolishness. Christ has given to them his cross, and it has proved to be a scandal. They can go no further.”

Jim Finley: I'm so sensitive as we are today to sexist language, again if he were writing today he'd move back and forth between the masculine and the feminine. See, I think I mentioned this in an earlier thing. I'll say it again here. Merton once said in a conference to the novices, he says, "You know, we tell God when it comes to this mystical union with you, I really, really, really want this, but under one condition. That when I cross the line into mystical union, my ego will remain in tact and I'll become a mystical ego and finally get the respect that I deserve." We're always trying to strike a deal with God.

Really, I think what we're talking here about in Christian terms is the metaphor of the cross. Jesus says, "Follow me," and it sounds like a good idea until you see where he's taking us, which is the cross. What is the cross in this sense? The cross is our dreaded and cherished illusions that anything less than an infinite union with infinite love has the authority to name who we are. Only an infinite union with infinite love can put to rest the restless longings of our hearts. It's a God given longing that God has placed in our heart, a state of being unconsummated, short of an infinite union with the infinite love of God. It's a setup in the artistry of God's love for us.

J This happens in all kinds of ways. Sometimes it happens in the midst of what's going on in our life, the falling apart of a marriage, a child is seriously sick, or the financial hardship, or even the distress of the world, how it just gets to us. Sometimes it has to do with unresolved matters we can't get through. Then when we go sit in prayer with a rendezvous with God, God doesn't show up for the rendezvous. Why? Because we're being weaned by God off of the last traces of our capacity to be consoled by God on our finite terms so that through that death to attachment or identifying with anything less than an infinite union with infinite love as a sole security for our consolation and fulfillment, in that very death, the very sweetness that so alludes us comes rolling through like this.

: This takes patience. You have to see how it's working. By the way, another ... I say this as a psychologist too. You could see how if you were prone toward depression this could activate depression as a response to loss, namely the loss of one's ability to experience the presence of God. If you were subject to anxiety, you could see how this could give rise to anxiety. Like I'm not going to make it. I don't know how to do this. This engages our whole being of learning to walk with God in a quiet, honest, and vulnerable way as we go through this dark night, through this purgative purification in which nothing is left of us but love.

The mystic is not the person who says, "Listen to what I've experienced." The mystic is the person who says, "Look what love has done to me. There's nothing left of me but love." Thomas Merton once said, "I'm blown down the street like leaves scattered in all directions." This is the freedom of the children of God, this kind of mystical, subtle unfolding of this paradoxical state of life out of death, which is really the mystery of the life, and death, and resurrection of Jesus being lived out in the depths of our soul, in the depth of our life at this very intimate level.

Jim Finley: Number 11, the last one. He talks about ... You can see his own life coming through here and the

struggles of the monastery with the politics of the place, and the abbot, and institutional structures, and all the rest of it. You begin to see ... In other words, it's this way. You begin to realize that what's happening to you isolates you from others. Then other people are less and less able to understand you. You don't fault them for it, because you don't understand it either, but you realize you're left with the layered complexities of the compromised ways of the world, and also the compromised ways of the believing church as a community of sinners infinitely loved by God. There's a certain solitude that arises within you, a certain sense of not knowing exactly where you fit in. Merton talks about being a boundary person who lives at the edge of everything definable and explainable, and that boundary is the paradoxical center where God dwells and radiates out into our life.

Jim Finley: I think there is a final note here, which gets us back into the works of Merton. What starts to happen is that this infused state of contemplation starts showing up throughout the day in the kind of the rise and the fall of the sensitivity to talking to someone, to being in the middle of a situation, of being awake and alone in the middle of the night, and how we're called to a paradoxical kind of service in which we're called to be there for others and with others in an engaged, helpful, real way. Like how can I be helpful? But also in a way in which we're with others in a way in which we can perhaps see in them a preciousness they can not yet see. That is in the ability to have our eyes opened by God to see how unexplainably loved we are by this love that takes us to itself breath by breath, we see that this is true of everybody around us.

Their deepest struggle isn't their struggle. Their deepest struggle is the intensity of their struggle is closing off access to that invincibly loved essence of who they are in the eyes of God. We can be with them at one level, not just to do the helpful thing, but to do the helpful thing in such a way that our patience with them, or our attentiveness to them, or our acceptance of them, or our vulnerability with them creates kind of an opening in which some of this light might shine through into their heart in which they can continue to find their own way along this journey.

I'll end with that. I think maybe in the light of the limits of time, maybe this was the most honest way to approach this, kind of a poetry and blank verse, bearing witness to this in a way in so far as it resonates with you and calls you to discern within your heart how it might be stirring within you, like what it's asking out of you, and how with God's grace you might lean more deeply into it and find the fulfillment that Merton and all the mystics invite us to find.

With that then, let's bring this to prayer meditation. I invite you to sit straight, fold your hands in prayer, and bow.

Be still and know I am God.

Be still and know that I am.

Be still and know.

Be still.

Be. (silence)

Fold your hands and bow. Slowly say the Lord's Prayer together. Our Father, which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory now and ever. Amen.

Jim Finley: Mary, Mother of contemplatives, pray for us. Mother Teresa of Calcutta, pray for us. Thomas Merton, pray for us. Bless us. Until next time.

Kirsten Oates: Thank you for listening to this episode of Turning to the Mystics, a podcast created by The Center of Action and Contemplation. We're planning to do episodes that answer your questions, so if you have a question, please email us at podcasts@cac.org or send us a voicemail at cac.org/voicemails. All of this information can be found in the show notes. We'll see you again soon.