

# Irish priest in Japan examines East, West traditions

*Letters to Contemplatives*, by William Johnston, SJ; (Orbis Books (Maryknoll, 1991); 112 pages; \$9.95.

**By Monsignor William H. Shannon**  
Guest contributor

Father William Johnston is an Irish Jesuit from Belfast who has lived in Japan since 1951. He received a doctorate in mystical theology from Sophia University in Tokyo and has served on the university's faculty as professor of literature and religion.

He is also the author of a number of well-received articles and books on mysticism and East-West religious dialogue, such as *The Still Point*, *Silent Music*, *Christian Mysticism Today*, among others.

*Letters to Contemplatives* offers 15 letters he wrote to a variety of friends while he was on sabbatical from Jan. 1989 to June 1990. The letter form allows the writer to develop a number of themes, but without attempting to treat them exhaustively. Father Johnston sees our time as a providential period in human history, in which

there is a deep interest in the things of the spirit and the strong desire to seek the deepest levels of human consciousness.

He writes a great deal about mysticism, but especially about a new mysticism that is coming to birth in our time. It is a mysticism of ordinary people, rather than an elite of religious professions. It is holistic, in that it involves the whole person: breathing and posture are important factors. It is a mysticism that is based on radical faith that lets go of reasoning and thinking and imagining.

As one of Father Johnston's colleagues at Sophia University said: "I teach people not to think!" It is a mysticism that brings together many different religious traditions. Mirrored in the meeting at Assisi of various religious leaders called together by Pope John Paul II in Oct. 1986 (and again on Jan. 9 of this year), the new mysticism offers a vision of the church as the people of God walking hand in hand with Jews and Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists, and all men and women of

good will, toward a common goal: world peace and a recognition of the oneness of all reality in God.

Father Johnston believes that we can be enriched in our religious consciousness by contact with the world's great religious traditions. Yet he by no means advocates a simplistic and unthinking blending of various religious beliefs.

Interreligious dialogue is essential today, but for it to be authentic, it must be disciplined: we Christians must be grounded in Christ and in the Gospel. Only then can we open our hearts to the good that is present in Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and other religious traditions.

Father Johnston shows his own mastery of eastern thought, when, for instance, he sheds light on Zen teaching about the void and its relationship to the "dark night" in Christian mysticism, or the Buddhist denial of the individual self and the Christian call to let go of a false self constructed by our own dreams, schemes and illusions.

Nor is it simply a matter of comparing one religious belief with another; rather it means letting that very comparison lead us to a richer understand-

ing of what we believe ourselves. Thus, our goal is not to arrive at, say, a Christian Zen or Zen Christianity, but to have Zen Buddhism and Christianity each deepen its own perceptions by contact with the faith experiences of the other.

Yet I would not want to give the impression that this book is a treatise on religious dialogue or a series of doctrinal exchanges. The letter form which Johnston has adopted enables him to personalize what he writes, tailoring it to the needs of each of his correspondents. There is an immediacy about this literary genre: it offers the intimate experience of peering over the shoulders of the recipients of the letter and reading it with them. It is an invited intrusion into their privacy.

This is a thoroughly enjoyable book. Calling us to a wider ecumenism, it will considerably broaden our religious perspectives and our sense of God's wondrous deeds, as God reaches out to heal and save a total humanity.

Monsignor Shannon is professor emeritus at Nazareth College of Rochester.

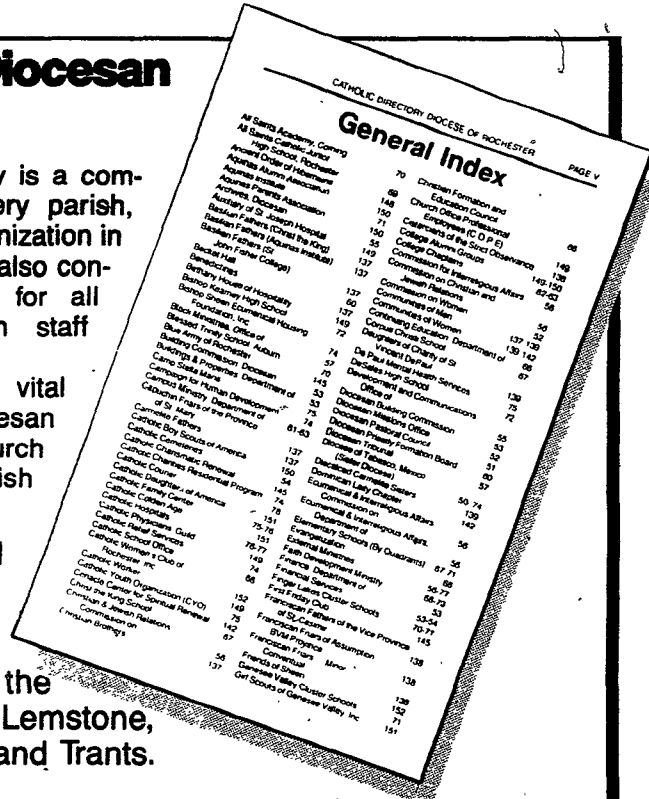
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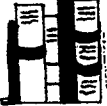
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