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THOMAS MERTON AND THE CONTEMPLATIVE BASIS OF SOCIAL ACTION

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To all the voices inside me that never said I could do this...

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INTRODUCTION

The written word has had much to say about Thomas Merton. His life and writings have been endlessly critiqued and written about, and numerous biographies of him have appeared since his death in 1968. Merton was also a man who wrote endlessly: above all things his true vocation was always a writer. His meticulous personal journals describe a man who endlessly struggled with his own identity, his decisions, others around him and with his relationship to God.

Perhaps it was because of the degree to which Merton struggled with these issues that his writings impacted his readers so much. In 1966 he wrote, "It seems to me that one of the reasons why my writings appeal to many people is that I am not so sure of myself and do not claim to have all the answers."[1] Referring to Merton's best known work *The Seven Storey Mountain*, the playwright and politician Clare Boothe Luce wrote: "It is to a book like this that men will turn a hundred years from now to find out what went on in the heart of man in this cruel century."[2] Luce's comment reveals the amount that Merton's struggles resonated with those living at that time.

As an autobiography, *Seven Storey Mountain* reveals many of the struggles Merton faced within himself, but also the array of issues outside himself. Among them were reform and renewal of monastic life, dialogue between Eastern and Western religious thought, contemplation and social justice. Although many writers have dealt

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[1] Thomas Merton. *Passion for Peace: The Social Essays*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Crossroad, 1995), 3.

[2] Mott, Michael. *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton.* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1984), 243. Please note that male-gendered pronouns will appear in this essay as they do in the text cited. The essay will always use gender-inclusive pronouns, however, when paraphrasing cited texts.

with these issues, few have resonated with as wide an audience as Merton has. Given the importance of his struggles with modern humanity and the array of issues he dealt with, Merton's writings offer clear wisdom to many in the world.

Given his importance, and given that both academia and the public have praised his writings so much, it is surprising that so few scholars have written so little about the connections between the two primary areas of Merton's writings: contemplation and social justice. Anthologies, articles and books discussing his life usually group Merton into either one of two categories: contemplative or social critic. Many acknowledge that both were important to him: Mott's biography accurately claims that Merton never strayed far from the questions "What does contemplation mean anyways?" and "How can we prevent social injustice?"[3] William Shannon's introduction to his collection of Merton's social essays offers a rare connection between these two areas of Merton's life: he states briefly that Merton's many years of contemplation produced a self-emptying compassion for the major social concerns of his day.[4] Yet Shannon fails to expand upon his connection any further, mainly because his book focuses on Merton's writings, and not an analysis of them.

An analysis of that connection *is*, however, the primary question of this thesis: How could the two themes Merton wrote most extensively about, contemplation and social justice, possibly fit together? Initially, one might disregard this question as unimportant, since Merton's intended audience existed more than forty years ago. Yet contemplative understanding and social justice remain vital issues today for two reasons. Firstly, science and technology's dominance has led to problems of overstimmulation and

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[3] Mott, *Seven* Mountains, 214.
[4] Merton, *Passion for Peace*, 2-3.

inauthenticity in modern society. Aldous Huxley articulates how modern consumerism has contributed to a distracted and un-centered worldview:

> "But it is upon fashions, cars and gadgets, upon news and the advertising for which news exists, that our present industrial and economic system depends for its proper functioning. For . . . this system cannot work unless the demand for non-necessaries is not merely kept up, but continually expanded; and of course it cannot be kept up and expanded except by incessant appeals to greed, competitiveness and love of aimless stimulation. Men have always been a prey to distractions, which are the original sin of the mind; but never before today has an attempt been made to organize and exploit distractions, to make them, because of their economic importance, the core and vital center of human life."[5]

Huxley's comments, even though they were made more than fifty years ago, still apply today. The actual *encouragement* of distraction through stimulation has caused an increase in inauthenticity and concern with outward, exterior matters.

Secondly, many of the social injustices that Merton encountered throughout his life—from military violence to racial inequality—still remain problems today. The idea of military assertiveness still dominates the thought patterns of most first-world citizens. The United States government, for example, responded to the recent attacks on the World Trade Center with violent military campaign in Afghanistan. Violence also continues to cause strife in the Middle East, where hundreds have died this spring in suicide bombings and anti-Palestinian military aggression. Racism, a problem that gained heightened awareness in the 1960's, is another problem that still exists in the United States' social climate: as of 1999, fifty-six percent of blacks and thirty-one percent of whites still thought that racism was a "big problem."[6] Therefore, Merton's ideas about

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[5] Huxley, Aldous. "Distractions—I," in *Vedanta for the Western World*, ed. Christopher Isherwood (Hollywood: Vedanta Press, 1946), 129, as found in Tim Vivian. *Journeying Into God: Seven Early Monastic Lives*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1996, 10.

[6] Ellis Cose, "Feeling Better About the Future," *Newsweek*, 7 June 1999, 35.

contemplation and social justice still apply to modern humanity despite the fact that they seem outdated.

These two areas of Merton's life share many ideas in common, as this essay will demonstrate. Merton's shift towards social concerns in the 1960's was *not* a radical shift in his thought. Rather, contemplative experience produced a compassion for the world that Merton could simply not hold back. Merton never argued for either contemplation or social justice: both were the same reality for him. His ideas about these two areas were primarily in *how they should be lived*, and here lies the connection between these two areas. Merton sought in all of his writings, whether on the topic of contemplation or social justice, to ignite a genuine, authentic and rooted way of being in the world. Living as a contemplative where "static" experience was the only lived reality was not authentic or genuine enough for him since no action followed it. True contemplation fundamentally changed the way one acted on the world—Merton often spoke of it incorporating one's whole being, not just one's mind. In the same way, Merton viewed social justice as an act of compassionate concern for the world, not seeking shocking demonstration, but rooted in authentic internationality.

The structure of the essay will be as follows: chapter one will provide a background for Merton's ideas by discussing his monastic background; chapter two will examine his contemplative vision, and what he thought true contemplation meant; chapter three provides some of the main points Merton made throughout his social essays; chapter four looks at Merton's contemplative and social visions in the contexts of theology, psychology and popular culture; and a final section will draw some conclusions based on based on the preceding analysis.

In order to look at Merton critically it is helpful for the reader to keep in mind that Merton's writings are not the final authority on the subjects of contemplation and social justice. Many churches, especially the Society of Friends, and workers in the field of social justice regard Merton as an unquestionable source of truth and wisdom. While it is true that Merton's insights have incredible depth and profundity, bear in mind that a study of his writings requires a critical eye.

CHAPTER ONE: MERTON AND MONASTICISM

Introduction

Thomas Merton held many vocations during his life. Born in 1915 and orphaned at an early age, Merton delved into his studies first at Cambridge and later at Columbia. He focused his studies during his over graduate work at Columbia on literature, writing his dissertation on nature and art in William Blake's poetry.[7] Upon graduation he took a teaching position in the English department at St. Bonaventure University in New York. During his teaching experience, however, Merton's interest in mysticism and growing commitment to the Catholic Church influenced his exploration into religious and spiritual vocations. For a short while he even considered joining a Catholic Action house in Harlem, New York that served the needs of the poor. However, two retreats to the Monastery of Our Lady of Gethsemani in 1941 convinced him that he had found his true vocation. Merton's journals from that year reflect his deep sense of calling to the monastic life:

> This is the center of America. I had wondered what was holding this country together, what has been keeping the universe from cracking in pieces and falling apart. It is this monastery—if only this one . . . This is a great and splendid place. I have never in my life seen a court of a King or Queen. Now I am transported into one and I can hardly breathe, from minute to minute.[8]

The interest in literature and writing from his earlier days, combined with his passion for Christianity would shape much of Merton's life at the monastery. Firstly, the monastery's profound importance for Merton convinced him that monastics had a vital

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[7] Mott, *Seven Mountains*, 116.
[8] Thomas Merton. *The Secular Journal of Thomas Merton.* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1959), 183, as found in Mott, *Seven Mountains*, 172.

mission in the world. Secondly, the monastery heavily influenced his belief that solitude connected one to the world rather than separating one from it. In both of these ways, the monastery shaped and influenced Merton's life, including his writings on contemplation and social action.

Monasticism: A Bulwark of Unchanging Hope

Merton believed the monastery had a vital role to play in the modern world—and indeed had proved vital throughout its more than seventeen centuries of existence. Given that he was a monastic himself, Merton's views were biased towards upholding the monastic tradition. Yet despite the fact that he felt the need to defend his vocation, he still offers some insight into the role of monasticism in the world. His experience as a novice master—teaching incoming novices at Gethsemani[9]—and also the prominence of his writings on monasticism within his own order[10] gave him insights into monasticism's role that few others would have had.

Merton viewed the monastery as a place where those who felt called by God could lead a life of spiritual commitment. Other aspects of the monastery were important for him, such as the symbol of monasticism as a "bulwark" of unchanging hope for the rest of the world.[11] Merton's primary view of the monastic life always tended towards the spiritual, however: "(the monastic's) vocation calls him exclusively to the transcendent."[12] He sometimes used Erasmus-like images of battle to depict the nature of the monastic life: "(Monastics) are not exempted from service in fighting the great battles of their age, but rather, as a soldier of Christ, they are appointed to fight these battles on a

[9] Mott, *Seven Mountains*, 278, 286-88.
[10] Mott, *Seven Mountains*, 403-5.
[11] Thomas Merton. *The Silent Life*. (London: Sheldon Press, 1957), 173.
[12] Merton, *Silent Life*, 174.

spiritual front."[13] It was by acting on the world in this particular way, through prayer and spiritual practice, where Merton saw monastics most fulfilling their role within the greater society. During his first and only trip to Asia in 1968, Merton shared his understanding of the monastery is a living symbol during his meeting with the Dalai Lama. In their meeting, he expressed his view that contemplative monks, whether in the east or west, were a living example of the freedom and transformation that meditation can give.[14]

Merton's monastic order, the Cistercian Trappists, also shared this view of monasticism as an enacted as a symbol for the rest of the world. The Cistercian order began in the eleventh century as an offshoot of the Benedictine cenobitic tradition. The monks of southern France who joined this new style of monasticism distinguished themselves from traditional Benedictines in a number of ways. Benedictines had built a strong sense of community, but in an external, outward sense. A deeper interior and spiritual connectedness was lacking, and this is where Cistercians wished to focus their communal life. Cistercians sought a communal spiritual life, rather than a series of shared liturgical and prayerful "practices." Simply going through the "motions"—like that of a military corps—was not enough. They understood their community through inward *spiritual* expressions rather than externally.[15] Excessive concern with outward actions, instead of inward education and formation, was the major Cistercian criticism of Benedictines that subsequently shaped its spiritual tradition.[16] Cistercians sought to re-orient the monk's focus to the interior life by seeking more time within the monastery

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[13] Merton, *Silent Life*, 173.
[14] Mott, *Seven Mountains*, 550.
[15] Martha G Newman. *The Boundaries of Charity: Cistercian Culture and Ecclesiastical Reform, 1098-1180*. (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1996), 44.
[16] Newman, *Boundaries of Charity*, 22.

walls, increasing the importance of prayer and decreasing the allowance of material possessions.

For monasticism to enact this symbol, Merton believed monastics had to keep the spirit of God alive and present in their community. Repeating age-old liturgical practices could not do this alone. He confronts the notion of monasticism as a commodity to "check off one's list" when he argues: "The one thing necessary is not that which is left when everything is crossed off, but it is perhaps that which includes and embraces everything else; that which is arrived at when you've added up everything and gone far beyond."[17] From his perspective, monasticism needed to stray away from its traditional "pattern of disintegration [and] existential moratorium" towards a view that made the realities of God utterly alive and present, renewing the energies of the monastic in order to bring forth their gifts upon the world.[18] Without the immanent realization of God, Merton saw monasticism as only acting as a symbol, when in fact their daily spiritual lives could have an even greater impact upon the world.[19]

If monastics could fulfill their vocation of keeping the spirit of God alive, Merton thought monasteries had the capacity to *establish* peace. From this section in *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Merton claims that contemplatives influence the world by bringing it peace:

> Therefore it is something that all men who desire to please God ought to desire—not for a minute, nor for half an hour. It is in these souls that peace is established in the world. They are the strength of the world, because they are the tabernacles of God in the world. They are the ones

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[17] Thomas Merton. *Contemplation in a World of Action*. (New York: Doubleday, 1973), 341.
[18] Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, 288.
[19] Apparently Cistercians have not accepted Merton's ideas about monastic renewal very widely. In the primary book on Cistercian history, *The Cistercians: Ideals and Reality* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1977), Louis Lekai mentions Merton influence on the order in one paragraph, our of more than five hundred pages. Apparently Merton influenced the wider public to a greater extent than those within his own order.

> who keep the universe from being destroyed. They are the little ones. They do not know themselves. The whole earth depends on them. Nobody seems to realize it.[20]

Merton implies here that society would fall into ruin without such places where prayer and spiritual warfare dominate one's lifestyle. For in the daily life of humankind, very few can take the time to dwell with God as much as contemplatives do. Simply through living their vocation to its fullest, Merton argues that monastics keep the notion of a transcendent God alive through their own prayers and contemplation. Merton thus understood monasticism primarily as a living symbol of the peace God could offer, but also as a place where contemplative prayer could have an effect on the world.

Solitude Unites One to the World

One would think that a monastic such as Merton who entered a monastery retained no connection with the outside world at all. In fact, for the first ten years of his life at Gethsemani, this was indeed true: Father Louis (his given monastic name) wished for nothing else than for complete solitude. Merton wrestled with his abbots to grant permission to build a hermitage on nearby monastic grounds. When away from his hermitage for brief visits outside the monastery walls, Merton writes in his journals that he craved for solitude.

Merton's desire for solitude did not mean that he desired to separate himself from society. On the surface this seems quite strange: he separated himself from the world, and he was not *physically present* with anyone except his fellow monks. How could a monk argue that solitude was not separation? Merton's journey of solitude brought him into contact with the world through a *spiritual* dimension rather than a physical one.

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[20] Thomas Merton, *New Seeds*, 288.

Merton denied that pursuing solitude to physically separate oneself from relationships would connect one with a spiritual dimension. Solitude that sought escape from the world was not true solitude:

> Some men have perhaps become hermits with the thought that sanctity could only be attained by escape from other men. But the only justification for a life of deliberate solitude is the conviction that it will help you to love not only God but also other men. If you go into the desert merely to get away from people you dislike, you will find neither peace nor solitude; you will only isolate yourself with a tribe of devils.[21]

Escaping the world meant escaping one's spiritual connections with others and escaping from one's compassion for all human beings. Pursuing the contemplative life for selfish reasons was not the true calling of the monastic life. "A man who is not stripped and poor and naked within his own soul will unconsciously tend to do the works he has to do for his own sake rather than for the glory of God."[22] Monasticism ultimately pursued a life that would empty selfish desires and unite one with the world through compassion.

Merton drew on the writings and traditions of the early desert asetics to form his idea that the contemplative life united one with the world at a spiritual level. Early desert ascetics, the fourth century pioneers of monasticism, sought solitude simply to create a different kind of society where they could pursue spiritual practices not normally allowable in society. Merton writes that they, "did not reject society with proud contempt, as if they were superior to other men."[23] Rather they wished to live away from a society that divided itself into those who dominated and those who obeyed. Although desert ascetics separated themselves from society to a much greater extent than Merton did, both of their motivations were the same. Monasticism provided the opportunity to

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[21] Merton, *New Seeds*, 52.
[22] Merton, *New Seeds*, 58.
[23] Thomas Merton. *The Wisdom of the Desert*. (New York: New Directions, 1960), 5.

perfect one's compassion for the world not by leaping into a social void, only changing the customs and standards of one's community.[24]

Merton demonstrated contemplation's importance by his decision to enter into spiritual solitude at a monastic setting. Merton believed that contemplative prayer produced peace in the world by connecting him in a spiritual dimension with the rest of the world. Having established that contemplation was very important for Merton within his monastic vocation, chapter two will explore further exactly how his contemplative vision could awaken the revelation of God's spirit to enact peacefulness on the world.

[24] Merton, *Wisdom*, 9-10.

CHAPTER TWO: MERTON'S CONTEMPLATIVE VISION

Introduction: The Limitless Mystery of God

From many of Thomas Merton's writings, he makes unmistakably clear that the experience of contemplation cannot be easily explained.[25] "It is a misleading word in many respects," Merton explains in the preface to his most comprehensive book on contemplation, *New Seeds of Contemplation.*[26] Merton warned that contemplation could allure one into a supreme and intimate encounter with God that looked immensely appealing on the surface. Not all who think they have experienced contemplation truly know what it really means. "It is a more profound depth of faith, a knowledge too deep to be grasped in images, in words or even in clear concepts . . . it can only be hinted at, suggested, pointed to, symbolized."[27] The individual experience of contemplation implies that in its most genuine form one must experience it personally, not as an abstract idea obtained from outside of oneself.

There is therefore no "systematic" way of understanding contemplation, from Merton's point of view. It is an inward, personal experience that can only be realized by someone for himself or herself. If Merton had read the New Catholic Encyclopedia's definition of contemplation, printed in 1967, a year before his death, he would not have been pleased: "the word has the general meaning of speculative study, admiration of beauty or consideration of wisdom."[28] The verbs of this definition—study, admiration,

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[25] For an excellent survey of classical Catholic theology that details the unknowable nature of God, see Elizabeth Johnson. *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse.* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998), 104-120.
[26] Merton, *New Seeds*, x.
[27] Merton, *New Seeds*, 1, 6.
[28] J. Aumann. "Contemplation" in *The New Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: McGraw Hill), 1967, 3:258.

and consideration—all imply that contemplation takes place in what Merton called the "external self."[29] This self is external in that it processes and executes thought-patterns that are self-centered. The verbs of this definition take place in our mind—in the sense that they are completely disconnected with the depths of our true spiritual selves. If Merton would have been given the opportunity to submit his own brief definition, this sentence may have been it: "The only way to get rid of misconceptions about contemplation is to experience it."[30]

Despite these difficulties, Merton had a knack for recognizing the hints and symbols that pointed towards contemplative understanding. Merton's writings reveal his own familiarity with moments of spiritual insight. The amount of material that he wrote on the topic gives an idea of the depth of his understanding. The majority of his published books focused on this topic more than any other.[31] Merton's strong passion for this topic also gave him the ability to communicate his ideas surrounding contemplation. "Merton's strongest prose was consistently on the subject of contemplation or in the autobiographical writings . . ."[32] He himself even admits that he was addicted to contemplation: "The pleasures of the interior life are so great and so pure; they so far transcend the crude joys of sense and of this world, that they exercise a terrible attraction upon the soul that meets them along its road to God."[33]

Using Merton as a trustworthy guide to contemplative understanding, there are three main points that encapsulate his contemplative vision. Firstly, only God can reveal

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[29] Merton, *New Seeds*, 7.
[30] Merton, *New Seeds*, 6.
[31] For a bibliography of Merton's writings see Frank Dell 'Isola. *Thomas Merton: A Bibliography*. (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1975) or Marquita Breit. *Thomas Merton: A Bibliography*. (Scarecrow Press, 1974).
[32] Mott, *Seven Mountains*, 210.
[33] Thomas Merton. *Ascent to Truth*. (New York: Hardcourt, Brace and Company, 1951), 168-69.

the true nature of things through contemplation. Secondly, the revelation of the essence of things fundamentally changes the way one acts on the world. Finally, all people, not just those specifically called to the contemplative life, require contemplation to act authentically. In all of these ways, Merton sought to communicate the importance of contemplation in human existence. Merton feared that lives lived without an understanding of sacredness would mean lives lived in a violent and destructive manner. If contemplation could awaken the fundamental reality in life and make living real and alive, Merton believed life could be lived at its truest and most authentic level.

Revelation, Not Consumption

In Merton's view contemplation revealed the true nature of things. The search for this revelation could not happen externally, but had to spring out of the depths of one's being. The external self—the thinking self, the "false" egotistical self—cannot reveal the nature of things because the true essence of things only exists in our inner, true self. "[The false self] is our 'individuality' and our 'empirical self' but it is not truly the hidden and mysterious person in whom we subsist before the eyes of God."[34] Merton separated these two selves because he believed the mind and the ego produced fantasies about the essence of things. Only the true self could awaken a "spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life, of being."[35]

Merton also makes the further distinction that only God can awaken one's true self. "It is not we who choose to awaken ourselves, but God who chooses to awaken

[34] Merton, *New Seeds*, 7.
[35] Merton, *New Seeds*, 1.

us."[36] The importance of this distinction is that the true nature of things does not exist in our mind or our ego; rather it exists in God. If the essence of things existed in the mind of everyone, then only the mind would be necessary to reveal true self. This would make contemplation an object of calculated consumption.[37] Merton places the goal of contemplation not on consuming the nature of things as an object, but rather on realizing the moment when God chooses to awaken and open up the essence of things that exist *beyond* oneself. The adjectives Merton uses to define contemplation—"awareness," "heightened expression," "spiritual wonder," "gratitude," and "realization"—evidence Merton's belief that contemplation opened oneself up, rather than closed oneself in.

A letter Merton wrote to the Sufi scholar Abul about his routine for prayer in 1966 helps clarify his position that only God awakens true contemplation. Abul had written Merton about his own method for prayer, and Merton, who rarely told much about his own prayer life to anyone, shared this response:

> My prayer is then a kind of praise rising up out of the center of Nothing and Silence. If I am still present "myself" this I recognize as an obstacle. If He wills He can then make the Nothingness into a total clarity. If He does not will, then the Nothingness actually seems to itself to be an object and remains an obstacle. Such is my ordinary way of prayer or meditation. It is not "thinking about" anything, but a direct seeking the Face of the Invisible. Which cannot be found unless we become lost in Him who is Invisible.[38]

Merton makes clear here that the final step of contemplation, what he refers to as making the "Nothingness into a total clarity," can only happen "If He wills." This means that contemplation may not always awaken an awareness of the true nature of things. In order

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[36] Merton, *New Seeds*, 10.
[37] Merton, *New Seeds*, 10.
[38] Merton to Aziz Abul, Jan. 2, 1966, as found in Mott, 433.

to have a true contemplative experience, Merton believed only God could help overcome the obstacle of contemplation as an object of consumption.

Merton was quick to note that God's revelation in contemplative experience did not necessarily mean experiencing pleasure. Contemplation was never an escape, a spiritual "feel-good pill" that solved one's spiritual problems: "Let no one hope to find in contemplation an escape from conflict, from anguish or from doubt."[39] Instead of associating contemplation with pleasure, Merton viewed it as an intuitive understanding of the essence of things:

> "[The pain of contemplation] is a kind of trial by fire in which we are compelled, by the very light of invisible truth which has reached us in the dark ray of contemplation, to examine, to doubt and finally to reject all the prejudices and conventions that we have hitherto accepted as if they were dogmas."[40]

True contemplative experience changes the way the contemplator views God. Contemplative encounter opens up an understanding that everything we had previously conceived was God was false. The pain of contemplation comes from realizing that the nature of things, the "conventions that we have hitherto accepted as if they were dogmas," is not what we had previously believed it to be. In this way, a contemplator's doubts and fears gain new perspective, but are not lost.

Another perspective on the revelatory nature of contemplation comes from the existentiality of contemplation. Anything described as existential is both deeply personal, and yet profoundly other worldly. Merton believes contemplation awakens *both* of these elements: the experience of a God that comes from far beyond one's understanding, and at the same time can be known intimately. Merton discusses the inner

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[39] Merton, *New Seeds*, 12.
[40] Merton, *New Seeds*, 12.

contemplative experience as "'my-self' in existential mystery."[41] Merton also describes the inner experience as "intuitive." This description fits existential thought as well: God becomes a living reality, a truth that is present, and not an abstract principle. Merton communicates the aliveness of God well in this passage: "Contemplation does not arrive at reality after a process of deduction, but by an intuitive awakening in which our free and personal reality becomes fully alive to its own existential depths, which open out into the mystery of God."[42] [43]

Humility and Poverty, Not Selfishness or Ungratefulness

Once God revealed true contemplative experience, Merton writes that the way one acts upon the world fundamentally changes. In the short essay "Transcendent Experience", Merton points out the danger in contemplative experience of thinking that contemplation affirms the ego. If one seeks contemplation only for the purpose of affirming oneself, no change in the person will actually take place. Merton vividly argues that most people "take for granted that the only subject of [transcendent experience] is the ego-self, the individual person."[44] Most think that the experience *only* benefits the contemplator himself or herself. The misconception here is that God does not enter in and create a new reality. If one can reach beyond such false notions and become "ontologically carried 'above oneself'", a radical and revolutionary change can happen in the subject.[45]

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[41] Merton, *New Seeds*, 8-9.
[42] Merton, *New Seeds*, 9.
[43] Merton's essay entitled "New Consciousness," pp. 15-32 in *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968), expands significantly on the difference between God revealed in a Cartesian sense (thinking self) versus God revealed as an ontological truth (innermost, "true" self).
[44] Thomas Merton. *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*. (New York: New Directions, 1968), 73.
[45] Merton, *Birds of Appetite*, 74, 72.

The primary way he saw this happening was through the unselfish and simple values of humility and poverty. Contemplation for Merton was, at its roots, deep humility. Desiring to humble means renouncing the desire to "gain" something for oneself. "To unify your life unify your desires. To spiritualize your life, spiritualize your desires. To spiritualize your desires, desire to be without desire."[46] Merton captures the paradox of contemplation here: a need to gain humility, and at the same time a need for displacing all attempts at vanity of self.

True humility, found in contemplation, never attempts to gain something for oneself. "Such self-contemplation is a futile attempt to establish the finite self as infinite, to make it permanently independent of all other beings. And this is madness."[47] Any attempt at seeking humility for one's own purposes could never bring about true contemplation. Often what contributed to the desire to possess humility is craving for a moment of spiritual wonder.[48]

Growing out of a deep sense of humility, Merton understood contemplation as "flowering" best in gratitude. In gratefulness, God's love is comprehended. Not only that, but it is the recognition that "God has given us everything."[49] Contemplation allows oneself to come in touch with their own gratefulness to God, for its goal is realizing ourselves as "persons in whom God dwells, with infinite sweetness and inalienable power."[50] Once a contemplative truly understands gratitude, their actions towards themselves and the world changes.

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[46] Thomas Merton. *Thoughts in Solitude*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1956), 56.
[47] Merton, *New Seeds*, 52-53.
[48] Merton, Thomas. *The Sign of Jonas*. (New York: Hardcourt, Brace and Company, 1948), 34-35.
[49] Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*, 42.
[50] Merton, *New Seeds*, 9.

Ungratefulness does not come out of true humility. In being ungrateful, contemplatives only know that they do not yet know love. For Merton there was a distinct line between the knowledge of gratitude and ingratitude: "Those who are not grateful soon begin to complain of everything. Those who do not love, hate."[51] Perhaps this points towards why contemplation is so vital for Merton: without an understanding of thankfulness, God cannot be known.

In the fruition of contemplation in gratitude, the element of self-love also manifests itself. Spiritual humility does not say: I do not want to be who I am. It says, I love how I am, with all my deficiencies. Recognition of one's emotional, character and temperamental traits—aspects of our human nature that God has given—brings contemplatives closer to understanding gratefulness than farther away from it. It is in these characteristics that the uniqueness of our own personhood can express itself *as human* to God.[52]

A final angle through which to view contemplation's "flowering" is through the lens of poverty. Similar to contemplation and solitude, Merton's discussions of poverty and humility intertwine with each other. They connect firstly by having very similar meanings in their spiritual sense. Both recognize the need for love and for material things, humility emphasizing more of the love aspect and poverty more of the material aspect.[53] Spiritual poverty expresses itself in an attitude towards material possessions.[54] This attitude understands the times for using the advantage of material possessions, and when not to. In other words, a spirit of poverty does not mean a lack of material

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[51] Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*, 41.
[52] Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*, 24-26, 43-45
[53] For more on poverty, see pp. 262-267 of *New Seeds of Contemplation.*
[54] Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*, 59.

possessions, but an attitude towards them. One could say that in gaining spiritual poverty, one gains control over material things by understanding that they are not always necessary. "Poverty means need. To make a vow of poverty and never go without anything, never have to need something without getting it, is to try to mock the living God."[55] A true spirit of poverty, arising out of contemplation, acknowledges God as the true provider of all things.

Humanity Requires Solitude

The final realm of Merton's thoughts on contemplation regards its necessity for all of society. Merton believed contemplation required solitude, and he recognized the different kinds of solitude that could take place in the monastery and in society. For monastics, solitude is one of the most important elements of their vocation: "The negative elements, solitude, fasting, obedience, penance, renunciation of property and of ambition, are all intended to clear the way so that prayer, meditation and contemplation may fill the space created by the abandonment of other concerns."[56] But the solitude-nal aspect of contemplation does not apply to monastics only. Merton recognized that even in society, people required a certain amount of solitude: "Certainly in the pressures of modern urban life, many will face the need for a certain interior silence and discipline simply to keep themselves together, to maintain their human and Christian identity and their spiritual freedom."[57]

The sickness in modern society that Merton wished to cure was a lack of personal integrity. Members of society accepted their place in it too often. Not only did they

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[55] Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*, 61.
[56] Merton, Thomas. *Contemplative Prayer*. (Garden City, New York: Image Books, 1971), 19.
[57] Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, 19.

accept their social status, but they passively accepted their ideas and values without personally wrestling and reflecting on them. Violent and abusive authority, hate, resentment, falseness and servitude held society together, from Merton's point of view. His cure for this spiritual cancer was individual contemplation. Contemplation could unite society with love instead of automatism, and restore each person's integrity "as persons." [58]

Contemplative experience was not confined to monastery walls. Merton states that contemplation could exist for those "of the world" as well as for those out of the world. In the introduction to *Thoughts in Solitude*, Merton writes that "everywhere is a desert. Everywhere is solitude in which man must do penance and fight the adversary and purify his own heart in the grace of God." (20) Not only does Merton imply here that contemplation could not exist outside the monastery, but he proposes that it must happen for everyone.

For Merton, no member of society could escape "the inner war" between one's false self and one's true self, revealed by God in contemplation. Fighting against the distractions of modern society through solitude and contemplation, people could attain their own uniqueness. Since everyone has their own individuality, Merton believed each person was a solitary, uniquely wrestling to find their true selves: "Everywhere is solitude in which man must do penance and fight the adversary and purify his own heart in the grace of God."[59] Pushing towards the goal of a true self that "flowered" in grattitude, humility and poverty, Merton envisioned a society where every person could incorporate solitude into their daily life and become persons of integrity rather than resentment.

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[58] Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude,* 11-14.
[59] Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*, 20.

CHAPTER THREE: MERTON'S SOCIAL VISION

Introduction

Thomas Merton did not begin writing his social essays until 1961. For many, this was too much of a break from his contemplative writings, and many of his readers chose to stop reading what he wrote. Merton felt a duty, however, to speak his conscience, and he continued to write heavily on matters of social importance for the remaining seven years of his life. In a letter to Daniel Berrigan in 1963, Merton confided that it was precisely because of his views on contemplation that he felt obligated to spread the gospel of social action: "What is the contemplative life if one does not listen to God in it? What is the contemplative life if one becomes oblivious to the rights of men and the truth of God in the world and in His Church?"[60] Therefore one cannot look at Merton's social writings and not make connections with his views on contemplation.

In his social writings—which took many forms, including political analysis, theological exploration and even poetry—Merton demanded that social action take on an other-worldly dimension. Specifically when Merton wrote about the topics of Christian social responsibility and nonviolence, all areas of his arguments came back to the idea that without the alien presence of God, a person's motivation for social justice would be selfish. This chapter will look into four important areas of Merton's writings that come back to this central idea: first, asking ourselves what our true intentions are; second, addressing moral problems from a moral and not a worldly perspective; third, recognizing that connecting ourselves with God connects us with the concerns of society;

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[60] Merton, *Passion for Peace,* 3.

and finally, Christians' tendency to demonstrate social concern through the two polarities of shocking demonstration or emotional listlessness.

God-Minded Intentionality in Christian Action

In the first pages of the article "The Christian in World Crisis: Reflections on the Moral Climate of the 1960's", Merton reveals that his primary concern regarding modern Christianity is not that Christians are asking questions of themselves, but that they are asking the wrong question. "'Where is our violent and overstimulated culture leading us?' or 'Can total war be avoided?' or 'Will the Communists take over the West?'" were questions that sought to produce an answer that gave the questioner the least amount of anxiety—an answer that actually took away his or her responsibility.[61]

The more appropriate question that pointed directly at Merton's view of the Christian's need to take responsibility was instead "*What are our real intentions?*"[62] The new question that Merton proposes changes the questioner's perspective. The emphasis on the questioner now becomes "what can I offer to this situation, *based on my faith* and my religious commitment?" instead of "what can I offer to this situation so that I will not be labeled as weak?" If we are only responsible to ourselves we will seek only to defend ourselves, blindly asserting concern for a problem when none actually exists. "The blind drive to self-assertion rejects indications that love might be more meaningful and more powerful than force."[63] Unless the Christian can base their actions on their religious commitment, the "real intentions" of a Christian do not exist, or the person has not

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[61] Thomas Merton. "The Christian in World Crisis: Reflections on the Moral Climate of the 1960's," in *The Nonviolent Alternative*, ed. Gordon C. Zahn (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980), 20-21.
[62] Merton, "Christian in Crisis", *Nonviolent Alternative*, 21.
[63] Merton, "Christian in Crisis", *Nonviolent Alternative*, 23.

wrestled with the question sufficiently. This constitutes the first problem Merton saw within Christianity in the 1960's.

By asking the question "*What are our real intentions?*" Merton saw an avenue by which Christians might act based on the essence of their inner spiritual beliefs rather than worldly demands. The essence of Christianity, as Merton saw it, was what he called a "theology of love," which he explicates in Part One of *Faith and Violence* (1968). Pope John XXIII's encyclical "Pacem in Terris" provided the grounds for this theology with the statement: "One of the profound requirements of [our] nature is this: . . . it is not fear that should reign but love—a love that tends to express itself in mutual collaboration."[64] Working together responsibly—not separated from one another, not purely seeking the consumption of our innermost spiritual desires—requires a mutual agreement of the need for love. Merton's theology of love should not be viewed as a "spiritual tranquilizer"[65] but as an enabling force that created an inner presence while also strengthening one's commitment to outer action.

Moral Guidelines of God, Not of the Secular World

The second was the failure of Christian politicians and citizens to treat social injustices from a completely moral perspective. The degree to which so-called "believers" thought that they were responsible for the social ills of Merton's day were absolutely detestable to him: "(Many Christians) are fundamentally indifferent to reasonable, moral or patriotic ideals and prefer to sink into their religious apathy and let

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[64] Thomas Merton. "Faith and Violence" in *The Nonviolent Alternative*, ed. Gordon C. Zahn (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980), 189.
[65] Thomas Merton. "Peace: Christian Duties and Perspectives," in *The Nonviolent Alternative*, ed. Gordon C. Zahn (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980), 13.

the enemy overrun the country unresisted."[66] There were clearly some moral guidelines that Merton thinks any person, even those un-Christian, could not cross:

> We have to be convinced that there are certain things already clearly forbidden to all people, such as the use of torture, the killing of hostages, genocide or the mass extermination of racial, national or other groups for no reason than that they belong to an "undesirable category."[67]

If the Christian neglected the responsibility to deal with these problems from a moral standpoint, Merton forewarned that the threat of a moral relaxation would bring about apocalyptic calamity at a pace more furious than anyone could imagine. Just as contemplation was not a "solution" to all of the problems in one's life, Christian responsibility was not something to take lightly. Rather it was a moral obligation:

> "Christ Our Lord did not come to the world to bring peace as a kind of spiritual tranquilizer. He brought to His disciples a vocation and a task, to struggle in the world of violence to establish His peace not only in their own hearts but in society itself."[68]

Merton saw in the 1960's a pathetic moral climate where "boredom, exasperation and indifference" prevailed, instead of "a humble and objective seriousness."[69] Failure to face these problems from a moral standpoint was a failure to understand the immense gravity of the social situation of the 1960's.

Merton proposed re-infusing moral freedom into the Christian conscience as a solution to the lack of responsibility in social affairs. "It must be possible for every free man to refuse his consent and deny his cooperation to this greatest of crimes."[70] Although this statement was made in the context of an argument against nuclear weapons, it applies to any issue of widespread social importance. The ability to make a

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[66] Merton, "Christian in Crisis", *Nonviolent Alternative*, 33.
[67] Thomas Merton. "Peace: Duties . . .", *Nonviolent Alternative*, 19.
[68] Merton, "Peace: Duties . . . ", *Nonviolent Alternative*, 13.
[69] Merton, "Christian in Crisis", *Nonviolent Alternative*, 29, 23.
[70] Merton, "Peace: Duties . . .", *Nonviolent Alternative*, 18.

moral choice—in itself an act of responsible action—gives anyone the freedom to "elevate themselves above their material surroundings and control their own destiny by living according to truth, justice and love."[71]

Connection with God Creates Compassion for All

A third mistake Merton saw Christians consistently making was their inability to connect their own concerns with those of the world. In the same way that contemplation was not a commodity that the contemplator could devour and use to escape true reality, Merton saw a fundamental connection between a Christian's inward status and their outward responsibility. The "blind drive to self-assertion," mentioned earlier, dominated Merton's criticism of Christian un-responsibility.[72] Merton could not stand holy people who believed they were making holy stances outside of a social context. True faith never takes us from the world; instead it unites us to it:

> "For some 'faithful'—and for unbelievers too—'faith' seems to be a kind of drunkenness, an anesthetic, that keeps you from realizing and believing that anything can ever go wrong . . . Is faith a narcotic dream in a world of heavily-armed robbers, or is it an awakening?"[73]

In Merton's own life, abandoning society was not an option. Many would argue that his decision to enter a monastery was an escape from the world. Yet Merton believed that he had not left society. In fact, during his time at Gethsemani he gained a grounded connection with the world that did not allow him to simply go about his prayers and be penitent all day. Although he distanced himself from society in a physical way, Merton's held a deep sense of spiritual compassion for the world.

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[71] Merton, "Christian in Crisis", *Nonviolent Alternative*, 25.
[72] Merton, "Christian in Crisis", *Nonviolent Alternative*, 23.
[73] Merton, "Faith and Violence", *The Nonviolent Alternative*, 185.

In "Reflections on the Moral Crisis of the 1960's," Merton eloquently draws on two timeless ancient philosophers to solidify his call for Christians to un-isolate themselves. He first quotes Thucydides in an excerpt from *The Peloponnesian War*, describing the divisiveness of Athenian culture following their war with the Peloponnesians in the fifth century B.C.:

> "Society was divided into warring camps suspicious of one another. Where no contract or obligation was binding, nothing could heal the conflict, and since security was only to be found in the assumption that nothing was secure, everyone took steps to preserve himself and no one could afford to trust his neighbor. On the whole baser types survived best."[74]

Plato provided similar inspiration to help Merton drive home his point. A section from the *Republic* revealed the isolation that could plague even those who loved justice. Plato wrote that people who viewed themselves as unable to change the lawlessness surrounding them

> Will remain quietly at their own work like a traveler caught in a storm who retreats behind a wall to shelter from the driving gusts of dust and hail. Seeing the rest of the world full of iniquity, he will be content to keep his own life on earth untainted by wickedness and impious actions, so that he may leave this world with a fair hope of the next, at peace with himself and God.[75]

These lengthy quotes are inserted for the purpose of pointing out two factors that are important for understanding Merton's social vision. The first is that by isolating themselves, Christians silently speak that they distrust any viewpoint other than their own. For Thucydides, this destructiveness led to no debate at all in Athenian society—a value that had been the glue holding that culture together. The untrustworthy isolationist lacked in the quotation from the *Republic* isolated himself because he lacked the courage

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[74] Merton, "Christian in Crisis", *Nonviolent Alternative*, 28.
[75] Merton, "Christian in Crisis", *Nonviolent Alternative,* 29.

to responsibly battle the "storm" that was madly spinning around him. Second, the inability to see our own needs as equal to those of the world will do nothing else but bring about our own destruction. Thucydides saw destruction happening as Athenians looked out only for themselves, and Plato saw it through those who only sought peace for themselves. Merton never believed that any Christian could ever justify abandoning society: "The intellectual and the spiritual person cannot therefore justify themselves in abandoning society to the rule of an irrational will to power."[76]

Merton wanted Christians to reclaim their connectedness to the world through an "awakening" that brought forth compassion and trust instead of a "narcotic dream."[77] Encouraging waging war on the level of moral negotiation and conscience rather than physical violence, produced the kind of solidarity Merton hoped for. Waging this war required trustworthiness in relations with society and open communication: "Rational collaboration is manifestly impossible without mutual trust and this in turn is out of the question where there is no basis for sure communication."[78] Merton's social vision of the responsible Christian saw open communication and a compassionate trust as the basic components of having a connected worldview.

Balancing Christian Social Concern Between Activism and Passivity

Besides standing tall as a bulwark against Christian apathy, Merton adamantly viewed responsibility to non-violent social action as essential to the Christian life. In fact Merton equated responsibility as a Christian with a commitment to non-violence—the two could not exist separately. He did not deny that exercising non-violence would be

[76] Merton, "Christian in Crisis", *Nonviolent Alternative*, 29.
[77] Merton, "Faith and Violence", *Nonviolent Alternative*, 185.
[78] Merton, "Christian in Crisis", *Nonviolent Alternative*, 29.

difficult: "The task of ending war is in fact the greatest challenge to human courage and intelligence."[79] From his vantage point, Merton saw two distinct polarities that prevented Christians from truly practicing non-violence. First was the tendency to protest violence through shocking demonstration. The second was passivity, not in the sense that one does not know or care about war, but that one fails to believe that any stance they take will produce an effect on violence. Finding the middle ground between acting with an individualistic attempt to gain what *we want* and thinking that we have no power to enact change produced grounded action Merton would consider truly Christian.

Ungrounded, unreasoned and uncontrolled protest irritated Merton enormously. Wild vaunts of protest, which Merton probably saw most in the "hippie" culture of the early 60's, flaunted any real concern for anyone beyond themselves. "There is considerable danger of ambiguity in protests that seek mainly to capture the attention of the press and to gain publicity for a cause, being more concerned with their impact upon the public than with the meaning of that impact."[80] Such "dramatic and superficial" displays of concern demonstrated a deep emotional awareness, but lacked the intellectual depth that Merton believed necessary for ending war.

Emotional listlessness was the opposite problem that Merton saw as having no place in the true Christian practice of non-violence. In "Peace and Protest: A Statement" he compares passive rationality with alcoholism: "The human race today is like an alcoholic who knows that drink will destroy him and yet always has 'good reasons' why he must continue drinking."[81] A person who understands the necessity of constructive

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[79] Thomas Merton. "Peace and Protest: A Statement," in *The Nonviolent Alternative*, ed. Gordon C. Zahn (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980), 67.
[80] Thomas Merton. "Peace and Protest", *Nonviolent Alternative*, 68.
[81] Merton, "Peace and Protest", *Nonviolent Alternative*, 67.

alternatives to war, but discards any further engagement with the issues surrounding the problem, cannot consider themselves a pacifist.

Such "passive" pacifism nagged Merton because it also contained an element of blind obedience to authority. In "Passivity and Abuse of Authority", he harshly criticizes those who "are no longer fully capable of *seeing and evaluating* certain evils as they truly are: as crimes against God and as betrayals of the Christian ethic of love."[82] Throughout the essay, addressed primarily to Catholics but applicable to anyone who calls themselves a Christian, Merton states that too many Catholics quickly accept church doctrine and authority without an individual moral commitment. "Here the supreme virtue is to agree with authority no matter whether it is right or wrong, to maintain one's position by flattery, compliance and mechanical efficiency."[83] Such passivity and quietism must have disturbed Merton, primarily because it evidenced a lack of Christian belief that their opinions and moral stances could influence society.

Merton also saw a tendency towards passivity expressing itself in higher stratas of society as well. The enormous tragedy of modern warfare for him was that the decisions that most directly affected war were "committed not at the front . . . but in war offices and ministries of defense in which no one ever has to see any blood unless his secretary gets a nosebleed."[84] The problem here exists on many levels for Merton: a lack of moral conviction at the highest levels of societal control; a distancing between perpetrator and victim; and inability of socially committed citizens to effectively impact the moral decisions of those in high office. Recognizing that violence happens not only on the

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[82] Thomas Merton. "Passivity and Abuse of Authority," in *The Nonviolent Alternative*, ed. Gordon C. Zahn (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980), 129.
[83] Merton, "Passivity", *Nonviolent Alternative*, 130.
[84] Merton, "Faith and Violence", *Nonviolent Alternative*, 188.

individual level, but also on the communal and governmental level, was another key component of Merton's vision of social justice.

The futileness and hopelessness that refraining from moral stances exhibited would not wash themselves away without intentional and thoughtful moral wrestling. Merton's arguments imply that excusing ourselves from taking a stand on issues of moral importance meant that one had not sufficiently wrestled with the action one should take. Merton never asserted in his writings that the results from such wrestling would cause a political revolution. Instead he sought change from within. For example, when listing some final possibilities for ending war in "Peace and Protest", he suggests that our "government not divert some of the money paid out for our overkill capacity, to investigate the chances of lasting and realistic peace?"[85] "The task of man and of the Church is . . . to provide a satisfactory international power to police the world and subdue violence while conflicts are settled by reason and negotiation."[86] Pope John Paul XXIII's visit to the United Nations in gave Merton hope that everything necessary for nonviolent change was in place: "It was a most serious and highly credible reminder that instruments for peaceful conflict solution are at hand. These instruments [the U.N. and the papacy] are abused and discredited, but if men want to make serious and effective use of them, they are still free to do so." [87] Creating tactful, peace-loving and morally rational people, especially from within the political structure, dominated the solutions Merton believed would change a violence-stricken world.

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[85] Merton, "Peace and Protest", *Nonviolent Alternative*, 69.
[86] Merton, "Peace and Protest", *Nonviolent Alternative*, 67.
[87] Merton, "Peace and Protest", *Nonviolent Alternative*, 69.

CHAPTER FOUR: MERTON'S INTEGRATION OF CONTEMPLATION AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Introduction

Having laid out Merton's contemplative and social visions, the task now moves towards understanding the connections between them. How can contemplative experience—a solitary, inward journey that can so easily turn into escapism—and social justice—an outward action, so often associated with those who are "in the world"—share any insights? The same question applies to Merton's life as well: how could a monk, walled in a monastery for almost twenty years, suddenly begin producing documents of such vivid and adamant social concern as he did? Three topics that have not yet been discussed answer these questions and help understand the connection between Merton's contemplative and social visions. These topics were important to Merton's thought and require discussion, but do not fit into either the contemplative or social category. The topics of this chapter incorporate Merton's views on theology, psychology and popular culture: three areas that were not quite as important to Merton as contemplation and social justice but influenced him to a great deal nevertheless. In fact, looking at Merton's contemplative and social visions from within these three categories will help the reader begin to understand Merton's integrated view of contemplation and social justice. The first topic is theological: Merton's understanding of God as both transcendent and immanent allows the two categories of contemplation and social justice to co-exist. The second is psychological: borrowing from Dr. Reza Arasteh's psychological concept of "final integration," Merton incorporated contemplation into a "monastic therapy." The final category comes from popular culture: Merton's rejection of 1960's hippie culture

enforced his ideas that social change required an "alien," or Godly motivation, and that true contemplation awakened an intuition of God and compassion for others. These three categories open windows that glimpse at how Merton's understandings of contemplation and social justice fit together.

God as Both Transcendent and Immanent:
Concepts Uniting Contemplation and Social Justice

To understand how contemplation and action can fit together, specifically how they fit together for Merton, one must reconcile the transcendent and immanent concepts of God. Merton believed that if God was totally beyond comprehension, no possibility for incorporating God into the *way one acted on the world* could exist. Merton's essay "New Christian Consciousness" outlines how God could become an actualized, unabstracted and living reality:

> Underlying the subjective experience of the individual self there is an immediate experience of Being. This is totally different from an experience of self-consciousness. It is completely nonobjective. It is not "consciousness *of*" but *pure consciousness*, in which the subject as such "disappears." [The experience] has meaning in so far as it does not become fixated or centered upon itself as ultimate, learns to function not as its own center but "from God" and "for others."[88]

From such a "pure consciousness" Merton believed the actions one took on the world would be of a changed nature—they would be acts of social justice. At the same time, Merton denied that God could be completely immanent, existing only within one's mental prayer or action. To do so would imply a Descartian view that understood God as only existing in one's mind. For Merton, God always needed to maintain a transcendent quality as well: "The self is not its own center and does not orbit around itself; it is

[88] Merton, *Birds of Appetite*, 23-24.

centered on God, the one center of all, which is 'everywhere and nowhere,' in whom all are encountered from whom all proceed."[89] Merton believed God was thus a living, viable and ontological reality, and at the same time beyond all comprehension, the "center" of all things.

If one views God as "the Uncaused Cause," using only power from God's own self to mold and shape the world from above, then the human possibility of enacting change becomes quite small.[90] On the other hand, if one views God as completely "in the world," and only revealing God's self in the world, then human action is the only way God acts upon the world. Merton reconciled the two by proposing that God remained totally transcendent, but that God could actually come alive and be "directly and personally present in our own being."[91] This presents a dual concept of God as both "out there" but also as being personally "apprehended" and "experienced." Merton saw that a conception of God as totally transcendent gave little value to human action. He also recognized that the transcendent view of God dominated most of Christian theology's history. However, with the advent of post-Newtonian physics, "a whole new conception, a dynamic, immanent conception of God and the world" came about.[92] A "correct" imagination of God was no longer necessary in order for anyone to fully comprehend God. The traditional transcendental image of separation between God and human understanding no longer applied. A more dynamic view of God—acting, living and moving—became necessary. Merton subscribed to this category of theology that

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[89] Merton, *Birds of Appetite*, 24.
[90] Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, 174.
[91] Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, 175.
[92] Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, 175.

integrated the concepts of God as immanent and at the same time contained a sense of the transcendental.

Final Integration: Conquering Existential Anxiety

In *Contemplation in a World of Action*, Merton discusses a theory of psychoanalysis that integrates the ideas of contemplation and social justice. "Dr. Arasteh holds that adaptation to society at best helps a man to 'live with his illness rather than cure it,' particularly if the general atmosphere of the society is unhealthy because of its overemphasis on cerebral, competitive, acquisitive forms of ego-affirmation."[93] "In fact, in many cases, psychoanalysis has become a technique for making people conform to a society that prevents them from growing and developing as they should."[94] Merton writes that such neurotic conceptions plague the monastery as well as much of Western society.

Merton noted an important difference between neurotic anxiety and existential anxiety. Neurotic anxiety presupposes that guilt or fear are harming someone's physical, emotional or relational well-being. This kind of anxiety entails a fear that holds one back from using one's talents and gifts to fulfill their truest selves. On the other hand, "the blocking of vital energies that still remain available for radical change" causes existential anxiety.[95] Distinguishing between these two types of fears helps to recognize that "existential anxiety [is not necessarily] a symptom of something wrong, but as a summons to growth and to painful development."[96] Merton recognizes the rareness of

[93] Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, 222.
[94] Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, 222.
[95] Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, 223.
[96] Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, 223.

people who conquer existential fears to beomce born into a "new transcultural identity" that is entirely "personal, original, creative, [and] unique."[97] He called the final step in this process "final integration."

"The man who is fully 'fully born' has an entirely 'inner experience of life.' He apprehends his life fully and wholly from an inner ground that is at once more universal than the empirical ego and yet entirely his own. He is in a certain sense 'cosmic' and 'universal man.'"[98] Final integration does not necessarily mean that one "has it all figured out." Rather a patient successfully treated by Merton's monastic therapy would harness their creative energies and talents to grapple with the big questions they face. In living that way, people could live a life of social justice: "The finally integrated man is a peacemaker and that is why there is such a desperate need for our leaders to become such men of insight."[99]

Merton thought everyone had a responsibility to face the issues monastic therapy raises. One had to first identify the difference between neurotic and existential anxieties in oneself, and then move on to discover how to use one's talents in : "We must still be ready to face anxieties, and realize the difference between those that are fruitless and those that offer a promise of fruitful development . . . "[100]

Merton's Criticisms of 1960's Hippie Culture

Merton had connections with many that came to be associated with the New Left: Martin Luther King, Jr. might have visited Gethsemani if it were not for his untimely

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[97] Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, 223-24.
[98] Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, 225.
[99] Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, 226.
[100] Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, 227.

death; Merton enjoyed the music of Joan Baez and even entertained her company at Gethsemani 1966 (he was also a Bob Dylan fan); and Aldous Huxley had been an occasional correspondent of his since 1937. He shared the social concerns of these people, but he did not share their secular world-view (except for that of King). What troubled Merton most about hippies was their belief that only *they themselves* could enact the social change necessary to bring about the world they wanted. The lack of any otherworldly dimension to their agenda distanced Merton from their cause. Instead of social change stimulating a "hippie kingdom," Merton wished for social change to result in the Kingdom of God:

> The humanly optimistic answers foresee radical changes of purely secular sort which will initiate a kind of hippie kingdom of love in a cybernated and peace-loving mega-city (presumably with free LSD for everybody).[101]

Merton's final comment about LSD serves as a segue into his other criticism of hippies. It was noted earlier that Merton's understanding of contemplation never viewed it as an "escape" from reality. Contemplation opened up an understanding of the true nature of things, of God's presence among us and created an true understanding of what love meant . Hippies perceived drugs as a means to intuit the divine; in other words drugs was their contemplation. Merton viewed this as "contemplation made easy."[102] Drugs did not integrate the love that true contemplation offered because the motivation for taking drugs was seeking pleasure for oneself. Merton did not doubt that drugs could stimulate the same spontaneous awe at the mystery of life as contemplation, but he did not believe they could integrate the love that pure contemplation offered. Whereas drugs

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[101] Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, 230.
[102] Mott, *Seven Mountains*, 378.

created an "anesthesia," or "illusion" from reality that distanced oneself from God, contemplation opened up a closeness to God and to others.

CONCLUSIONS

Before making any concluding remarks, it will help to summarize what this study has learned about Thomas Merton. Chapter one discussed Merton's monastic context, and how this shaped his understanding that solitude connected one to the world, and that monastics symbolized the peace that contemplation could give. Merton believed God could exist both inside and outside the monastery, however God's presence at the monastery made it a symbol of the peace that contemplation could give. Chapter two discussed how true contemplation genuinely changed one's outward actions in gratitude and poverty. Chapter three discussed Merton's social vision, and how it required the correct genuine inward intentions, compassionately concerned for all humankind without a desire for selfish gain. Chapter four looked at some other areas of Merton's thought that contribute to his understanding of contemplation and social justice fitting together.

What Unifies Merton's Contemplative and Social Visions?

Thus far this study has viewed contemplation and social justice through two separate lenses, although the last chapter began to approach an integrated view of these two visions. The largest debate among Merton scholars has been what *exactly* unifies his contemplative and social visions. In a review of James Baker's book *Thomas Merton: Social Critic*, Lawrence Cunningham argues contemplative prayer integrates all of writings.[103] Baker agrees as well: "Contemplation is the key to Merton's social

[103] Lawrence S. Cunningham, review of *Thomas Merton: Social Critic*, by James T. Baker, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 41 (December 1973): 674.

theory."[104] Generally, this case has been made across the board, and my study has not discovered otherwise. Chapter one found that Merton always spoke from the context of a monastery, meaning that contemplation was primary both in his daily life and also in his ideas. Merton's strong belief that humanity required solitude—not just monastics—revealed his strong passion for the issue of contemplation. Chapter three's analysis found that without the correct internal motivations, social concern was self-serving. Chapter Four appraised Merton as a believer in contemplative, existential psychotherapy as a way of integrating someone into society as a peacemaker. Chapter Four also found that Merton favored "natural" contemplation over drug-induced contemplation as a means towards a God-minded social concern. These findings again indicate contemplative prayer as the unifying idea in Merton's writings.

Based on my findings, Merton offered two distinct ways of being in the world, but he did not necessarily demand that one follow one or the other. These two ways were to live contemplatively or to live in a socially concerned manner. Although contemplative prayer was the unifying theme of both his contemplative and social visions, Merton never explicitly stated so. Merton never stated flat out: "contemplation produces social concern: just do it!" This lack of a categorical demand weakens his writings, and does not allow for contemplation's importance to come through.

Elena Maltis shares this problem in her analysis of Merton's writings. She states two things that contributed to Merton's lack of making a definitive answer. Firstly, he was a compulsive writer who wrote for a variety of reasons, including personal,

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[104] James Thomas Baker. *Thomas Merton: Social Critic*. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1971), 54.

recreational, psychic, and work.[105] Maltis' belief that Merton was a compulsive writer meant that he had a tendency to confuse ideas and crossover between them without making any clear statements. Secondly, Maltis points out that Merton's monastic setting did not allow for the constructive criticism of an academic setting.[106] This is quite interesting, because most people who analyze Merton think his correspondences with friends gave him sufficient collaboration about his ideas. But Maltis makes a strong point that is useful for this study: the lack of an academic setting, and also the hesitancy of academics to criticize monks since they are "too holy" contribute to the elusiveness of his arguments. Though Merton *did* advocate for both the life of gratitude and poverty and the life of social responsibility, he never explicitly stated which came first.

The debates about Merton besides what integrated his social and contemplative visions are few and far between. Despite this, several scholars have proosed some interesting twists on Merton's ideas. Robert Inchausti provides a unique perspective on Merton's social vision. Elena Maltis has some insights into Merton's personality that allow us to understand why the idea of contemplation as complete transformation was troublesome for Merton. James Baker's critique of Merton's early opinion of monasticism contributes to the debate of the necessity and role of the monastery. Olivier Clement offers a conception of Christ that, when inserted into Merton's ideas about contemplation and social justice, help erase the possibility of understanding his ideas as un-Christian.

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[105] Elena Maltis, C.S.C. *The Solitary Explorer: Thomas Merton's Transforming Journey*. (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1980), 142-3.
[106] Maltis, *The Solitary* Explorer,143.

Inchausti and the Responsibility to Awaken "Those Who Think They Are Free"

The analysis of Merton's social vision in chapter two encompases action mostly on a personal level. The four areas of Merton's social vision outlined there—God-minded intentionality, Godly moral guidelines, connection with God creating compassion for all, and balancing one's actions between social activism and passivity—can all become easily mistaken to apply only to day-to-day situations. For example, internally motivated moral action could take place between two friends. Another example: one could think "connection with God creates compassion for all" meant "connection with God creates a numerical increase in your social network."

Robert Inchausti places Merton's social vision within a wider context that helps to guard against a possible misinterpretation of chapter two's analysis. He states that Merton's greatest contribution to the social movements of the late 1950's and early 1960's was to call attention to the ethical implications of nonviolent social action to those who most needed to hear it: "The responsibility of a religious social critic is not to tell the oppressed they are oppressed (they know that), but to tell those who think they are 'free' that they are really oppressed."[107] Inchausti's idea helpfully points out that Merton's social ideas were meant to go beyond a specifically face-to-face context. Awakening those who believed they were free of social obligation brings this analysis' four main points about Merton's social vision—God-minded intentionality, Godly moral guidelines, connection with God creating compassion for all and balancing one's actions between social activism and passivity—into a broader and, I think Merton would have agreed,

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[107] Robert Inchausti. *Thomas Merton's American Prophesy*. (State University of New York Press: Albany, N.Y., 1998), 93, 95.

necessary scope. Merton would have agreed with Inchausti that awakening the elite of society—those who created the *structures* that cause social injustice—to struggle with their social responsibilities would create justice.

Aspects of Merton's Personality Hindering Transformative Language

Besides the issue of widening the context of Merton's social concern, chapter two's analysis also fails to note a problem with Merton's contemplative vision. Chapter two comes to the conclusion that true contemplation changes a person's actions in a genuine manner, towards poverty and gratitude. The chapter did not find that Merton viewed contemplation *causing a complete and radical transformation* in the contemplator that makes them bearers of social justice. The opening paragraphs above already discussed Merton's lack of making a clear-cut statement that contemplation produced social justice, and this is what Merton failed to make explicit enough in his contemplative writings.

Maltis' analysis of the two major aspects of Merton's personality provide clues the lack of transformative language in Merton's contemplative writings. Merton's use of hyperverbalization to make extreme statements ("I can never do anything right," for example), and an attraction to nonconceptual prayer combined to create confusion in much of what Merton wrote.[108] Over and over in Merton's writing, he makes extreme statements about things that have no particular conceptual idea behind them. For example, a journal entry in 1941 reads: "I was sick of every word I said right after I said it, and yet I went on arguing! Even after Father Joachim had told us all, by a mild, shy,

[108] Maltis, *The Solitary Explorer*,142.

indirect reproof, to stop arguing."[109] These sentences have elements of both hyperverbal truth and vagueness in them: hyperverbal in that many of us have the tendency to argue despite resisting the desire to do so, and vague in that Merton describes himself as being angry despite not wanting to be. Using hyperverbal language in a more concrete way more often may have helped Merton incorporate transformative language into his writings more often.

Merton's tendency to constantly "keep moving" also contributed to his lack of understanding contemplation as transformative. Maltis states that Merton had a tremendous tendency to push himself forward while living in a generally static environment, the monastery. Merton's conceived time differently than most of his fellow monastics. Pensive, constantly seeking out discovery and yearning for new possibilities were hallmarks of his personality that Maltis accurately recognizes.[110] Merton's writings on monastic renewal give a good example of this trait. In *Contemplation in a World of Action* Merton writes that monasticism should never become a repetition of the rituals and liturgies that had been performed by monks for centuries. Rather he viewed it as a life-giving community that could push members towards a full expression of their talents and gifts. Although monastic renewal was widely discussed at the time, Merton stands out as an especially loud voice in favor of monasticism as a "fully alive" vocation. Merton's tendency to "keep moving" within his static environment hindered his usage of transformative language. The monastery probably restricted Merton in this respect. Contemplation could not transform him to the extent that he would want to leave the monastery and serve society "in the world." Rather he had to argue that contemplation

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[109] Mott, *Seven Mountains*, 177.
[110] Maltis, *The Solitary Explorer*, 142.

changed the contemplator, but not in such a radical way that they would need to change their social location. Merton wrote that contemplation changed one's actions and attitude into expressions of gratitude and poverty, not necessarily a change in the place where one enacts these thoughts and feelings. A transformative view of contemplation would have gone to a greater extent to argue that contemplation changes one's social concern more than simply one's actions and attitude.

Merton and Christ

There is a danger in viewing Merton's ideas about God as un-Christian. Even though Christ is the central element of Christian doctrine, the concept of Christ rarely appears in his writings. Looking back to chapter two, Merton mentions nowhere that God reveals *Christ* in true contemplation. Rather it "becomes fully alive to its own existential depths, which open out into the mystery of God."[111] Christ also plays no role in revealing anything to the contemplator: "It is not we who choose to awaken ourselves, but God who chooses to awaken us."[112] The discussion of Merton's social vision in chapter three also rarely incorporates any notion of Christ in social action. Merton states that the essence of Christianity is called a "theology of love," but does not explain Christ's role in this theology. [113] Merton lacks clarity on how Christ fits into the picture of social action when he states: "Christ Our Lord did not come to the world to bring peace as a kind of spiritual tranquilizer." [114] Merton does say there that Christ calls us to a life of

[111] Merton, *New Seeds*, 9.
[112] Merton, *New Seeds*, 10.
[113] Merton, "Peace: Duties . . .", *Nonviolent Alternative*, 13.
[114] Merton, "Peace: Duties . . . ", *Nonviolent Alternative*, 13.

responsible social action, but he does not fully explain what makes the call of Christ different from the call of God, or from any other human being to responsible action. Olivier Clement, in a book of theological reflections about the ecumenical monastic community of Taizé, France, incorporates Christ into a contemplative and social justice context that Merton might have found helpful. For Clement, the mystical Christ provides an avenue to for God to become completely real and human to each one of us. He advocates strongly for a "rediscovery of the deepest kind of Christianity . . . so the living God can reveal himself in the mystery of Christ as the incarnate, crucified and risen God who raises us from the dead through an inner life."[115] Clement believes that the multi-faceted nature of Christ does not restrict Him from becoming incarnate to everyone who seeks the living God.[116] Clement also speaks of Christ as a force that can "irrigate society and culture," and of the connection between one's inner life and human solidarity.[117] Clement's idea that Christ can become a living presence within a contemplator that sustains one to enact social concern explains to a greater extent than Merton how Christ can become a force for social concern.

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[115] Olivier Clement. *Taizé: A Meaning to Life*. (Chicago: GIA Publications, Inc., 1997), 45.
[116] Clement, *Taizé: A Meaning to Life*, 43.
[117] Clement, *Taizé: A Meaning to Life*, 44, 46.

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