

The Ellul Forum

For the Critique of Technological Civilization

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Thomas Merton's Critique of Modern Technological Civilization

About This Issue

This issue of the *Ellul Forum* is devoted to the work of the Trappist monk and social critic, Thomas Merton. Merton was born on January 31, 1915 in Prades France. His mother died when he was six and his father when he was fifteen. He grew up without any significant exposure to religion. However in the summer of 1933, traveling in Italy, he found himself drawn to the churches of Rome. It was the beginning of a journey that led him to baptism in the Catholic Church in November of 1938 and then to enter the Trappist monastery of Gethsemani in Kentucky on December 10th, 1941. His literary career took off with the publication of *Seven Storey Mountain* in 1948, an autobiographical account of his conversion, which his superiors in the monastery asked him to write. It became an immediate best seller in post WWII America.

While *Seven Storey Mountain* is a powerful book, it is a pious story of conversion that in itself would not make Merton the remarkable figure that he is. It was for Merton just the first installment on a series of biographical reflections on his spiritual journey, whose honesty and power make him a unique author. Two of the most important were *The Sign of Jonas* in 1953 and the *Asian Journal* in 1972. Merton died exactly twenty-seven years to the day that he entered the monastery (Dec. 10, 1968) at a conference on Monasticism, East and West, in Bangkok.

Merton's power as a religious author lies not in writing original theology but in his willingness to make his life transparent to others in the midst of his monastic vocation to solitude. Indeed, being a monk and an author, at the same time, was the most difficult spiritual paradox of his life. Like Jonas, he found himself "in the belly of a paradox" — pulled in two directions. Merton chronicled this spiritual crisis of his first ten years in the monastery in his book, *The Sign of Jonas*. It was only after this "dark night of the soul" that Merton came to accept that he was called to be both a monk and an author. As a result, by the sixties a whole new Merton emerged, a powerful social voice in critique of racism and segregation in America, in critique of the cold war and nuclear war, and in critique of the Vietnam war. At the same time he entered into serious dialogue with religious figures and spiritual traditions around the world, especially the religions of Asia. The framework for his critique of modernity was his own developing spirituality in dialogue with the spiritual traditions of Asia as the basis for a critique of the illusions of modern technological civilization.

For anyone who has read Ellul, the similarity of Merton's critique of technological civilization is startling and impressive. Virtually point for point, Merton and Ellul, writing about the same time, echo each other. Just how much mutual influence, if any, there was between them would be an interesting subject for a doctoral dissertation. In this issue, Christopher J. Kelly, details the scope of Merton's criticism of modern technological society and its roots in the monastic tradition of the *via negativa* — the way of negation. Christopher Kelly, completed his Masters degree in Religious Studies at the University of South Florida in Tampa in 1998. His essay here is adapted from his Master's thesis on Merton. He is now a doctoral student in the School of Religion at the University of Iowa.

Also in the *Book Review* section of this issue you will find a review of a doctoral dissertation on "Christian Freedom" in Ellul's work. The dissertation, written in Italian, is by Gianni Manzone. It is reviewed here by Virginia Picchietti, of Scranton University. We are grateful to Gianni Manzone for his fine work and to Professor Picchietti for her willingness to review it for the benefit of our readers.

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Book Review

Manzone, Gianni. *La libertà cristiana e le sue mediazioni sociali nel pensiero di Jacques Ellul*. Milano: Glossa, 1993. Pp. 290.

Reviews by: Virginia Picchiotti, University of Scranton

Gianni Manzone's dissertation provides a systematic and detailed analysis of the philosophical thought of French theologian Jacques Ellul. It aims to "reconstruct the theology of Ellul's Christian liberty" (177). The work is divided into three parts, each dealing with Ellul's notion of Christian freedom, and includes a general introduction to both Manzone's opus and Ellul's thought. It also contains a comprehensive bibliography, while each chapter is supported by extensive notes.

The "General Introduction" is divided into six parts. The first part discusses Ellul's biography, including his evolution as a scholar of both legal and Christian philosophy. The second part defines his style. According to Manzone, the style giving shape to Ellul's philosophical writings is the product of tensions arising from his position as a Christian thinker who is firmly *engagé* in social reality. Ultimately, Ellul's style aims at provoking decisions on the part of society (12). Part three of the introduction delineates Ellul's production, while parts four through six focus on his theological methodology. Manzone classifies the methodology as theological dialectics, and sees Ellul's thought as being heavily influenced by Barth and Kierkegaard. From Barth, Manzone concludes, Ellul draws such notions as God is Other, God is different from man, and time is different from eternity. From Kierkegaard, meanwhile, Ellul gleans an approach to theological inquiry as a systematic type of thought working with abstract concepts (16). Manzone identifies the richness and originality of Ellul's philosophical approach, which consists of a sociological inquiry and epistemological perception of reality and a theological approach to the Bible, as well as a focus on Christian ethics in the context of theological dialectics. Significantly for Manzone, Ellul's thought can be succinctly described as a "theology of confrontation," an approach that differs from Tillich's "theology of reconciliation." Ellul's philosophical thought, Manzone concludes, is a confrontation between Marxist thought and Christian philosophy, sociology and theology, all "mutually critical" (20).

Part I of Manzone's work focuses on Christian freedom as the governing principle of Ellul's work and life as a Christian thinker. Although noting Ellul's resistance to the "systematization" of his work, Manzone nevertheless recognizes the urgency with which Ellul's philosophy aims to recuperate the concept of Christian freedom, which has been "ignored and rejected" even by the Church (41). Ellul, Manzone notes, considers liberty as one of the most important values Western society has contributed to humanity. Given this premise, Man-

zone dedicates the rest of Part I to the diverse permutations of the notion of liberty, from its origins in God and Christ, to its manifestations in God's glory and in love for one's neighbor, to its evolution and realization through faith and action.

In order to provide a clear definition of Ellul's notion of Christian liberty, Manzone examines the "seven misunderstandings or erroneous notions of liberty" Ellul opposed in various articles and books (43). According to the author, the French philosopher rejects the idea of liberty as inherent to human nature and independent of the individual's social milieu and physical and mental condition. Indeed, while Ellul refutes the notion of liberty as a purely spiritual or internal experience, he stresses its correlation to "concrete external restrictions" (45). Moreover, he renounces the idea of liberty as a choice, since choice is artificial and limited. Ellul offers as an example the role technology plays in creating choices, a role he defines as "determinism" (110). An individual cannot approach these choices "freely," the philosopher contends, because they are predetermined and delimited, a concept Manzone expands in Part II. For Ellul, liberty is discontinuous from human nature, something to be achieved and originating from an external source, or God. It also assumes diverse permutations because, Manzone notes, "individuals must construct their own personal lifestyle based on the circumstances in which they live and their own conscience" (47). While performing good actions does not guarantee liberty, liberty can be achieved "answering the personal call from God and accepting the liberation that Christ offers" (47).

Part II of Manzone's opus is entitled "Christian Liberty as Criterion for Socio-Ethical Judgment." The purpose of this part, Manzone clarifies in the premise, is to "understand if and how the concept of Christian liberty becomes the standard for all moral life and for the ethical reflection of the Christian individual" (107). Questions shaping Manzone's inquiry are "Does liberty play a structurally central role and does it shape every aspect of the individual's comportment?"; "Which categories and concepts does Ellul employ to develop an 'éthique de la liberté' and how are they applied in the phenomena he most analyzed and considered most relevant to us today?"; "How does the concept of Christian freedom function in the Christian individual's judgment and action in a technological society, in politics, in mass media, and in law?" To answer the questions he sees as essential to understanding Ellul's work, Manzone divides Ellul's approach into two categories, the concrete realm, in which facts are described, and the philosophical realm. In the former sphere Manzone characterizes the French philosopher as a positivist who distinguishes between fact and norm. In the latter sphere, he identifies Ellul as an existentialist for his focus on freedom.

In his consideration of these questions, Manzone dedicates a section to each of the components that make up Ellul's investigation of Christian freedom. According to Manzone,

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Forum: Thomas Merton's Critique

Contemptus Mundi: Thomas Merton's Critique of Modern Technological Civilization

by Christopher J. Kelly

INTRODUCTION

The works of Thomas Merton reflect a combination of intellect and honesty that tends to stir the conscience of even the most casual reader. A vocal social critic, Merton was no stranger to controversy. He spoke critically on the most troubling social and political issues of our time. His work continues to be applicable to today's increasingly post-modern world. Through the concept of *contemptus mundi* Thomas Merton engages in a postmodern critique of modernity. Well before the post-structuralist critique, Merton found his own monastic path "beyond modernity". His is not a pre-modern rejection of the world in the traditional Christian monastic sense, but a postmodern rejection of the subject/object duality of modern techno-bureaucratic European civilization in order to provide a different frame of reference from which one may deal with the *agonia* of existence. Merton's use of the *via negativa* negates the modernist notion of self and liberates the individual from the collectivist pattern of life in modern technocratic society. Merton is postmodern in a historical rather than ideological sense of the word. He is post-modern precisely because he offers post-European and post-Christian critique that opens a path beyond modernity.

My argument is that Merton's experience of the *via negativa*, as reflected in his book *The Sign of Jonas*, led him into a postmodern framework from which came his critique of society. Merton's experience of the *via negativa* is the pivotal point in his personal spiritual growth and his social commentary. Before his experience Merton wanted only to turn his back on the world in order to find God, afterward he saw his vocation as finding solitude in compassion for others. This took two forms: 1) vocal social criticism that attacked the injustices of racism, the Vietnam War, the development of nuclear weapons; and 2) a discovery of the spiritual wisdom of other religious traditions, most notably Zen Buddhism, Taoism, and Gandhi's Hinduism. At the end of his life, Merton seemed to have embraced both Taoism and Zen while remaining a devoted Christian. This was possible because he had moved beyond any modernist Eurocentric and Christian-centered spirituality to discover the ethical importance of other spiritualities, which Merton saw as complementing rather than competing with his own Christian spirituality. As we move from a planet of isolated nations to a global community, Merton's cross-cultural

and interreligious orientation speaks to our time. I think this is a significant note, for while European Christianity sought to make the world Christian, Merton's pluralism, especially his interest in the East, led him to speak out against an attitude toward the world that sought to destroy or convert that which was not European and Christian.

MERTON'S CRITIQUE OF MODERNITY

Even in the early days of his writing Merton attempted to sound an alarm meant to awaken his contemporaries to the dangers around them. The first line of *The Ascent to Truth*, published in 1951, reads, "The only thing that can save the world from complete moral collapse is a spiritual revolution." According to Merton, human beings are in a precarious position, for "the exposure of the nineteenth-century myths — 'unlimited progress' and the 'omnipotence' of physical science — has thrown the world into confusion" (1951: 3). He believed that the violence and hatred he saw around him presented and continue to present a serious challenge to the very existence of the human race. For Merton, the root cause of the crisis of the modern age lies in a misunderstanding of who we are as human beings. "Our ordinary waking life is a bare existence in which, most of the time, we seem to be absent from ourselves and from reality because we are involved in the vain preoccupations which dog the steps of every living man" (1951: 10). Merton believed that modern human beings are preoccupied with trying to find some comfort in life by becoming loyal consumers, by surrounding ourselves with material possessions that flatter our own egos. We have become alienated individuals.

Modern individuals are alienated not only by the material world they have created but by the ideological world that undergirds it. According to Merton, Cartesian duality splits the world into subject/object relationships and thereby alienates people from their true natures, in which there are no ultimate distinctions. Descartes' "*Cogito, ergo sum*" is "the declaration of an alienated being, in exile from his own spiritual depths, compelled to seek some comfort in a *proof for his own existence*(1) based on the observation that he 'thinks'" (1972: 80). Merton believed that rather than determining a foundation for truth and reality, the Cartesian ego-self only succeeds in con-

fusing one's understanding of him/herself, the world, and the ineffable divine. By reducing him/herself to a concept and objectifying the rest of existence, the alienated being makes it impossible to experience the true nature of his/her own being. Merton writes:

The world itself is not a problem, but we are a problem to ourselves because we are alienated from ourselves, and this alienation is due to an inveterate habit of division by which we break reality into pieces and then wonder why, after we have manipulated the pieces until they fall apart, we find ourselves out of touch with life, with reality, with the world and most of all with ourselves (1992:387).

The true nature of the human being and its relationship to the world is existential and intuitive. One cannot come to an understanding of this through a process of deductive reasoning, especially one that has a false sense of self as a starting point.

For the contemplative there is no *cogito* ("I think") and no *ergo* ("therefore") but only SUM, I Am. Not in the sense of a futile assertion of our individuality as ultimately real, but in the humble realization of our mysterious being as persons in whom God dwells, with infinite sweetness and inalienable power (1972:9)

The contemplative life cannot be lived by anyone who considers him/herself as an ego-self. Yet, Merton laments, modern human beings steadfastly cling to an illusory sense of identity in an effort to come to terms with what Merton terms "*agonia*." Merton characterizes the concept in the following way. "Life and death are at war within us. As soon as we are born, we begin at the same time to live and die (1996:3)." One may not be fully aware of it, but, according to Merton, there is within each person an anxious agonizing over the nature of existence. We may not think about it but the knowledge that we are mortal is always present. It manifests itself in a wrestling of the spirit in which one confronts the *agonia* of "being and nothingness, spirit and the void" (1996:3). The more one becomes aware of one's mortality the greater the distress. This wrestling with the angst of existence is

manifested largely in desperation, cynicism, violence, conflict, self-contradiction, ambivalence, fear and hope, doubt and belief, creation and destructiveness, progress and regression, obsessive attachments to images, idols, slogans, programs that only dull the general anguish for a moment until it bursts out everywhere in a still more acute and terrifying form (1966:55).

In an effort to find relief from the problem, human beings identify themselves; they give themselves a name or a function. Merton concludes that human beings would rather have a false identity than risk being nothing. However, this false identity results in an alienation of human beings from their true natures as indefinable reflections of an indefinable God. What remains is an ego-self who sees him/herself as the basis of reality and objectifies everything else, including God.

Merton's work seems to imply that there is a subconscious belief among men and women that the *agonia* of existence can be numbed or overcome if people come together as a unit. Here we encounter a nuance in the modern experience of alienation. For Merton, the structure of modern society is configured in such a way that people tend to give up all effort towards understanding their true natures through misguided attempts at

forging a common identity with others. People are willing to reject the agonizing responsibility of discovering who they are and become part of the crowd. As a result, people are not only alienated from themselves by asserting the foundation of the ego-self, but they also become alienated from the ability to realize themselves by surrendering all personal independence. Merton writes:

One of the characteristics of "mass society" is precisely that it tends to keep man from fully achieving his identity, from operating as an autonomous person, from growing up and becoming spiritually and emotionally adult (1966:59).

The situation is further complicated by the fact that the modern West is fundamentally capitalistic and materialistic. Its goal is the acquisition of material things. Merton believed that people consume in order to avoid the *agonia* and find some direction in life. The economic structure of the modern West is geared toward providing instant gratification without further need of responsibility. People buy what they want, or think they want, use it and then discard whatever is left over because there will always be more available. Merton was acutely aware of the dangers inherent in pursuing materialistic goals. He writes:

Man is a consumer who exists in order to keep business going by consuming its products whether he wants them or not, needs them or not, likes them or not. But in order to fulfill his role he must come to believe in it. Hence his role as consumer takes the place of his identity (if any). He is then reduced to a state of permanent nonentity and tutelage in which his more or less abstract presence in society is tolerated only if he conforms, remains a smoothly functioning automaton, an uncomplaining and anonymous element in the great reality of the market (1966:29).

The role of advertising, or "propaganda" in Merton's words, is of paramount importance in keeping the system running efficiently. Mass media is the vehicle through which advertising procures its effect. Television, newspapers, and magazines are all willing to tell us what is wrong with us and then prescribe a remedy available on an easy payment plan. However, the advertising is sophisticated enough, or the public is blind enough, that it gives the impression that we are actually thinking for ourselves. Merton believed that people gain the impression of assuming some measure of responsibility and management over their lives, yet in actual fact they merely accept what is given to them through economic, political, and social advertising and propaganda.

This is one of the few real pleasures left to modern man: this illusion that he is thinking for himself, when, in fact, someone else is doing his thinking for him.... This very special and tempting force of propaganda — that it helps sustain the individual's illusion of identity and freedom — is due to the isolation of the individual in mass society, in which he is in fact a zero in the crowd in which he is absorbed. It is this simple act of apparently thinking out what is thought for him by propaganda that saves the individual from totally vanishing into the mass. It makes him imagine he is real (1966:216-217).

Merton takes care to note that the word "alienation" is also used by those already firmly entrenched in mass society. How-

ever, for these people the alienated individual is the one who does not conform to the way things are done, does not participate in the general myth. He or she is different and rebellious, quite uncomfortable with the collective "rightness." When understood in this sense, Merton would be considered an alienated person. Indeed, anyone who voluntarily leaves the world and consciously abandons the *status quo* of massive collectivism and consumerism would be considered a little odd, to say the least. But this interpretation of alienation is very different from Merton's understanding of the alienated individual, who "though 'adjusted' to society, is alienated *from himself*. The inner life of the mass man, alienated and leveled in the existential sense, is a dull, collective routine of popular fantasies maintained in existence by the collective dream that goes on, without interruption, in the mass media (1992:268)."

Technology and the Myth of Progress

For Merton, technology plays such an important role in fostering alienation that it deserves special attention. According to Merton, the world we live in is governed by systems and techniques. The reverence for nature, which began to decline with the onset of urbanization, has been replaced by a trust in technology and mass media that is reinforced by the secular myth of progress. Merton was very familiar with the idea of a "better world" promised by the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution, but he believed the claims of science and technology to bring happiness and fullness of life to be fraudulent. A technological society, he claimed, does not concern itself with the value of the human being. One's dignity as a member of the human race is disregarded in an effort to determine how one may be most efficiently used. Techno-bureaucratic systems exist merely to promote the functioning of their own processes. For Merton, rather than initiating a golden new age, the results of the Enlightenment and the secular myth of progress only succeeded in further removing human beings from their authentic state.

Unshakable confidence in the ability of technology to provide all that is necessary for human life is a particularly persuasive step in the process of alienation.

It is precisely this illusion, that mechanical progress means human improvement, that alienates us from our own being and our own reality. It is precisely because we are convinced that our life, as such, is better if we have a better car, a better tv set, better toothpaste, etc., that we condemn and destroy our own reality and the reality of our natural resources. Technology was made for man, not man for technology. In losing touch with being and thus with God, we have fallen into a senseless idolatry of production and consumption for their own sakes. We have renounced the act of being and plunged ourself [*sic*] into process for its own sake (1992:202).

The problem is nothing new, but what makes it more pressing and international are the tremendous effects that technology can and does have on the modern world. We are far more capable now of destroying ourselves and our environment than in the 18th century, for instance. Yet, Merton believed that the majority of the people of his day considered it unthinkable to challenge the veracity and good will of science.

The central problem of the modern world is the complete emancipation and autonomy of the technological mind at a time when unlimited possibilities lie open to it and all the resources seem to be at hand. Indeed, the mere fact of questioning this emancipation, this autonomy, is the number-one blasphemy, the unforgivable sin in the eyes of modern man, whose faith begins with this: science can do everything, science must be permitted to do everything it likes, science is infallible and impeccable, all that is done by science is right. No matter how monstrous, no matter how criminal an act may be, if it is justified by science it is unassailable (1992:62-63).

As a result of this development, science and technology are now the bearers of absolute power. The desire to apply their ideals is so pervasive that it has no rivals. They need not answer to any control, for, it is believed, whatever they demand must be the best course of action. There is no ethical dilemma in the application of science for it has become an autonomous entity subject only unto itself.

Needless to say, the demands of ethics no longer have any meaning if they come into conflict with these autonomous powers. Technology has its own ethic of expediency and efficiency. *What can be done efficiently must be done in the most efficient way— even if what is done happens, for instance, to be genocide or the devastation of a country by total war* (1992:63).

Merton recognized that questions of morality tend to impinge upon the efficient application of science and technology. He believed that bureaucratic systems that mask any moral responsibility by removing any personal involvement have been organized in order to counter the effects of personal conscience. Modern Western governments, in Merton's opinion, have become preoccupied with getting things done in the most expedient manner as possible by whatever means necessary.

We are concerned only with "practicality" — "efficiency": that is, with means, not with ends. And therefore we are more and more concerned only with immediate *consequences*. We are the prisoners of every urgency. In this way we so completely lose all perspective and sense of values that we are no longer able to estimate correctly what even the most immediate consequences of our actions may turn out to be (1992:102-103).

Merton saw the effect of the secular myth of progress as a surrendering of human freedom and spontaneity to an unseen yet pervasive principle of efficiency that promises to fulfill our desires if we accept our roles as cogs in the machine. However, recent history has shown that whenever systems and techniques are allowed to operate without question a culture of death is not far away. Merton lived during a turbulent time in which the possibility of nuclear war was quite real. The United States and the Soviet Union faced off against each other in global competition, each seeing the other as a demonic force in the world. Yet, almost insidiously, the most dangerous threat to humanity lay at the heart of each country's social policy. American democracy was identified in its capitalism, which enticed the individual into mass society. Soviet communism lauded the dissolution of privacy into the collective of the people. However, neither system was aware of the alienating force of its own social structure. The two countries were, and to some extent

still are, bent on destroying the other without realizing their own self-destructive natures. In a letter to Bernard Haring dated December 26, 1964 Merton writes:

For one thing, the whole massive complex of technology, which reaches into every aspect of social life today, implies a huge organization of which no one is really in control, and which dictates its own solutions irrespective of human needs or even of reason. Technology now has reasons entirely its own which do not necessarily take into account the needs of man, and this huge inhuman mechanism, which the whole human race is now serving rather than commanding, seems quite probably geared for the systematic destruction of the natural world, quite apart from the question of the "bomb" which, in fact, is only one rather acute symptom of the whole disease (1985:383).

Failure of Organized Religion in an Organized Society

Secularization is a concern for Merton, but the problem of alienation is not only to be found in the secular world. One gets the sense from reading the works of Thomas Merton that while he was no religious anarchist, he did find fault in those religious organizations that were overbearingly authoritarian and so caught up in tradition and rigid doctrine so as to be part of the problem rather than the solution. It is just as easy for an individual to become alienated within his or her own religious tradition as in popular society. This is entirely possible, Merton believed, in a system that sees God as the mathematical first cause and the operator of a giant machine held together by reliance on a sacramental complex. Merton worried that the church was in danger of becoming simply a mirror of the technological world.

To a certain extent, according to Merton and others, science has become a form of religion. We hold it sacred, because it provides answers in the here and now. Its possibilities astound us and we marvel at each new invention, each new refinement. There is seemingly no end to the power of scientific and technological know-how. People trust in their political leaders to do what is appropriate, but those leaders themselves act on the same principle of efficiency that technology espouses. As a result, political agendas are often directed towards placating the masses in a manner that reinforces their alienation.

Merton believed that rather than conditioning individuals to be productive members of collective society, organized religion should seek to reflect the thoughts of the individual back upon him/herself and the *agonia* of his or her existence.

If in practice the function of organized religion turns out to be nothing more than to justify and to canonize the routines of mass society; if organized religion abdicates its mission to disturb man in the depths of his conscience, and seeks instead simply to "make converts" that will smilingly adjust to the status quo, then it deserves the most serious and uncompromising criticism. Such criticism is not disloyalty. On the contrary, fidelity to truth and to God demands it (1992:273).

For Merton, the Church has an obligation to promote intersubjective love between persons rather than the individualistic isolation of mass society that reduces existence to a state of impersonal, formal relationships between objectified entities. By destroying the intimate, personal bonds between extended

families and small sub-groups, a process begun by the advent of urbanization, "mass society segregates the individual from the concrete and human 'other' and leaves him alone and unaided in the presence of the Faceless, the collective void, the public (1992:274)." The role of the Church is not to aid the process by "giving it an inviolable religious sanction and tranquilizing the anguish of the alienated mind by injunctions to obey the state (1992:274)." Instead, the Church must do all within its power to help men and women to resist the seductive lure of anonymous conformity, which alienates people from themselves and each other. It must be critical of technology and the exercise of power for its own sake.

MERTON'S POSTMODERN CONTEMPLATIVE VISION

If Merton rejected the world, his was a rejection of the illusory world created by technological mass media society. It was a rejection only for the purposes of transformation. Merton's espousal of a *contemptus mundi* and his own experience of the *via negativa* led him into a postmodern framework for his critique of society. What results from Merton's experience is a turn toward the social concerns of his day and a vibrant interest in the spiritual disciplines of the East.

According to Merton, we are alienated from our true selves by the false identification of self with the Cartesian ego-self. It is a self who subconsciously surrenders all personal identity to the mass organization of society. The alienation is not freely chosen but is, in part, a result of the natural human condition as it is perceived in the West. However, the situation is worsened by an affirmation of an illusory individual identity or dissolution into collectivity. According to Merton, the social, political, and economic spheres of the world seem to act in accord to dissuade any idea of nonconformity or of questioning the status quo. Western governments have more power at their disposal now than at any other time in history, yet their citizens are more alienated and estranged from what Merton calls the "inner ground of meaning" than ever. According to Merton, the situation has reached crisis proportions because of the loss of the sense of contemplation in the modern world. For Merton, honest engagement in spiritual exercises in the West is, for the most part, a thing of the past. Religion has become routine, requiring little effort on the part of the believer. If one is to have any hope of overcoming one's alienation, then he or she must enter into a contemplative lifestyle. "Far from being irrelevant, prayer, meditation and contemplation are of the utmost importance in America today (1971:375)." It is within the contemplative vision that a *contemptus mundi* occurs that allows one to see him/herself and others in their proper context.

The Role of the Contemplative Life

The monastic ideal has been an important part of Christian history since its inception. It has had an uneasy relationship with the world at large for much of the time. The question has always seemed to hinge on just how far the aspiring monk or nun should be removed from society. Early Church Fathers like Tertullian (153-222 CE) urged that all Christians should shun the inherently evil world around them and band together in an effort to remain righteous before the eyes of God. The

theme carried over into the Middle Ages but was considerably modified. Although a rejection of the world for the good of one's spiritual life was considered praiseworthy, Benedictine monastic communities throughout Europe were actively engaged in improving the social and material well-being of the human community. Yet, in much of Western monasticism there still persisted a strong insistence that one must renounce all worldly pleasures and concerns in order to make any progress on the path towards holiness. This insistence found expression in the formation of orders like the Carthusians and the Cistercians, the latter of which Merton was to join in 1941. Orders such as these were founded on a form of contemptus mundi that assumed that

theology had nothing to learn from the world and everything to teach the world. That theology was a store of static and eternal truths which were unaffected by any conceivable change in the world, so that if the world wanted to remain in touch with eternal truth it would do well to renounce all thought of changing (1966: 39).

Although it may have been beneficial during its time, such a contemptus mundi has little relevance for the modern world. To reject the world in an exercise of self-absorbed contemplation is an act of folly, according to Merton. It assumes, firstly, that one can entirely retreat from the world in monastic isolation, and, secondly, that one can come to self-understanding without the presence of other human beings. Such an exercise simply will not work, for neither the individual nor the monastic community can ever truly be separate from the web of life that is the world.

As long as I imagine that the world is something to be "escaped" in a monastery — that wearing a special costume and following a quaint observance takes me "out of this world," I am dedicating my life to an illusion (Cunningham, editor, 1992:377).

It does one no good to turn his or her back on the world either because it is inherently evil or because it is full of distractions that avert attention away from personal contemplation. In fact, Merton argues, any attempt at spiritual growth that places the individual first is doomed to failure.

The purely individualistic concept of asceticism and of prayer is, paradoxically, very harmful to the development of true personal identity. The identity of the person is fully realized only in a conscious and mature collaboration with others (1971:76).

Merton's contemptus mundi is not a blanket rejection of the world. It is a rejection of the secular myth of progress and the domination of systems based on efficiency, and a rejection of the subject/object dualism that alienates humanity from its true nature. This kind of rejection is evident in other religious traditions as well: the Hindu concept of Maya or the Buddhist "emptiness of the world," for instance. According to Merton, neither of these traditions rejects reality, but rather seeks to unmask the illusion that the world exists as an absolute and purely objective structure that must be accepted for what it seems to be for the individual subject. For Merton, one has to annihilate the illusory sense of distinction between the divine and the human, and between the human and the world. His is a contempt for the self and the world that ultimately frees one

from the restriction of identity and brings one to the realization of the interdependence of all being. He rejects a society

that is happy because it drinks Coca-Cola or Seagrams or both and is protected by the bomb. The society that is imaged in the mass media and in advertising, in the movies, in tv, in best-sellers, in current fads, in all the pompous and trifling masks with which it hides callousness, sensuality, hypocrisy, cruelty, and fear. Is this "the world?" Yes. It is the same wherever you have mass man (1966:36-37).

It is vitally important to note that for Merton one need not enter a monastery in order to have a healthy contemptus mundi. The spiritual life is by no means confined to the walls of the cloister. It is a "special dimension of inner discipline and experience, a certain integrity and fullness of personal development, which are not compatible with a purely external, alienated, busy-busy experience (Cunningham, 1992: 369)." Although physical solitude and silence are extremely beneficial to spiritual progress, the true isolation is a wandering in the desert within ourselves, and this isolation leads to an awareness of our inherent communal nature. Merton believed it was entirely possible for all human beings to espouse a healthy contemptus mundi through a contemplative lifestyle that is present and active in the midst of society.

The contemplative life offers one a different point of view or vantage point from which to re-examine his or her own existence. It delivers one from the standards of efficiency imposed upon the world by a technological imperative which demands that if something can be done it must be done. In his own affable style Merton succinctly identifies a certain independence gained by those who have espoused a healthy contemptus mundi:

One of the "tyrannies" of "the world" is precisely its demand that men explain and justify their lives according to standards that may not be reasonable or even human. The monk is not concerned with justifying himself according to these standards. Today a man is required to prove his worth by demonstrating his "efficacy." In such a world the monk may simply decide that it is better to be useless — perhaps as a protest against the myth of illusory efficacy. As an American monk I am forced to view with shame and compassion the lengths to which the myths of "efficiency" and "practicality" have led American power in Viet Nam. To the machinery of an organized efficiency that produces nothing but mass murder I certainly prefer the relative "inefficiency" of my own monastic life, which produces only some milk, some cheese, some bread, some music, a few paintings, and an occasional book (1971:229)

While the contemplative lifestyle is not held to the standards imposed upon the rest of mass society its contemptus mundi is of little benefit if one remains aloof. In order to be fully human one must "re-enter" the world and act for social change. Merton argues that a certain level of involvement in the contemplative life is a necessary component for any successful social action or creative work. Anyone who tries to better others around him or her or the world at large without having a clear self-understanding, freedom, and integrity will not be successful. "He [or she] will communicate to them nothing but the contagion of his own obsessions, his aggressiveness, his ego-centered ambitions, his delusions about ends

and means, his doctrinaire prejudices and ideas" (Cunningham, 1992:375).

Ultimately, the role of the contemplative life is to focus one's attention upon oneself in order to unveil the illusion of individual selfhood. Spiritual isolation sets the stage for the realization of our true selves through the experience of direct union with a God who is all in all.

The Via Negativa

The *via negativa* experience was a watershed in Merton's life. The focus of his writing and activism after the publication of *The Sign of Jonas* was on social justice and the value of other religious traditions. What follows is an attempt to clarify what is meant by the "*via negativa*" and to show how Merton's experience shifted his position from a world-denying monk to a world-embracing proponent of social change.

Throughout this paper the reader has been presented with an idea of the Cartesian ego-self in conflict with a "self" that has yet to be explained. Although Descartes' thinking subject can be explained and defined, the same cannot be said for a notion of "self" that has ineffable origins. As noted, Merton firmly believed that human beings have divine origins; they are made in the image and likeness of God. Yet, the God of the Judeo-Christian tradition is a God without image. The result is a being made in the image of a God without image. The tradition of the *via negativa*, or "negative way," is an approach to theology and a spiritual practice that maintains that it is not possible to say what the divine, or the self, definitively is, but it is possible to come closer to an understanding by determining what it is not through a separation from the world and deep introspection. The contemplative life allows one to dissolve the dualistic and alienating understanding of human identity. The process by which this dissolution occurs is the *via negativa*.

The tradition of the *via negativa* denies that either God or the self can be identified or defined by any human concepts or knowledge. It is an apophatic approach to theology that affirms that God is and always will be a mystery because the divine transcends all human modes of thinking and rationalization. No conceptions or categories offered by empirical science can ever come close to describing the true nature of God.

Traditionally, the *via negativa* as a spiritual discipline was definitively applied to Christianity by Dionysus the Areopagite (Pseudo-Dionysius) around 500 CE. Dionysus, according to Denys Turner, was primarily responsible for forging the language that has become characteristic of the Western Christian apophatic tradition. He made a theology out of "metaphors of negativity" contrasting light and darkness, ascent and descent, etc. Turner argues that Dionysus owes his use of such metaphors to a convergence of Greek and Hebraic influences on Western Christian thought, more specifically, the synthesis of Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" (Book 7 of Plato's *Republic*) and Moses' encounter with God on Mt. Sinai in the Book of Exodus (Ex. 19 and 20).

The prisoner in Plato's allegory at first has a limited view of reality. For him, reality consists of shadows on the cave wall. However, once he is freed and makes his way up to the cave entrance he is overwhelmed by the brilliance of the sun as it exposes the "true" reality of the physical world. Plato's allegory describes the experience of the philosopher as he "ascends" from ignorance into the light of wisdom, which is so bright that it blinds. The philosopher ascends from the pseudo-reality of

a world of shadows and is initially plunged into a deep darkness brought about by intense light.

In the story of Moses' encounter with God, the people of Israel are warned not to venture near the foot of Mt. Sinai lest they see God and thereby perish. Moses, however, is permitted to climb the mountain and is enveloped in a dark cloud, wherein he meets God. God shields Moses from the glory of his countenance for no one is permitted to see the Lord and live.

Turner recognizes that in both the Allegory and in Exodus "there is an ascent toward the brilliant light, a light so excessive as to cause pain, distress and darkness: a darkness of knowledge far deeper than any which is the darkness of ignorance. The price of the pure contemplation of the light is therefore darkness, even, as in Exodus, death. This darkness is not the absence of light, but rather of its excess — therefore a 'luminous darkness (Turner, 1995:17).'" As Turner points out, Gregory of Nyssa, one of the Cappadocian fathers of the fourth century, was well aware of the Platonic imagery of Moses' encounter with God. For Gregory, when Moses entered the dark cloud he was gaining knowledge of the incomprehensible; he was seeing without seeing.

According to Turner, the theologians of both the Greek and Latin traditions wanted to bring together Plato's story and Moses' experience. What resulted was the development of metaphors of negativity. However, what Dionysus and the early mystics meant by these terms and what has come to be understood by "mystical experience" in much of contemporary scholarship are two different things. When Dionysus spoke of a "descent into the darkness of God" he was using a metaphor to describe something that transcends experience, for the *via negativa* through which one "descends" is a loss of everything, including experience. Later interpretations have tended to give a psychologized experiential quality to these metaphors that was never intended by their authors. These interpretations limit the *via negativa* to a psychological experience. What is important to note is that the *via negativa* is not a means of achieving some experience in the contemplative life but is, rather, a complete loss of self and surroundings in that which is beyond experience.

Merton's own experience of the *via negativa* de-centered his own viewpoint and turned him toward the world. Published in 1953 *The Sign of Jonas* is a collection of diary entries made by Merton between the years 1942 and 1952. It reflects the thoughts and anguishes of a man who after ten years in the monastery is unsure of his progress in the spiritual life, a man filled with fear and doubt. It is within the pages of *The Sign of Jonas* that Merton begins to lose his identity and enters what John of the Cross calls the "dark night of the soul." For John, the surest measure of one's progress in the spiritual life is the apparent lack of progress accompanied by intense feelings of depression and despair. One cannot journey through the Dark Night, the *via negativa*, without feeling doubt, fear, and anguish. They are all part of the process that strips the person of the false sense of self. *The Sign of Jonas* reflects Merton's struggle. He writes,

It is fear that is driving me into solitude. Love has put drops of terror in my veins and they grow cold in me, suddenly, and make me faint with fear because my heart and my imagination wander away from God into their own private idolatry. It is my iniquity that makes me physically faint and turn to jelly because of the

contradiction between my nature and my God. I am exhausted by fear (1953:254).

Merton, the enthusiastic monk who had rejected the world and embraced the silence of the Abbey of Gethsemani in The Seven Storey Mountain, discovered that his desire to give himself completely to God was not easily realized. Between 1940 and 1950 the Abbey grew from about 70 to 270 members. Instead of finding the solitude and silence he expected, Merton encountered a growing number of brethren busying themselves with the construction of new buildings. His own writing seemed to him to be a distraction from true devotion. He became more and more frustrated. He was constantly tempted to leave the Cistercians and join the Carthusians, who enjoyed a much more isolated lifestyle. Instead of drawing closer to God, Merton believed he had lost all spiritual direction. It was only his obedience to his superiors that gave him any respite from the doubt concerning his contemplative vocation, which constantly confronted him.

However, Merton persevered through his anguish until he came to a new understanding of the contemplative life. True contemplation, he came to realize, does not concern itself with how to contemplate or the environment in which one contemplates. What was necessary for true contemplation was to "shut up" and be still. The more one is concerned with the trappings of the contemplative life the less one achieves its goal. True contemplation surfaces from deep within when all self-centered thoughts and actions are dispelled, when one no longer attempts to achieve it by one's own efforts. His quest to find God by rejecting the world and concentrating on his own spiritual progress had led him to doubt his vocation as a Cistercian. He felt compelled to isolate himself entirely.

Merton came to understand, however, that true solitude is not supposed to bring one a sense of satisfaction. "Solitude means being lonely not in a way that pleases you but in a way that frightens and empties you to the extent that it means being exiled from yourself (1953:249)." It means undergoing a kenosis in which the self is purged through fear, helplessness, and isolation in God. "True solitude is a participation in the solitariness of God — Who is in all things. His solitude is not a local absence but a metaphysical transcendence. His solitude is His being (1953:269)."

It is here that we encounter the language commonly associated with the *via negativa*. Merton speaks of becoming "lost in the darkness of God" and entering the "desert" within himself. With no certainty in his ambitions and no sense of self he is overwhelmed by the infinite light of the divine, which is so bright that it is perceived as darkness. Decentered by the *via negativa* Merton finds a home in that which has no center, for it is everywhere. All of a sudden he is able to perceive the world in a different way. The spiritual desert he encountered in the temptations and distractions that beset him purged him of his ego-self and became a desert of compassion. In his solitude he became ever more acutely aware of the interdependence of all things. Merton had "progressed" far enough along the path of the *via negativa* that he emerged with a new understanding and embraced the world around him, for in it he recognized the presence of God.

Merton began to realize that solitude is not the absence of company, just as silence is not merely the absence of noise. They are, rather, interior conditions that are cultivated by

removing all concerns of the self. Ambitions and desires, even though they may seem well intended, only serve to reinforce the self-constructed barrier between God and human beings. At first Merton viewed his writing as a distraction that needed to be resolved. Paradoxically, Merton discovered that instead of being a hindrance his own writing turned out to be the means by which he was to embrace these newly found understandings of solitude and silence. His works became the vehicle through which he emptied himself.

In his work as a writer, Merton discovered also a new experience of poverty. By his writing he had made himself and his most inner feelings and thoughts a public possession. In this way he had disowned himself and allowed others to enter into his monastic silence (Nouwen, 1991:45).

Not only did Merton empty himself through his writing, but it also became for him a means of communicating with leaders of nations, scholars, religious figures, and lay men and women about the most pressing concerns of the day. It is clear that following his *via negativa* experience Merton began to question the injustices around him. This is, perhaps, most evident in his attack on racism in America. Merton was adamant that racism, most demonstrative in the South, was actually a white problem. He writes that

the irony is that the Negro...is offering the white man a "message of salvation," but the white man is so blinded by his self-sufficiency and self-conceit that he does not recognize the peril in which he puts himself by ignoring the offer (1964:53).

For Merton, the non-violent protest of African Americans was not only a means for them to obtain their freedom but was also an opportunity for whites to de-center themselves and recognize the dignity of all life. It was up to whites to look into themselves and realize that black people were not their enemies or their rivals or subhuman objects of contempt. The motivation behind Merton's words lay in a profoundly different understanding of human nature that sprang from his passage through the dark night. Because Merton no longer was self-centered he was able to describe the plight of African Americans through their own eyes and identify racial tension as an opportunity for spiritual growth on the sides of both black and white.

In the years after *The Sign of Jonas* Merton turned not only toward the world but also to the various religious traditions of the East. His awakening to a de-centered reality beyond all differentiation reflects his keen interest in Zen Buddhism. Zen strives for an intuitive communion with the infinite. It seeks to negate a "consciousness of things" in order to experience consciousness itself. To be awakened to consciousness one must empty oneself of self-consciousness. The Zen Buddhist searches for his or her "original face" or "mind" which exists beyond identification and transcends the duality of subject and object. Merton states, "Like all forms of Buddhism, Zen seeks an 'enlightenment' which results from the resolution of all subject-object relationships and oppositions in a pure void (1992:13)." The real self is realized when one "achieves" no-self (*anatman*). Having undergone this kenosis one "experiences" *Satori* (enlightenment) and is immersed in *Sunyata* (the Void). Liberated from the confining sense of self one becomes aware of the unity of life and is moved by compassion to help others.

Merton believed that Christianity could learn much about itself from Zen Buddhism. According to James Baker, Merton recommended that Christians maintain the discipline of Zen, which is effective in overcoming self-attachment. He did not find any theological or philosophical difficulty in making such a recommendation, for the Christian ideal itself advocates selfless service to one's neighbor. Zen's emphasis on experience could also help steer Christianity away from what Merton saw as its preoccupation with dogma and doctrine. Merton observed that "Zen seeks the direct, immediate view in which the experience of the subject-object duality is destroyed. That is why Zen resolutely refuses to answer clearly, or abstractly, or dogmatically any religious or philosophical question whatever (Cunningham, 1992:311)." To be sure, Merton recognized the importance and validity of theological investigation and clarification. However, caution must be taken to remember that the essence of Christianity, for Merton, is an active "living experience of unity" that must not be clouded by doctrine.

As Baker notes, Zen could also help Christians to better understand contemplation. It neither teaches nor denies anything, and "enlightenment comes neither by quietistic inactivity or by self-conscious overactivity, for both attitudes tend to make the person a subject and all others objects, creating a false and dangerous dichotomy (Baker, 1971: 144)." Merton writes, "Buddhist meditation, but above all that of Zen, seeks not to explain but to pay attention, to become aware, to be mindful, in other words to develop a certain kind of consciousness that is above and beyond deception by verbal formulas — or by emotional excitement (Cunningham, 1992: 404)." In satori all distinctions vanish for it is an awareness of pure being beyond all subjects and objects. Merton believed that such an enlightenment was part of Christian contemplation, as well. Christian "satori" is experienced when all distinctions between the human and the divine are dissolved.

For Merton, the *via negativa* is the means by which humans realize their true natures. It is a leap into the darkness of the infinite. It is a loss of identity that defies logic and reason. The subjective ego-self would propose that it in itself is the measure of what is real. But the *via negativa* offers an avenue through which to negate all subject/object duality, thereby freeing one to experience that which is both transcendent and immanent. "In order to be open we have to renounce ourselves, in a sense we have to die to our image of ourselves, our autonomy, our fixation upon or self-willed identity (1966:204)." This death takes place through the act of contemplation in which one becomes fully awake and aware of the sacredness of life, of the unity of being itself, and of the infinite source of life, which is recognized as the divine. Through self-negation one loses oneself in order to regain one's being beyond identification.

To reach a true awareness of Him as well as ourselves, we have to renounce our selfish and limited self and enter into a whole new kind of existence, discovering an inner center of motivation and love which makes us see ourselves and everything else in an entirely new light (Cunningham, 1992:372).

True self-realization is the perception of openness to the infinite in the very core of our being. This is the nature of the "true spiritual self" that Merton is concerned with.

We become real, and experience our actuality, not when we pause to reflect upon our own self as an

isolated individual entity, but rather when, transcending ourselves and passing beyond reflection, we center our whole soul upon the God Who is our life. That is to say we fully "realize" ourselves when we cease to be conscious of ourselves in separateness and know nothing but the one God Who is above all knowledge (1996:122).

Merton's dissolution of the subject/object duality that isolates one from the physical world owes much to his interest in Taoism. His separation from society at Gethsemani afforded him almost constant contact with the natural world. References to nature are scattered throughout his works, and even in *The Seven Storey Mountain* he seemed to be particularly attentive to whatever physical environment surrounded him. By the time he had retreated to a private hermitage on the monastery grounds, however, Merton's understanding of his place in the natural world reflected his belief in the unity of all life. From studying the works of the great Taoist master Chuang Tzu, he was convinced of the interdependent nature of all life. By objectifying the natural world human beings make it easy for science and technology to seize command. Taoism proposes a cessation of activity in the sense that true understanding of one's place in the world is not something that can be systematically and technically deciphered. Merton writes, "Chuang Tzu is not concerned with words and formulas about reality, but with the direct existential grasp of reality in itself. Such a grasp is necessarily obscure and does not lend itself to abstract analysis (1992:xvi)." The way to "find" oneself is to be awakened to being through *wu wei*.

Wu wei is not passivity but action "that seems both effortless and spontaneous [when] performed 'rightly,' in perfect accordance with our nature and with our place in the scheme of things. It is completely free because there is in it no force and no violence. It is not 'conditioned' or 'limited' by our own needs and desires, or even by our own theories and ideas (1992:34-35)." Nature does not objectify anything; it simply "is." By negating a separate self that is concerned with defining itself one is immersed in all that is. According to Merton, detachment and spiritual isolation, two of the most beneficial attributes of the contemplative life, must be cultivated if one is to remove the mask of the ego-self that hides the divine within. However, it must be noted that while there may exist certain guidelines along the way for the aspiring pilgrim who enters the *via negativa*, there is no formula one may use to unerringly find his or her way beyond the subject/object duality and the various pitfalls of a self-centered consciousness. Indeed, to focus on any set of actions as a means to an end, according to Merton and Zen, is to entirely miss the point.

By its very nature the *via negativa* is anti-technique. It defies the ability of technical systems to dominate the individual precisely because it is not a system. It is the way that is no way. It is the loss of all foundations and distinctions, a journey through fear and confusion. Yet, it is ultimately liberating for it destroys all perceived boundaries and classifications. It is able to counter the alienating effects of mass society because it puts one in a different frame of reference than the constant barrage modern humans undergo from mass media. It affords a liberating and intuitive experience of reality rather than the scientific view of an objective world. For Merton, it offers hope to a world inhabited by mindless automatons who feel alienated from themselves yet lack the courage to stand against the masses.

By denying absolutes and all definitions, the *via negativa* introduces doubt into one's spiritual life that leads to a healthy questioning of all authority. This doubt is not easy to suffer through but is fundamental to the realization of the interdependent nature of all life. Merton states:

Let no one hope to find in contemplation an escape from conflict, from anguish or from doubt. On the contrary, the deep, inexpressible certitude of the contemplative experience awakens a tragic anguish and opens many questions in the depths of the heart like wounds that cannot stop bleeding. For every gain in deep certitude there is a corresponding growth of superficial "doubt." This doubt is by no means opposed to genuine faith, but it mercilessly examines and questions the spurious "faith" of everyday life, the human faith which is nothing but the passive acceptance of conventional opinion (1972:12).

Doubt throws into question any action taken in the name of an absolute authority, even if the authority is no identifiable figure but a principle of efficiency promoted by a well organized bureaucracy.

Interdependence

According to Merton, the one who is open to the infinite sees the world from a very different perspective. To him or her the world no longer is limited to a plane of physical space in which human beings perform the daily routines of their lives. Instead, it becomes a "complex of responsibilities and options made out of the loves, the hates, the fears, the joys, the hopes, the greed, the cruelty, the kindness, the faith, the trust, the suspicion of all (Cunningham, 1992:378)." We all assume some level of responsibility for any pain and suffering in the world. "In the last analysis, if there is war because nobody trusts anybody, this is in part because I myself am defensive, suspicious, untrusting, and intent on making other people conform themselves to my particular brand of death wish (378)." The other, the stranger, immediately poses a threat by his or her difference. However, when the existence of all people in the divine is experienced, the openness to the infinite transcends all defining characteristics and renders ultimate differentiation impossible.

The deepest level of conscience "is beyond both consciousness and moral conscience; it is beyond thinking and self-awareness and decision. It is the conscience of God in us, it is where the Holy Spirit operates (1988:130)." Merton calls it the spiritual conscience. It is not a state of individual experience only, but is, rather, a kind of communal conscience. It is in the spiritual conscience that one encounters God and everyone else, for God is the source for all beings. We all share in the divine. The contemplative life offers one the chance to experience community in the spiritual conscience.

Here Merton notes the importance of prayer. For him, there is no such thing as individual prayer.

When I pray I am, in a sense, everybody. The mind that prays in me is more than my own mind, and the thoughts that come up in me are more than my own thoughts because this deep consciousness when I pray is a place of encounter between myself and God and between the common love of everybody (1988:135).

We do not meet other people merely in our external contact with them, we also meet them in the depths of our own hearts.

This is what is experienced in the spiritual conscience. It is neither restricting nor constricting. When one renounces self-identification he or she is opened to the infinite and is able to accept other people as interdependent equals rather than identifying and defining them as separate objects.

In the modern world the contemplative life of prayer and detachment is the surest measure of maintaining a liberating sense of community. On August 22, 1967 Merton wrote to Dom Francis Decroix saying:

We should bear in mind that Marx taught an interesting doctrine about religious alienation, which is a consequence of regarding God as distant and purely transcendent and putting all our hope for every good in the future life, not realizing God's presence to us in this life, and not realizing that prayer means contact with the deepest reality of life, our own truth in Him. Also we should point out that prayer is the truest guarantee of personal freedom.... It should certainly be emphasized today that prayer is a real source of personal freedom in the midst of a world in which men are dominated by massive organizations and rigid institutions which seek only to exploit them for money and power. Far from being the cause of alienation, true religion in spirit is a liberating force that helps man to find himself in God (1985:159).

The realization that one is interconnected with everyone else in that which transcends all yet is intimately present in all, necessitates a reevaluation of how we interact. It calls into question all claims to absolute truth, thereby eliminating the desire of one group to dominate another.

The concept of dignity is paramount here. Human dignity is understood to be what we all have in common despite our differences — race, gender, ethnicity, etc. It is not definable because it is based on our semblance to the image of a God without image. It can only be considered in terms of "not this" and "not that," and this is why the *via negativa* is helpful in affirming it. The moment dignity is defined it is defiled. Dignity is a sharing in the infinite that transcends and finds expression in all religions.

For Merton, a recognition of the innate dignity of the human being required a commitment to non-violence. Merton was adamant in his support for peaceful protest. His role model in this regard was Mahatma Gandhi. In Gandhi, Merton recognized a kindred soul who was well aware of the interdependence of all life. Merton wrote that Gandhi's spirit of nonviolence

sprang from an inner realization of spiritual unity in himself. The whole Gandhian concept of nonviolent action and satyagraha is incomprehensible if it is thought to be a means of achieving unity rather than as the fruit of inner unity already achieved...The spiritual life of one person is simply the life of all manifesting itself in him. [It] is very necessary to emphasize the truth that as the person deepens his own thought in silence he enters into a deeper understanding of and communion with the spirit of his entire people (1965:6).

The one who is aware of the unity of life does not consider the use of violence to be a valid option, even in the cause of justice. Gandhi epitomized the struggle of a people against a powerful colonial nation. Yet, his call to revolution was manifest in his devotion to silence and interior reflection. Merton respected that even in the face of cold-blooded murder,

Gandhi's respect for human dignity would not allow him to return blow for blow.

Gandhi believed that the dignity of all is mitigated if one responds to violence with violence. "To punish and destroy the oppressor is merely to initiate a new cycle of violence and oppression. The only real liberation is that which liberates both the oppressor and the oppressed at the same time from the same tyrannical automatism of the violent process which contains in itself the curse of irreversibility (1965:14)."

Nonviolent response stands as a witness to the dignity of all persons. It challenges the conscience of those who unquestioningly follow the orders of institutionalized authority by transcending the roles of oppressor and oppressed. According to Merton and Gandhi, those who resort to physical aggression are not much more than slaves to their own violent actions. By refusing to acknowledge the innate dignity of all they cut themselves off from the true freedom that emerges from the recognition of the communal nature of all life. If one recognizes oneself in the other it liberates him or her from the confining nature of prejudice.

There are certain principles, however, that can be used to guide the interaction between humans and governments and between individual people. According to Merton, authentic social action must emphasize three things. First, it must emphasize the human being over the collective automaton who is a slave to technology. Human beings have an innate dignity that must not be surrendered by becoming a cog in the machine, a mere step in the process of production. Authentic interaction must focus on the "liberation of man from the tyranny of the faceless mass in which he is submerged without thoughts, desires, or judgments of his own, a creature without will or without light, the instrument of the power politician (1966:69)." Second, authentic social action must emphasize the personal aspect of the human being. It is not enough to respect the human above the automaton. Every human being's personal values, which, according to Merton, are spiritual and incommunicable must be taken into account. "To respect the personal aspect in man is to respect his solitude, his right to think for himself, his need to learn this, his need for love and acceptance by other persons like himself (1966:70)." Attempting to convert others to a particular point of view, or even spoon-feeding those who are already converted, does little more than prepare the way for mass society.

Third, authentic social action must emphasize wisdom and love. A sapiential view of society is "less activist, more contemplative; it enables men and institutions to see life in its wholeness, with stability and purpose, though not necessarily in a politically conservative sense (70)." Only when these three criteria are met can men and women hope to effect a significant change in their interaction that will release them from mass society and keep them open and accepting of the other.

In *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* Merton reiterated his belief in accepting others for what they are by stating that

the more I am able to affirm others, to say "yes" to them in myself, the more real I am. I am fully real if my own heart says yes to everyone. I will be a better Catholic, not if I can refute every shade of Protestantism, but if I can affirm the truth in it and still go further. So, too, with the Muslims, the Hindus, the Buddhists, etc. This does not mean syncretism, indifferentism, the vapid and careless friendliness that accepts everything by thinking of nothing. There is much one cannot

"affirm" and "accept," but first one must say "yes" where one really can (1966:129).

While there may exist significant doctrinal discrepancies between faiths, one is not faced with an either/or situation, for we are all interdependent. To become blinded by the differences is to miss the underlying wholeness and unity that has its source in the divine infinite. Merton's advice to the Christian community is to love others "with a love completely divested of all formally religious presuppositions, simply as our fellow men, men who seek truth and freedom as we do (1966:298)."

CONCLUSION

Thomas Merton possessed not only the ability to recognize and understand what he was feeling at any given time but also the ability to express himself in a manner comprehensible to the conscientious reader. The message that resonates in Merton's writing is a dissatisfaction with the state of men and women in today's world.

The basis of Merton's critique is the extent to which people have become alienated from themselves. Ultimately, the nature of human beings cannot be defined. For Merton, men and women are created by and sustained by the divine. There is no absolute distinction between the human and God. This realization, in turn, dissolves any ultimate distinction among individual human beings. However, modern society does not view reality in this way. It is still firmly entrenched in the modernist paradigm, which begins with self and objectifies everything else. For Merton, this is anathema. By establishing the basis for reality in individual self-consciousness, modern human beings have only succeeded in alienating themselves from their own true nature.

According to Merton, the secular myth of progress blossomed under the objectification of the world and envisaged a new age in which humans would be the masters of their domain and be privy to the highest levels of maturity and freedom. However, instead of inheriting a bright future human beings have become mindless slaves to technological systems that promise instant gratification if one performs one's part as a cog in the machine as efficiently as possible. For Merton, the only way out of the crisis of modernity is the cultivation of a contemptus mundi that removes one from the status quo and enables him or her to come to terms with the agonía of existence in a way that negates any subject/object duality and opens one to the infinite.

Merton rejects the world in order to truly embrace the world. He negates himself in order to realize his lack of isolated, individual identity. The contemplative lifestyle is the embodiment of his contemptus mundi. Originally, Merton sought only solitude and silence; he wanted nothing more to do with the world. But the more he renounced all selfish claims the more he began to realize that solitude and silence are things one carries within the heart and are only fully effective when they are put to use in the world. A person is never truly alone when he or she unmask the illusion of selfhood and is exposed to the interdependence of all beings. The contemptus mundi removes one from the preoccupations and imposed standards of a world bent on maintaining a consumeristic ideal. In such a world the only respite one gains from agonía is a fleeting moment of gratification experienced when some new material

possessions is consumed. The false self briefly clings to a sense of satisfaction at having accomplished something.

The *via negativa* is the means by which one is able to escape the confining effects of false identification. It decenters ones consciousness as the basis of all reality and throws him or her into darkness and confusion. All foundations and footholds are dissolved and one languishes in despair. But this despair is purgative. By giving up all claims to self-control we die to ourselves and are liberated from the confining labels that identify us as objects in a material world. Without identity and definition we experience the true freedom that is part of the source of all life, the infinite divine. By denying absolutes and refusing to define, the *via negativa* calls all authority into question. By removing oneself from the machine one immediately offers an alternative to the unquestioning obedience of mass society. The person who empties him/herself is no longer concerned with any doctrinal differences that may separate religious traditions and refuses to deny the one who is different, precisely because differences cease to exist when there is no foundational identity in which they could take root.

Merton's critique of his society is a postmodern response to the claims of modernity. It is postmodern because: a) Merton critiques the myths that form the foundation of modernity: the illusion of individualism, the collectivism that it engenders, and the myth of progress that fuels it; and b) It does so without reverting to a pre-modern "Orthodoxy." Merton replaces such an orthodoxy with a de-centered approach to all religions and cultures. It should be noted that Merton is not merely making disinterested observations about the world around him. He is actively engaging in a systematic critique of what he considers to be the most pressing problems for a world in considerable turmoil.

The earliest works of Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* in particular, have a sarcastic tone to them. They do espouse a rejection of the world, but it is not a critique. Before the *via negativa* experience of *The Sign of Jonas* Merton rejected the world because of its failings. After his passage through the *via negativa* he embraced the world as a realm of interdependence. Merton's writing took an obvious turn toward social issues. Now from the vantage point of no-self he attacked those elements that were dehumanizing. Titles like *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* and *Contemplation in a World of Action* are highly critical of the unquestioning conformity that characterizes mass society. *Seeds of Destruction and Faith and Violence* make no apology for their criticism of racial segregation and the use of violence as a political tool. The fact that he identifies and critiques certain elements of modernity without reverting to a pre-modern ideal is what makes him postmodern without being ideologically so. He was surrounded by a Western Christian paradigm yet was able to take a step back, reflect upon what he saw, and voice his disapproval.

Merton does not revert back to a pre-modern standard when critiquing modernity. He does not see the answers lying in a retrieval of some noble, beneficent European golden age of Christendom. His response is clearly something different. He does not judge other religions and cultures by Western standards. Indeed, Merton rejects those standards precisely because they turn the physical world and all people in it into isolated objects. Recognition of the interdependence, dignity, and equality of all life immediately removes him from any Eurocentric world view and, in fact, makes him decidedly post-European.

Merton's response cannot be characterized as traditionally Christian – in the sense of embarking on a world mission to convert everyone. His ability to embrace the thought of and adopt some of the principles of Mahatma Gandhi, Chuang Tzu, and various Buddhist figures clearly makes him post-Christian. He is a Christian who points the way beyond "Christendom." For Merton, authentic Christianity is not threatened by other faith claims and does not find it necessary to turn all people into model Christians. He sees Taoism, Buddhism, and Christianity as converging and diverging in the *via negativa* and is able to learn more about his own potential from his encounters with other traditions in a manner that transcends cultural distinctions and doctrinal differences.

Readers of many of Merton's later works could question to what extent he remained a Christian. His immersion in the religions of the East that do not profess a belief in the traditional Judeo-Christian God, could cause many to misinterpret his message or avoid his thought altogether. Yet his description of Christianity in relation to various aspects of Buddhism *The Asian Journal* for instance, he remained fundamentally Christian and essentially biblical. The problem with Merton is that he cannot be boxed in. The tone of his early works is doctrinal; the issues seem black and white. After *The Sign of Jonas*, however, Merton's writing changes considerably enough in content that one could question if the same man wrote *The Seven Storey Mountain*. In fact, Merton himself insisted that he was not the same man. Like Abraham, he was a man who set out on a journey, not knowing where he was going but trusting God to lead the way. As such he opened a path into a postmodern world that still awaits full articulation.

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Book Reviews, continued.

Ellul's relationship to politics is one of "total confrontation" in which he sets out to abolish "political illusion" (137). This confrontation also defines the Christian individual's participation in politics, a participation marked by tension and not "distinguishable from other manifestations of faith, but simply a proclamation of the Gospel" (137). For Ellul, according to Manzone, politics are "irredeemable" and cannot be transformed by Christian liberty. In the section on freedom and mass communication, Manzone investigates the relationship between mass media and Christian freedom. More specifically, he examines how according to Ellul "the interaction between technology, politics, and 'propaganda' [the media] constitutes the heart of our civilization" (145). Manzone categorizes Ellul "among the apocalyptic" for whom mass media create people no longer capable of "critical thought" or "autonomous behavior" (150). Finally, in the section on the relationship between Christian freedom and law, Manzone concludes that for Ellul faith is not applicable to the juridical organization of society because law is secular. According to Ellul, Manzone notes, human law is relativistic (169) and "does not express religious values or divine justice. . . . [W]hen thinking of human law, Christians must . . . not see it as an ideal law derived from their religion" (167).

Part III of Manzone's opus, "Christian Freedom and Social Ethics: Beyond Ellul," performs an "evaluative and critical analysis of Ellul's attempt to define Christian freedom as the measure of Christian life and especially of the Christian individual's presence in society" (177). In the premise to this part, Manzone proposes an analysis based on the "confrontation between Protestant theology and Catholic theology on social ethics" (177). His aim is to understand the way in which the notion of Christian freedom becomes a means through which believers become socially *engagés*.

In this section Manzone assesses Ellul's analysis of society and social action, of civil institutions, and of social justice. He asserts that Ellul develops a sociological investigation based on a "neutral methodology" (198). The author recognizes the French philosopher's relativistic tendencies. However, he concludes that Ellul's philosophy of human action and freedom lacks an "anthropological dimension" (199), which would shed light on, for example, "the significance of individual acts for those who perform them" (198). In conclusion Manzone notes that the fact that Ellul does not "consider judgment of individual behavior as a moment intrinsically connected to judgment on institutional actions renders incomplete the dynamics of Christian freedom in its endeavor to relativize and modify norms and social institutions" (256). For Manzone, Ellul considers this undertaking in negative terms because he does not adequately consider the anthropological notion that freedom "incorporates both the individuals' socio-cultural milieu and their personal history" (257). In the end, Manzone contends, human beings are capable of relating to God because they can grasp "Revelation," or the Word of God in human form, because they see themselves in it (257).