[*TMA* 13 (2000) 63-79]

The Restoration of Balance: Thomas Merton's Technological Critique

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'The great defect of American thought is a lack of balance: too much science and not enough wisdom'.[1]

Letter from Thomas Merton to Hiromu Morishita, a survivor of Hiroshima

The Problem of Technique

What do I know about technology? I get into the steel building [a recent addition to the Monastery of Gethsemani] and I'm lost!'[2] This is how Thomas Merton, as novice master, began a lecture on technology to his charges in the mid-1960s. This admission plays to the stereotype of a cloistered cleric, but Thomas Merton was no stereotype. His was a voice of prophetic resistance, advancing an alternative vision to the regnant techno-scientific paradigm of the modern world. This alternative vision assumes that technology is an inevitable and, in some instances, valuable aspect of human life, but technology must be also respectful of the integrity and dignity of every human person:

> Technology could indeed make a better world for millions of human beings. It not only can do this, but it must do it. What I am 'against' then is a complacent and naive progressivism which pays no attention to anything but the fact that wonderful things can be done with machinery and with electronics.[3]

1. In a letter to Hiromu Morishita, 8 March 1965, printed in William H. Shannon (ed.), *The Hidden Ground of Love* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), p. 459. Hiromu Morishita was a teacher and a Hibakusha, a survivor of Hiroshima who visited Merton at Gethsemani on a trip to the United States in 1964.

2. This is from a recorded lecture of 5 June 1966 of Merton to his novices at the Abbey of Gethsemani. Thomas Merton, 'The Christian in a Technological World' (Electronic Paperback Series; Credence Cassettes).

3. In a 'circular letter' sent out during Lent of 1967 printed in Robert E. Daggy

Merton sensed that behind the dramatic instances of technological advancement such as space flight is an almost irresistible human compulsion to control nature. The compulsion to control human nature has ancient roots. He lamented how Adam's prideful acts in the Garden of Eden exchange a 'perfectly ordered nature elevated by the highest gifts of mystical grace for the compulsions and anxieties and weaknesses of a will left to itself...' More specifically, an idolatrous devotion to human creations often produces a fractured and consuming devotion to activity that does not integrate the spiritual and the material.[4]

A close reading of a number of social critics in the 1960s provided some depth and breadth to Merton's instinctive distrust of the frenetic activity in contemporary human life. In 1964, Merton received a copy of Jacques Ellul's *The Technological Society*. Ellul, a French sociologist, was a severe critic of the hegemony of 'technique' in the contemporary world.[5] Technique is a mentality promoting ceaseless progress and change, as Merton put it, an 'automatic self-determining system' that eliminates individual choices.[6] In such a system process, efficiency, and change become the ultimate values in human life.

The mentality of technique is represented in specific technologies such as airplanes. After having watched airplanes pass over his head at the monastery, Merton declared that these jets were symbols of passivity that fostered a false sense of control over nature.[7] He would later desire to be on such planes in order to fly to conferences and other meetings. The millions travelling in the airplanes are not necessarily going anywhere, however, so 'perhaps going nowhere is better'.[8] The rapidity of air travel also disrupts a sense of proportion and

(ed.), *The Road to Joy* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989), pp. 98-99.

4. Thomas Merton, *The New Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1961), pp. 110, 111.

5. In letters to Père Hervé Chaigne 28 December 1964 and 21 April 1965, printed in William H. Shannon (ed.), *Witness to Freedom* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1994), p. 109.

6. In a letter to Bernard Haring, 26 December 1964 (*The Hidden Ground of Love*, pp. 383, 384); William H. Shannon, 'Can One be a Contemplative in a Technological Society', *The Merton Seasonal* 22.1 (Spring, 1997), pp. 12-20.

7. Thomas Merton, 'Day of a Stranger', *The Hudson Review* 20 (Summer 1967), pp. 211-18.

8. In a journal entry for 18 July 1967 (*The Other Side of the Mountain*, p. 266). For the journals I simply quote the day of the entry together with reference to the volume title and page number of the published edition. The *Journals of Thomas Merton* appeared in seven volumes under the general editorship of Patrick Hart. They are as follows: *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation* (ed. Patrick Hart;

continuity. In 1952, after taking a series of flights, Merton is amazed at the disorientation that resulted from leaving Gethsemani and returning home in less than 48 hours. The rapidity of travel prompts an intense desire to purge 'the violence of that one day's journey'.[9]

Technique is not only present in machinery but in processes such as the modern medical system. Hospitals, for Merton, were 'totally alien' countries where long bouts of passivity are broken by unannounced medical interventions as swirling teams of medical providers arrange 'ingenious and complicated happenings'.[10] Patients are prodded and poked in a 'medieval frenzy'. Michel Foucault's study of madness confirms that doctors are really 'artists'who display a 'remarkable flair for improvisation on people's backs, elbows, guts, etc'.[11] Merton reminds us that only the human contact of nurses and friends helps to mitigate the worst aspects of these invasions.[12]

According to Merton, the technological mandates of activity, process, and efficiency present in modern medical care are separating humanity from traditional religious resources. The forms and teachings of the faith are no longer deemed effective in responding to the moral and psychological dimensions of the contemporary human predicament. For example, Merton laments the disappearance of angels as an example of how the transcendent reminders of human limitations and sources of spiritual comfort are discarded by the technological world:

Journals, I, 1939–1945; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995); *Entering the Silence: Becoming a Monk and a Writer* (ed. Jonathan Montaldo; Journals, II, 1941–1952; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996); *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Vocation* (ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham; Journals, III, 1953–1960; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996); *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years* (ed. Victor A. Kramer; Journals, IV, 1960–1963; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996); *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage* (ed. Robert E. Daggy; Journals, V, 1963–1966; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997); *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom* (ed. Christine M. Bochen; Journals, VI, 1966–1967; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997); *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey* (ed. Patrick Hart; Journals, VII, 1967–1968; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998).

9. 25 July 1952 (*A Search for Solitude*, p. 3).

10. 8 May 1964 (*Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 102).

11. In a letter to Father John Eudes Bamberger, 4 May 1967, in Patrick Hart (ed.), *The School of Charity* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990), p. 332.

12. 6 August 1965 (*Dancing in the Water of Life*, pp. 276, 277); in a letter to Robert Lax, March 1940 (Daggy [ed.], *The Road to Joy*, pp. 153, 154).

> More than ever we need the angels, not to replace our machines but to teach us how to live with them. For the angels come to teach us how to rest, to forget useless care, to relax, in silence, to 'let go', to abandon ourselves not in self-conscious fun but in self-forgetful faith. We need instead of lightening of our existence to weigh it down. May they come back into our world and deliver it from its massive boredom, its metaphysical fatigue.[13]

While discarding the need for angels or any other religious explanations, the ubiquitous demands of technique molds each individual for the ends of greater social, economic, or political entities. The mass society rejects the Christian challenge of each person to discover within themselves the 'spiritual power and integrity which could be called forth only by love'.[14]

Why would a society adopt a regime of 'technique' that eliminated the integral humanity of every person? It was the consequence of a Faustian bargain. In exchange for easing the rigors of human life, technique required that 'truth, love, justice, etc'. be sacrificed to the idol of progress. This selection of a false god results in a state of alienation where reason accounts for the unconscious, the qualitative is made quantitative, and an artificial world replaces nature at every turn. A concurrent pragmatism also vitiates any moral standard. Moral principles are equated with a notion of 'taboo', because of the impatience of technology. As a last step, the transcendent is forsaken.[15] There is no compromise with the agenda of technique and the citizenry must 'take it or leave it'. Most Americans do not opt out of the system because the prosperity resulting from productivity is a divine blessing, a 'sign of election'.[16]

13. Thomas Merton, 'The Angel and the Machine', *The Merton Seasonal* 22.1 (Spring, 1997), pp. 3-6.

14. Thomas Merton, *Disputed Questions* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1960), pp. 127-34; in a letter to Rosemary Radford Ruether, 19 March 1967 (*The Hidden Ground of Love*, pp. 505-508).

15. 'The Christian in a Technological World'; 14 July 1964, 17 April 1965 (*Dancing in the Water of Life*, pp. 126, 230); Thomas Merton , 'Technology' in *Merton Collected Essays*, VI (Louisville: Thomas Merton Center, 1966), 53-59. These notes were apparently made for his lectures to the novices entitled, 'The Christian in a Technological World'. The taped lecture and these notes were similar, but not identical; 9 July 1962 (*Turning Toward the World*, p. 230).

16. 'Technology', p. 54; 7 December 1958 (*A Search for Solitude*, p. 234); Merton, even before reading Ellul, had recognized the pernicious effect of the regnant ideal of process in Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition*. 12 June 1960 (*Turning Toward the World*, p. 11).

The Alternative Vision of Christian Humanism

Merton's response to the dilemma of technique is not easily sketched because he is not an ethicist or a moral theologian. Although his writings are sporadic on technology, they still have certain persistent themes. One of the persistent themes is the contemplative monk's critical role in reconnecting humanity to the reality of the transcendent. Specific ethical criteria can assist in judging particular ethical issues in terms of a just and humane society. For Merton, the mindless association of individuals in a technological collectivity must be replaced by a spiritual community.

Christian humanism hopes to reconnect humanity to eternal verities and human dignity, not efficiency and progress. This rebinding of humanity requires a creative response to grace that 'actualizes the divine life' in each person. For Merton, human freedom and creativity flow from the 'infinite, necessary, and absolute being of God' displayed in the 'mystery of freedom, creativity and grace' centered in the incarnation.[17]

How then to communicate the truths of Christian humanism in a techno-scientific age? Fortunately, faith can be stirred in any age, because faith is a gift from God that is revealed in the heart of the gospel. The message is not heard very often in the contemporary world because it is not lived by Christians. If Christianity is internalized, then the world might attach credibility to Christian assertions.[18]

There is also hope for a resurrection of Christian humanism, because human beings long to recover their true selves. To be sure, the insatiable demands for novelty in a technological and market oriented society can be maintained for an extended period by the manipulation of advertising. Ultimately, these velleities, however, only confer 'pseudo-satisfactions'. Deep suspicions inevitably arise because of continuing anxieties and false hopes. The anxieties of the technological age promote within the human heart a call for renewal described by Merton as a 'liberation of creative power'.[19]

A true rebirth of the self, however, is 'beyond an ideology or a political cause', for in Merton's contemplative vision there must be a rebirth of the spirit, an awakening of mind and heart. Such a rebirth requires a constant renewal of the spiritual quest in Christ, a series of

17. Merton, 'The Church and the "Godless World"', pp. 274-77.
18. Merton, 'The Church and the "Godless World"', pp. 252-54.
19. Thomas Merton, 'Rebirth and the New Man in Christianity' (April 1966), in *Merton Collected Essays*, VI, pp. 233-43.

transformations aiming at a spiritual love.[20] The converted engage the larger world with a different vision. A Christian humanism founded on love and respect builds the kingdom of God in the world by seeking a society that is just, humane, and peaceful.[21]

The Restorative Powers of Contemplation and Nature

The mentality of technique flattens human relationships, destroys the natural world and eliminates God. In order to restore a true human community, Merton promotes antidotes such as contemplation and nature. In an introduction to the Japanese edition of *Seeds of Contemplation*, he asks the question, 'Can contemplation still find a place in the world of technology and conflict which is ours? Does it belong only to the past?'[22] His answer: contemplation is still vital in rejecting 'the call to diversion and self-deception' and accepting the 'inmost truth—the image of God'.[23] If this divine wellspring is lost, then humanity has no spiritual compass for discovering peace or true happiness.[24]

If the solution is internal and spiritual, then how can the proper resources be reappropriated? There are several false paths to be avoided. Aldous Huxley, whose work Merton admired in the 1930s, had declared that the contemplative experience can be initiated though hallucinogenic drugs.[25] Huxley's desire to mechanically manipulate a mystery through drugs typified, in Merton's opinion, the worst tendencies of a technological mentality.[26] True mystical experiences are divine gifts, not aesthetic experiences to be sold and packaged.[27] There were other more conventional forms of mechanistic belief to be avoided at all cost. Merton cautioned that Catholics must reject a 'negative Jansenistic pietism that just turns away from the

20. Merton, 'Rebirth and the New Man in Christianity', pp. 237-43.

21. Merton, *Disputed Questions*, pp. 24, 65.

22. Thomas Merton, Preface to Japanese edition of *Seeds of Contemplation* (March 1965) in *Merton Collected Essays*, V (Louisville: Thomas Merton Collection), p. 51.

23. Merton, *Disputed Questions*, p. 183.

24. In a letter to Rosemary Radford Ruether, 9 March 1967 (*The Hidden Ground of Love*, p. 503); *Disputed Questions*, pp. 192, 193.

25. In a letter to Aldous Huxley, 27 November 1958 (*The Hidden Ground of Love*, pp. 437, 438).

26. Merton, 'Monastic Attitudes', *Cistercian Studies* 2 (1967), pp. 9, 10.

27. In a letter to Aldous Huxley, 27 November 1958 (*The Hidden Ground of Love*, pp. 436-439); Judith Anderholm, 'Thomas Merton and Aldous Huxley', *The Merton Seasonal* 16.2 (Spring 1991), pp. 8-10.

machine and murmurs prayers to the Blessed Mother...'[28]

In contrast to consumerism or a simplistic piety, Merton advocated no easy path to contemplation. Ultimately, contemplation is 'a kind of spiritual vision to which reason and faith aspire, by their very nature, because without it they must always remain incomplete'.[29] While the contemplative experiences a longing within this process, the ultimate knowledge of God in our lives is a gift of the Holy Spirit. The gift is a concrete manifestation, a living presence and not the pursuit of abstract truths. The result of contemplation is an 'awakening, enlightenment and the amazing intuitive grasp by which love gains certitude of God's creative and dynamic intervention in our lives'.[30]

In assessing technology, Merton pioneered how contemplatives should examine the wisdom of both Western and Eastern religious traditions. A particularly useful antidote to Western materialism is Zen Buddhism. In *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, Merton comments that Zen enlightenment is not directed to some immanent end and hence its practitioners suffer little or no anxiety. Thus, the wisdom of the East provides an 'immediate awareness' of the spiritual life that is not 'dimmed by the technical progress and prestige of science.[31]

Grounded in this sense of spiritual withdrawal and divine contact, the contemplative is concerned with the dignity and value of every human being who is a fellow pilgrim in the religious quest and not an isolated autonomous unit, a consumer, or a cog in the machinery of ideology. Each pilgrim respects every other person because a dialogue with God can only be conducted in 'the soil of freedom, spontaneity and love'.[32]

The contemplative recovery of the deepest levels of reality is possible in the silence, beauty, and wonder of nature as frequently evidenced in Merton's writings. The divine source of nature makes the world to be more than raw materials for technical manipulation:[33]

28. In a letter to Rosemary Radford Ruether, 19 March 1967 (*The Hidden Ground of Love*, p. 506).

29. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961), p. 1.

30. Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 5.

31. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (ed. Naomi Burton *et al.*, New York: New Directions, 1973), p. 157. Merton is citing in this passage Edward Conze, *Buddhist Thought in India* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1962), p. 81.

32. Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 14.

33. Merton, *No Man Is an Island* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1955), p. 33.

> Perhaps the most critical aspect of Christian obedience to God today concerns the responsibility of the Christian in a technological society toward God's creation and God's will for His creation. Obedience to God's will for nature and for man—respect for nature and love for man-in the awareness of our power to frustrate God's designs for nature and for man—to radically corrupt and destroy natural goods by misuse and blind exploitation, especially by criminal waste.[34]

The same technique that eliminates the spiritual tap root of humanity also threatens to destroy nature. Technique falsely tries to separate human actions from their impact on nature and eventually humanity itself. Merton resisted such legerdemain. The attack on nature is 'part of the same sickness, and it all hangs together'.[35]

The sources of the American desire to dominate and even control nature on behalf of progress has historical origins. In an essay titled, 'The Wild Places', Merton observed that the Puritans despise the 'hideous and desolate wilderness' that spawned sin. The reward for taming the savage and pagan New World is prosperity. The Puritan impulse to progress has been easily coopted to sustain the myth of capitalism. As a consequence, the Puritan impulse is employed to leave America 'poisoned and unsettled by bombs, by fallout, by exploitation: the land ruined, the water contaminated, the soil charged with chemicals, ravaged by machinery'.[36]

There are alternative traditions that oppose the puritanical perspective. For the Transcendentalists, nature was the realm of God, a location for healing and sanity. A component of wilderness must be maintained because the wilderness reverses the corruption of the city. Nature in its purest form offers a psychological component of irrationality and spontaneity that balances the excesses of a technological culture.[37] Management of the land is necessary, however, to produce

34. 15 April 1965 (*Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 227).

35. 11 December 1962 (*Turning to the World*, p. 274). This was also the first mention of Carson's book *Silent Spring*.

36. Thomas Merton, *Day of a Stranger* (ed. Robert E. Daggy; Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith, 1981), p. 17.

37. Of course, Merton could not, like Thoreau, leave the wilderness and travel to his aunt's for weekend meals. Thomas Merton, 'The Wild Places' in *The Merton Collected Essays*, VIII (Louisville: Thomas Merton Center) pp. 316-21. Merton acknowledged that these ideas are taken from Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven: Yale University, 1967); Thomas Merton, 'Wilderness and Paradise', *Cistercian Studies* 2 (November, 1966), pp. 83-89. He admitted to being taught by two Thoreau scholars at Columbia, Joseph Wood Krutch and Mark Van Doren. Merton, in a letter to Harry J. Cargas, 14 February 1966 (*Witness*

food. Merton favored a stewardship paradigm for agriculture. In exchange for the gift of produce, the farmer exercises a responsible dominion over the land. God had the authority to revoke this stewardship as was done in the case of Eden.[38]

The wilderness and stewardship paradigms are supplemented by the ethical implications of the environmental movement. Rachel Carson asserted that technology's constant imperative to construct newer and more efficient projects promoted insecticides that destroyed many species and created poison-resistant insects.[39] The dangers of unrestrained technologies requires a new ethical stance, perhaps the 'biotic ethic' of Aldo Leopold. One of the pioneers of the ecological movement, Leopold insisted that human beings were members of a biotic community whose integrity, stability, and beauty was grounded in the recognition of the human dependence on an environmentally comprehensive community. Merton acknowledged how Leopold opposed the regnant 'pseudo-creativity deeply impregnated with hatred, megalomania and the need for dominion'.[40]

The restoration of the balance in life by communion with God's creatures provides a model for restorative possibilities for human communities in a form of 'mental ecology'.[41] In the realm of 'mental ecology', there is a complimentary integration of the singing of birds, the 'clanging prose' of Tertullian, or the prophetic songs of Jeremiah and Isaiah. Thus, the contemplative is attuned to and in harmony with the symphony of existence.[42]

to Freedom, p. 171); in a letter to Sister Thérèse Lentfoehr, 25 September 1956 (Daggy, *The Road to Joy*, p. 222).

38. In a letter to Rosemary Radford Ruether, 19 March 1967 (*The Hidden Ground of Love*, p. 506).

39. In a letter to W.H. Ferry, 12 January 1963 (*The Hidden Ground of Being*, pp. 213, 214); 'Technology', p. 54; Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Image Books, 1966), p. 26.

40. 'The Wild Places', pp. 326-30; Leopold argued that the historic sense of community should be extended, as a matter of ethics, to include the environment: Aldo Leopold, *Sand Creek Almanac* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949), pp. 201-210.

41. Monica Weis, 'Living Beings Call Us to Reflective Living: Mary Austin, Thomas Merton and Contemporary Nature Writers', *The Merton Seasonal* 17.2 (Autumn 1992), pp. 4-9; Merton, *Day of a Stranger*, pp. 33-41; *Conjectures of A Guilty Bystander*, pp. 294, 295.

42. May 1965 (*Dancing in the Water of Life*, pp. 239, 240).

Negative and Positive Forms of Technology

In contrast to the restorative and integrating features of contemplation and nature, technologies present a mixed bag of possibilities. Echoing the critique of Lewis Mumford, Merton, often portrayed the cities as the counterpoint to the balance of nature and contemplation. Urban reality exhausts and deadens the spiritual life. The degradation of the spiritual life is reflected in the 'the constant noise of machines and loudspeakers, the dead air and the glaring lights of offices and shops, the everlasting suggestions of advertising and propaganda'.[43]

In the city, the technological focal point is the factory. After Merton dropped off a package at a General Electric plant in Louisville, he recorded his impressions:

> What struck me most was the immense seriousness of the place—As if I had found at last what America takes seriously. Not churches, not libraries. Not even movies, but THIS! This is it. The manufacture of refrigerators, of washing machines, of tape recorders, of light fixtures. This is the real thing. This is America.[44]

The factory is a perfect representative of technique. The problem is not work per se. Gainful employment is neither inherently good nor evil, but must be judged by the extent to which it promotes the contemplative life.[45] Moderate amounts of labor could 'purify and pacify the mind and dispose [a person] for contemplation'.[46] The problem is that the acceptance of excessive amounts of work often reflects an 'agitation' in the human soul. Merton warns that the interior life must not be subjugated to 'unnatural, frantic, anxious work, work done under pressure of greed or fear or any other inordinate passion'.[47]

Other specific forms of technology common to American life suggest that human beings are the raw material for systematic manipulations by the mentality of technique. This is true of the machinery of

43. Merton, *No Man Is an Island*, pp. 108, 109.

44. 26 September 1958 (*A Search for Solitude*, pp. 218, 219).

45. For a similar analysis cf. Simone Weil, *Oppression and Liberty* (trans. Arthur Wills and John Petrie; Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1955), pp. 38, 39, 108-11; Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots* (New York: Ark Paperbacks, 1953), pp. 240-48. Merton was familiar with and would write on Weil: Thomas Merton, 'The Answers of Minerva: Pacifism and Resistance in Simone Weil', in Patrick Hart (ed.), *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1981), pp. 134-40.

46. Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 19.

47. Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 19; *No Man Is an Island*, pp. 108-10.

war, medical procedures, and even common technologies like the automobile and the television. Automobiles are problematic because they waste resources, clog streets, and are symptomatic of a mythic American 'flight from reality'. As cars pass on the highway not far from the abbey, Merton rejects their 'alien frenzy' bent on 'madly going somewhere for no reason'. The automobile is a fitting symbol for the entire culture:[48]

> The attachment of the modern American to his automobile and the *symbolic* role played by his car, with its aggressive and lubric design, its useless power, its otiose gadgetry, its consumption of fuel, which is advertised as having almost supernatural power... [T]hat is where the study of American mythology should begin.[49]

Television anneals a different sort of disorder. As a monk, Merton had never seen an extensive amount of television, but he was informed by friends of its basic features. He knew in 1962 that polls estimated that 90 percent of households had television and the average viewing period was six hours per day.[50] The long viewing hours promote a 'descent to a sub-natural passivity' that renders the viewer susceptible to any illusory image on the screen.[51] In a letter to the Polish writer, Czelaw Milosz, Merton laments:

> The poison is exactly the alienation you speak of, and it is not the individual, not society, but what comes of being an individual helpless to liberate himself from the images that society fills him with. It is a very fine picture of hell sometimes. When I see advertisements I want to curse they make me so sick and I do curse them.[52]

What then is the solution? The viewer must reject the passivity of television and learn how to initiate independent means of thinking and 'This means serious reading, and it also means articulate discussion'.[53]

While television, the automobile, airplanes, and the factory abet a numbing passivity and an idolatrous consumerism, other technologies such as the camera further the aesthetic capacities and approaches of the contemplative experience. Initially, he did not favor the camera and he decries 'the awful instantaneous snapshot of pose, of

48. 18 June 1966 (*Learning to Love*, p. 316).

49. Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 76. Merton never learned to drive himself.

50. 22 October 1962 (*Turning Toward the World*, 259); in a letter to Erich Fromm, 26 September 1961 (*The Hidden Ground of Being*, p. 316).

51. Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 86.

52. In a letter to Czelaw Milosz, 28 March 1961 (*The Courage for Truth*, p. 72).

53. In a letter to Mr L. Dickson, 12 September 1965 (*Witness to Freedom*, p. 169).

falsity eternalized'.[54] Several years later, however, his views changed dramatically. Fascinated by the photographs of John Howard Griffin, Merton borrowed cameras as early as 1964 and became a proficient photographer.[55] The camera has the wonderous capacity to record the random object, as they had been left by their Creator. The 'Zen camera' became a 'catalyst for contemplation', by displaying a 'heightened awareness very similar to meditative prayer'.[56]

The camera is an example of how a machine can be complementary to the religious life. Other machines like the record and tape players meet this criterion.[57] The Shakers provide a historical example of a community that develops technologies on a human scale. The Shakers were a sect that split from the Quakers and believed in celibacy, universal brotherhood, pacifism, and the equality of the sexes. They shared their goods in communal living.[58] The Shaker craftsmen provided a counterpoint to Western technology in a 'wordless simplicity', as Merton termed it, that was a humble evocation of devotion and community.[59]

The camera, the tape recorder, and Shaker crafts, because of their intimate scale, can be employed in a search for beauty, faith and contemplation. The benefits of such technologies prompt an admission by Merton in 1967 that he might need to 'take back some of the things that I have said about technology'. When there is a misapplication of technology, he acknowledges that the machine is often an 'innocent', a

54. 17 November 1961 (*Turning toward the World*, p. 180).

55. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1993), pp. 409, 461, 471, 481, 516; 26 September 1964 (*Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 149). This interest in photography stood in marked contrast to Merton's boredom with photography in 1939 when he visited a Museum of Modern Art exhibit of Charles Scheeler. The photographs were 'neat and so precise and so completely uninteresting'; 22 October 1939 (*Run to the Mountain*, p. 68).

56. Patrick Hart, 'Photography and Prayer in Thomas Merton', *The Merton Seasonal* 10.2 (Autumn, 1985), pp. 2-5; John Howard Griffin, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Visual World of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1970), p. 49.

57. Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, p. 481.

58. Judith Fluornoy, 'Thomas Merton and the Shakers', *The Merton Seasonal* 22.1 (Spring 1997), pp. 7-11; in a letter to Mary Childs Black, 24 January 1962 (*Witness to Freedom*, pp. 30, 31).

59. Thomas Merton, 'Introduction', *Religion in Wood* (ed. Edward D. Andrews and Faith Andrews; Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1966), pp. vii-xv. Thomas Merton, 'The Shakers', *Jubilee* 11. 9 (January 1964), pp. 37-41; in a letter to Edward Deming Andrews, 21 December 1961 (*The Hidden Ground of Love*, pp. 36, 37); in a letter to Mrs Edward Deming Andrews, 20 July 1964 (*The Hidden Ground of Love*, p. 40).

medium through which human errors are transmitted and magnified. Of course, large-scale techniques and machines that express and foster the mentality of technique are not innocents. Merton had pointed out since the late 1940s that humanity must prudently assess their potential benefits.[60]

An Applied Ethics of Technology

A Christian engagement with the world must develop approaches not only for differentiating specific technologies, but also arriving at moral judgments on specific technological issues. Specific moral judgments require the development of processes and principles of ethical resolution. Merton never delineated a comprehensive ethical system, but he did outline insights for constructing such a system.

The development of applied ethical principles in a techno-scientific society is not easy, because the pace of new inventions and processes is so rapid that there is little time for discussion or debate:

> 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 the 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.[61]

Merton prepared some notes and a lecture on technological ethics in response to reading an instructive essay by Hyman Rickover on a humanistic technology. The lecture on technology that is recorded and the notes for the lecture provide some concrete hints at how fundamental Christians values could be applied to issues of technology.

Merton's lecture begins with a general normative analysis and references the principles enunciated in *Gaudium et Spes*. Science and its application in technology are a 'sign of God's grace'; the 'Christian message does not demand neglect of the world and progress but an obligation to do these things'. Scientists and engineers are not necessarily the best individuals to judge the legal and ethical parameters of their actions. They focus on efficiency not morality, and often have a

60. Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, p. 481.
61. Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 75.

vested financial interest.[62] The church then must discover through a difficult deliberative process any ethical reservations.[63] In this deliberation, the effects of technology must be consistent with religious first principles. For example, the search for justice 'has greater worth than technical advances'. Judicial or political processes must reenforce the primacy of the person and therefore technologies must not violate the justice and liberty of any person.[64] In sum, progress can result in a 'more human universe' through the intelligent application of the restraints and limitations of faith.[65]

Merton outlined how right principles would 'serve man' through a recognition of human limitations, but these principles must be instantiated within specific ethical criteria. These criteria seek to create technologies that are the product of reflection, seeking truly human ends, and are respective of human dignity and freedom. In the notes for his lecture on technology, Merton appropriated the ethical criteria for evaluating a technology from Hyman Rickover's lecture, 'A Humanistic Technology':

1. The short range private goals of all interested parties are balanced with a consideration of the common good;
2. The health and lives of citizens are protected and even extended to insure the 'psychic health' and the ineffable nature of every human personality;
3. Any technology must conform to the principle that the liberty of an individual ends when it harms another;
4. A technology must assess in advance its potential for harm. The technology should not be applied until it can be rendered harmless;
5. Authorities should consult and listen carefully to the advice of their experts.[66]

Collectivity or Community

The increasing velocity of technological changes suggested to Merton the rising influence of a mentality of technique that poses not only specific ethical challenges, but also threatens to systematically redefine human cultures. The world is at a moment of decision. Depend-

62. Merton, 'Technology', pp. 55, 56.
63. Merton, 'Technology', p. 57.
64. Merton, 'Technology', p. 57; *Turning Toward the World*, 6 June 1960, p. 9.
65. Merton, 'Technology', p. 57.
66. Merton, 'Technology', pp. 55-57.

ing on the choices made, humanity will be guided either toward a repressive collectivity or a humanistic community.

Unfortunately, the contemporary world is too often under the peonage of a collective technological mentality that wishes to avoid human 'contingency', 'unreality', and 'radical need'. Instead, the ideal of collectivity maintains an 'enormous', 'obsessive' and 'uncontrollable fabrication' of our selves. Each person is in jeopardy of yielding to being 'part of a pure myth' in which the person abdicates 'conscience, personal decision, choice and responsibility'.[67]

The 'fabrication' of a 'self' mutates each person into one of Ionesco's rhinoceri, an individual who complies with each and every illusion of the collectivity. The resulting 'ignorance' of the mass man is for Merton the 'axiomatic foundation of all knowledge in the human collectivity'. Technology and science aid this process by providing for every material need. An unreflective conformity results from an increasing material abundance.[68]

The collectivity spawns an enormous temptation to materialism and immanence. The permeation of these values into the social fabric breeds violence. The 'public void' of collectivity makes licit outrageous acts, Merton concluded, so long as these acts are authorized by society.[69] The resulting violence reflects the moral decay of a society that 'festers with servility, resentment and hate'. A collective automatism and its attendant technology can only be healed by a religious balm:

> No amount of technological progress will cure the hatred that eats away the vitals of materialistic society like a spiritual cancer. The only cure is, and must always be, spiritual. There is not much use talking to men about God and love if they are not able to listen...
>
> In other words, since faith is a matter of freedom and self-determination—the free receiving of a freely given gift of grace—man can not assent to a spiritual message as long as his mind and heart are enslaved by an automatism. He will always remain so enslaved as long as he is submerged in a mass of other automatons.[70]

How then to recover from being mindless and violent cogs in the collectivity? There are two paths to this liberation which are not mutually exclusive. An individual could choose social activism, which

67. Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966), pp. 15, 16.

68. Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable*, pp. 14-16.

69. Merton, 'The Other Side of Despair', pp. 208, 209.

70. Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (Boston: Shambala Publications, 1956), p. xi.

rejects the mantra of collectivity by opting to assist others, 'without thought of personal interest or return'.[71] Another option is to achieve a release from the siren call of the herd in a contemplative life that confronts and accepts poverty, renunciation, and death.[72]

Under either option, a community should not be guided by 'interest and necessity, but by love and grace'. Individuals are no longer isolated in a mass society, but communicate with one another in the 'openness and dialogue of love'. The 'openness' in this context means the acceptance of the reality that human communication involves the recognition that one's self is in 'confrontation with and in free, vital relation with the existence and potentialities of the other'. This relationship is based on Martin Buber's I–thou communication instead of the I–It communication with the other as object.[73]

Merton thus adumbrates the antinomies of the collectivity and community. These visions of social organization provide criteria for assessing appropriate forms of technology.

Collectivity	Community
1. Favors material progress and prosperity;	1. Favors the priority of moral growth and the dignity of each human being;
2. Grants a priority to the pursuit of exotic and scientific achievement instead of human values;	2. Grants a priority to the community and each person as a member of the community;
3. Favors an excessive devotion to work, internally generated goals, and higher levels of production;	3. Promotes a concern with the human dimension of work that should not be routine or monotonous, but in harmony with human creativity and dignity;
4. Trusts in an unassisted human wisdom to achieve proper ends;	4. Balances instrumental values with spiritual insights;
5. Permits technologies that dull human intelligence through passivity.	5. Promotes technologies that sharpen the intellect of the consumer.

Conclusion

In a patchwork and tentative fashion, Merton provided a diagnosis of and a prescription for the role of technology in human society. The

71. Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*, p. 17.
72. Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*, pp. 17-23.
73. Merton, 'The Other Side of Despair', pp. 211-13; Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (New York: Collier, 1958).

diagnosis discovers the essential problem in the idolatry of 'technique'. The prognosis for contemporary Western societies is bleak, but only if humanity does not awaken from its spiritual slumber. The Christian humanism recommended by Merton offers an alternative vision to the regnant techno-scientific paradigm. Christians can combat 'technique' through contemplation, nature, humane technologies, and an applied ethics. The ultimate objective is to replace a stifling technical collectivity with a community respecting the integral humanity and sacred dimension of each person.

The transition to a community requires prophetic voices who promote a new vision. The 'iconoclastic criticism' of the monk must be forthright and fearless, but also prudential.[74] The stakes in seeking such a balance are high because our failure to recover a proper balance between the spiritual and the technological might have devastating consequences:

> Science and technology are indeed admirable in many respects and if they fulfill their promises they can do much for man. But they can never solve his deepest problems. On the contrary without wisdom, without the intuition and freedom that enable man to return to the root of his being, science can only precipitate him still further into the centrifugal flight that flings him, in all his compact and uncompromising isolation, into the darkness of outer space without purpose and without objective.[75]

74. In a letter to Gordon Zahn, January 1962 (*The Hidden Ground of Love*, p. 649).
75. Preface to the Japanese edition of *Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 60.