

## "The Whole World . . . Has Appeared as a Transparent Manifestation of the Love of God": Portents of Merton as Eco-Theologian

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When Thomas Merton reflected on the role of the contemplative, he concluded that "a contemplative will . . . concern himself\* with the same problems as other people, but he will try to get to the spiritual and metaphysical roots of these problems."<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, Merton insisted, the contemplative will situate him- or herself within the challenges of history accompanied by the "Lord of History" who "weeps into the fire."<sup>2</sup>

Using these comments as a catalyst, this essay speculates how Merton might have engaged the present ecological crisis. In formulating such a speculation, the article begins by recalling how Merton was becoming increasingly alert to ecological issues prior to his death. It then explores Merton's understanding of God's relationship with creation and how that relationship affects the goodness and sacredness of the created world. Finally, Merton's christology is reviewed, with a particular focus on how that christology lends itself to an eco-theological perspective. In each of these discussions, it is suggested how Merton's theological reflections parallel those of contemporary eco-theologians,

\*While remarking Merton's lack of inclusive language at the time of his writing, the author has chosen not to amend the exclusive language in quotations of Merton's work cited throughout this essay.

1. Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968) 147.

2. Thomas Merton, *Cables to the Ace* (New York: New Directions, 1968) 55.

and it is demonstrated how eco-theologians have applied this theology to the issues of today's ecological crisis. Such parallels suggest how Merton himself might have examined both the "spiritual and metaphysical roots" and the presence of the "Lord of History" in today's ecological challenge. In suggesting that the foundations of their convictions are similar, it is not impertinent to propose that, were he alive today, Merton would share at least the general tenor of these eco-theologians' views. In particular, the parallels between the theological reflections of Thomas Merton and the eco-theologian Thomas Berry are examined.

Like Merton, Berry has spent a good deal of his life being formed through solitude and mystical reflection. He entered the Passionist Order of preachers in 1933, seeking a contemplative existence that "would provide the time and context for meaningful reflection."<sup>3</sup> That reflection was nourished by Berry's keen interest in the literature of the Church Fathers and the Far East. The latter interest eventually culminated in Berry's producing many articles and two texts on Eastern religions and spirituality.

Thomas Berry was ordained a Roman Catholic priest in 1942, the year that Merton received the habit of a choir-monk novice. His academic studies made him acutely aware of the role that religion played in the shaping of cultures. Partly as a consequence of this, he felt drawn to write about the issues confronting contemporary humanity, particularly the impact of modern technologies and economic systems upon society and the planet, a critical perspective that was also explored by Merton. Preferring to deal with the experiences of life rather than the abstractions of theory, Berry's interest in more recent years has been especially focused on the impact of the ecological crisis on the future of the planet, particularly its human dimension.

Berry's writing resembles Merton's because he tends to provide a historical narrative rather than a metaphysical synthesis. Like Merton, he favors the narrative style of Augustine rather than the deductive reasoning of Aquinas, and is more mystic than theologian.<sup>4</sup> Because he

3. Mary Evelyn Tucker, "Thomas Berry: A Brief Biography," *Religion and Intellectual Life* 5:4 (1988) 109. It is worth noting that at the time that Berry entered the Passionist Order, the community led what might be described as a semi-monastic life, spending half the year in prayer, study, and reflection within their monastery, and half the year "on the road" preaching to the faithful.

4. Recall Merton's comment in *The Seven Storey Mountain*: "My bent was not so much towards the intellectual, dialectical, speculative character of Thomism, as

often employs rhetorical and poetic language to exhort his readers and to comment upon empirical data, Berry has sometimes been accused of being unduly optimistic and superficial. Such a critique is an unfortunate confusion of style with content—a serious error when applied to either Berry or Merton.

## Introduction

### *Contemplative Life and the Crises of the World*

In *Seeds of Destruction* Merton argued that contemplative life cannot be a withdrawal from the crises of the world because to do so would make the bystander an accomplice in the structures that foster these critical situations.<sup>5</sup> Thus, he felt compelled to speak to the issues of his day. The importance of actively engaging the issues of the secular world was also recognized in the Roman Catholic Church's document *Gaudium et spes*, The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. Merton, writing in *Contemplation in a World of Action*, felt that *Gaudium et spes* signaled a shift in the Church's predominant belief that the world was an evil place in which all values must be fixed and preserved by the Church in order that humanity might be saved from its base instincts. "Christian society . . . [had] conceived itself as a world-denying society in the midst of the world. A pilgrim society on the way to another world." In rejecting this view, Merton observed that

the fact that the Church of the Second Vatican Council has finally admitted that the old immobilism will no longer serve is a bit too overdue to be regarded as a monumental triumph. The Constitution on the Church in the Modern World is salted with phrases which suggest that the fathers were, at least some of them, fully aware of this.<sup>6</sup>

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towards the spiritual, mystical, voluntaristic and practical way of St. Augustine." Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 220–1. See also Anne Marie Dalton, "Thomas Berry: Context and Contribution," *ARC* 22 (1994) 22.

5. George Kilcourse, *Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton's Christ* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993) 118.

6. Thomas Merton, "Contemplation in a World of Action," *Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (New York: Paulist Press, 1992) 378–81.

In the words of one of Merton's theological interpreters, "Thomas Merton felt vindicated. His own instincts, his reverence for nature and creation, had already been leading him to this openness and dialogue with the world."<sup>7</sup>

It was not surprising, then, that in the mid-sixties Merton would have developed an interest in ecological issues since this was an area of emerging concern in society. Nor is it surprising that his wide ranging correspondence would include a letter to Rachel Carson, who in 1962 wrote *Silent Spring*, the landmark text on the modern ecological crisis.<sup>8</sup>

### *Merton's Awareness of the Ecological Crisis*

On January 12, 1963, Thomas Merton wrote to Rachel Carson, telling her that he had been reading her "fine, exact, and persuasive book . . . carefully and with great concern." In that letter, he speculates that the same irresponsibility which permits humanity to "scorn the smallest values" also permits nations "to use our titanic power in a way that threatens not only civilization but life itself."<sup>9</sup> The sickness that fosters such irresponsibility and a preoccupation with the acquisition of material wealth underlies society's "despair in the midst of 'plenty'"—a despair that results in "indiscriminate, irresponsible destructiveness, hatred of life, carried on in the name of life itself. In order to 'survive' we instinctively destroy that on which our survival depends."<sup>10</sup>

Merton concludes the letter with further praise of Carson's work and with this admission about his own misguided efforts in the course of work done as the abbey forester: "I love the nature that is all around me here. And I regret my own follies with DDT, which I have now totally renounced."<sup>11</sup>

Ken Butigan argues that as Merton's focus turned increasingly to issues of survival in the 1960s, he became keenly aware of the plight of the planet. "Merton indicated that . . . we must learn *from nature*

7. Kilcourse, *Ace of Freedoms*, 129.

8. Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Cambridge, Mass.: Riverside Press, 1962).

9. Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis*, ed. William Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1994) 70.

10. *Ibid.*, 71.

11. *Ibid.*, 72.

how to participate in the replenishing of the world."<sup>12</sup> Butigan retrieves an image described by Merton in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* in which the environment reconstitutes and rehabilitates itself at night, following the ravages it has sustained during the day at the hands of humanity. "We must, Merton holds, learn to become partners *with* the natural world in the healing of the natural world."<sup>13</sup>

But mere survival was not a sufficient reason for Merton to be interested in the plight of the planet. His appreciation of life included a greater *raison d'être*, a larger cosmological vision. His letter to Carson also reveals the reasons for his ecological interest, as well as the theological foundations for this perspective. A quotation from that letter catalogues these views:

[Because of original sin], man has built into himself a tendency to destroy and negate himself when everything is at its best. . . . The whole world itself, to religious thinkers, has always appeared as a transparent manifestation of the love of God, as a "paradise" of His wisdom, manifested in all His creatures, down to the tiniest, and in the most wonderful interrelationship between them. . . . Man is at once a part of nature and he transcends it. . . . He must make use of nature wisely . . . ultimately relating both himself and visible nature to the invisible—in my terms, to the Creator, in any case, to the source and exemplar of all being and all life. . . . But man has lost his "sight." . . . It is in thinking that he sees . . . that he has lost his wisdom and his cosmic perspective.<sup>14</sup>

With this explanation in hand, it is possible to begin an exploration of the theological foundations that underpin Merton's perspective of the natural world, and concurrently to consider how his views correspond to those of contemporary eco-theologians.

## Creation

*God Is the "source and exemplar of all being and all life"*

Merton held that all of reality shared a common source of being—the One, the "invisible, transcendent and infinitely abundant

12. Ken Butigan, "Thomas Merton's Vision of the Natural World," *Cry of the Environment: Rebuilding the Christian Creation Tradition*, ed. Philip N. Joranson and Ken Butigan (Santa Fe, N.M.: Bear & Co., 1984) 344. (Butigan's emphasis.)

13. Ibid. Butigan citing Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966) 122–3.

14. Merton, *Witness to Freedom*, 71.

Source. . . . [The] reality of the created being [is] a reality that is from God and belongs to God and reflects God."<sup>15</sup> In fact, Merton notes, "The Christian life is a return to the Father, the Source, the Ground of all existence."<sup>16</sup> This is a popular starting point for discussions in eco-theology.

Sallie McFague is a theologian who has examined Christianity's traditional models of God and has proposed new ways of modeling our understanding of the Divine.<sup>17</sup> Her most recent model—the "universe as the body of God"—provides a metaphor that can be used to engage the ecological challenge. With the universe as the inspired "body of God," God is recognized as the source, power, and goal of all that is, "the source, power, and goal of the fifteen-billion-year history of the universe." God is both the "creator and the continuing creator of this massive, breathtaking cosmic history" told as cosmogenesis.<sup>18</sup> God is the giver and renewer of the vast universe throughout the entire evolutionary process. Hence, all of creation depends utterly upon God.<sup>19</sup>

Thomas Berry connects this divine source, the Word, with the activity of the primordial fireball. Drawing upon Scripture, he reminds us that in John's Gospel we learn that the Word, through which all that is has been made, "by its own spontaneities brought forth the universe. . . . This spontaneity as the guiding force of the universe can be thought of as the mysterious impulse whereby the primordial fireball flared forth in its enormous energy, a fireball that contained in itself all that would ever emerge into being."<sup>20</sup> From the start, Berry identifies himself as a commentator on cosmogenesis who accepts that God brought the universe into being; other cosmologists might disclaim

15. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 1, 26. See also Marilyn King, "'We Are Monks Also': Spirituality and Wholeness According to Thomas Merton," *Military Chaplain's Review* 16 (1987) 65.

16. Thomas Merton, "The Inner Experience," *Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master*, 326.

17. Sallie McFague is the Carpenter Professor of Theology and the former dean of Vanderbilt Divinity School. Her 1987 text, *Models of God*, was recognized with an Award for Excellence by the American Academy of Religion.

18. Sallie McFague, "An Earthly Theological Agenda," *Ecofeminism and the Sacred*, ed. Carol Adams (New York: Continuum, 1993) 94, 95.

19. Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993) xi, 148, 151–2.

20. Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988) 196–7.

this origin, but not Berry. He unequivocally attributes the single source of all being and life to the divine mystery.<sup>21</sup>

Merton, McFague, and Berry seem unanimous in recognizing God as the single source of creation.

*The World Is "a transparent manifestation of the love of God, as a 'paradise' of His wisdom, manifested in all His creatures"*

With God as the source of all of creation, it follows that creation would in some way reflect its creator. Consequently, Merton described the world in his letter to Carson as "a transparent manifestation of the love of God, as a 'paradise' of His wisdom, manifested in all His creatures." Merton is claiming that all of creation is a manifestation of the love of the divine mystery. As such, the mystery at the heart of all things participates in the gracious mystery of God. "The world is, as Merton writes in *Love and Living*, willed and held in being by God's love and is therefore infinitely precious in his sight. The cosmos is thus a revelation of the infinite love of the God who is 'Maker, Lover and Keeper.'"<sup>22</sup> If the cosmos is a revelation of God, then the experience of God is not restricted to extraordinary visions or experiences, but is to be found in the ordinary events of daily living.

This positive perspective on the revelation of creation and its manifestation of the divine represents an evolution in the understanding of Merton. In the 1953 volume *Bread in the Wilderness* Merton had posited that the fall of Adam had clouded the window of creation so that humanity could no longer see the natural world in the light of God.<sup>23</sup> By 1961, he had nuanced this outlook, noting that "in all created things we, who do not yet perfectly love God, can find something that reflects the fulfillment of heaven and something that reflects the anguish of hell."<sup>24</sup> In his letter to Carson in 1963, Merton had moved to an even more favorable position on creation, stating that "the whole

21. Thomas Berry, "The Dream of the Earth: Our Way into the Future," *Cross Currents* 37:2-3 (1987) 201, 210. See also Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes* (New York: Bantam Books, 1988); Stephen Gould, *Wonderful Life: The Burgess Shale and the Nature of History* (New York: Norton and Co., 1989) 291.

22. Butigan, "Thomas Merton's Vision of the Natural World," 338. Butigan is quoting Thomas Merton, *Love and Living* (New York: Bantam Books, 1979) 159.

23. Kilcourse, *Ace of Freedoms*, 51.

24. Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 26.

world itself . . . has always appeared as a transparent manifestation of the love of God . . . manifested in all His creatures." The *theoria physica* of the Greek Fathers, who had significantly influenced Merton's more mature understanding of creation and the incarnation, had taught the monk that contemplation of God could be realized in created things through the ascetic gift of discernment.<sup>25</sup>

Detachment from things does not mean setting up a contradiction between "things" and "God" as if God were another "thing" and as if His creatures were His rivals. . . . Rather we become detached *from ourselves* in order to see and use all things in and for God. . . . We love in all things His will rather than the things themselves, and that is the way we make creation a sacrifice in praise of God.<sup>26</sup>

If humanity failed to see and experience this divine Presence in creation, then perhaps it was because "man has lost his 'sight.'" The fault did not so much lie with the rest of creation, but with the human dimension. Indeed, humanity could confidently accept that the rest of creation was "doing the will of God, every single minute."<sup>27</sup> This creation, if untouched by human indiscretion, would not only nurture and sustain us; it would be a revelation of the divine. Creation, Merton observed, can inform our thoughts and prayers, acting as cables, medium, and message.<sup>28</sup>

Merton was echoing St. Teresa's observation that "all creation teaches us some way of prayer."<sup>29</sup> In one instance, he poetically reflected on the metamorphosis of six or seven black and russet caterpillars to their pupal state. Using such insect metamorphosis as a metaphor, he exhorts his reader to seek with similar "glad alacrity" transformation in Christ. He concludes that "we can learn such ways to God from creeping things and sanctity from a black and russet worm!"<sup>30</sup>

25. Kilcourse, *Ace of Freedoms*, 98.

26. Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 21, 25. (Merton's emphasis.)

27. Raymond Bailey, *Thomas Merton on Mysticism* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1974) 185. Bailey is quoting Merton's comments to novices while he was novice master.

28. Merton, *Cables to the Ace*, 7.

29. As quoted in Kilcourse, *Ace of Freedoms*, 27.

30. Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 184.

These themes—that creation is a manifestation of God's love, a revelation of the divine, and a way to approach our Maker—are also apparent in the thought of Thomas Berry, although Berry tends to push his conclusions further than Merton. Berry argues that if humanity is to value the planet and all of its inhabitants in any vital way, then a functional spirituality must emerge; that is, humanity must be inspired by a spirituality that is congruent with our understanding of cosmogenesis and simultaneously integrates us into the processes of cosmic evolution, emphasizing that we are formed and sustained within that dynamic emergence. Yet for such a functional cosmology to be successful, the "universe itself, but especially the planet Earth, needs to be experienced as the primary mode of divine presence."<sup>31</sup> That is, the living forms of this planet must be experienced as modes of divine presence, as voices of the divine. They are to be understood as our primary revelation of the divine, our primary scripture.

To reinforce this position, Berry appeals to Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*, (Prima Pars, q. 47, a. 1). Quoting Aquinas's reply, Berry notes that

because the divine goodness "could not be adequately represented by one creature alone, [God] produced many diverse creatures, that what was wanting to one in the representation of the divine goodness might be supplied by another. For goodness, which in god [sic] is simple and uniform, in creatures is manifold and divided; and hence the whole universe together participates the divine goodness more perfectly, and represents it better than any single creature whatever." From this we could argue that the community of all the components of the planet Earth is primary in the divine intention.<sup>32</sup>

Berry is arguing from Aquinas that God not only desires and chooses to communicate with creation, but that this communication through the various forms of creation ultimately manifests as a participation of the divine. He concludes that the sum of the diversity of creation is the greatest measure of its perfection, since the greatest totality of the divine goodness, which is shared in part by each aspect of creation, most closely approximates divine perfection.

Because the natural world represents "modes of divine presence," notes Berry, we need to "perceive the natural world as the pri-

31. Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*, 120.

32. *Ibid.*, 79.

mary revelation of the divine, as primary scripture, as the primary mode of numinous presence" and as the "primary subject of incarnation."<sup>33</sup> Merton has also emphasized the importance of experiencing the "numinous presence" of the divine, but he has limited this experience to humanity. Merton notes that the awakening of the inner or true self in each person will "not only enable us to discover our true identity 'in Christ' but [will] also make the living and Risen Savior present in us." We come to recognize "the sensation of a 'numinous' presence within us."<sup>34</sup> But Berry extends this encounter with numinous presence to the natural world, which he describes as the first revelation of God, the voice of the divine to creation. Consequently, for Berry, any obliteration of the planet by humanity is a destruction of the sacred presence within that reality; it is to "silence forever a divine voice."<sup>35</sup> Any wanton destruction of the natural world diminishes our experience and knowledge of God, since the way we come to know the world becomes the language by which we come to speak of God. Berry speculates that

If we have powers of imagination, . . . if we have words with which to speak and think and commune, words for the inner experience of the divine, . . . it is again because of the impressions we have received from the variety of beings about us. If we lived on the moon, our mind and emotions, our speech, our imagination, our sense of the divine would all reflect the desolation of the lunar landscape.<sup>36</sup>

If the grandeur of the universe is diminished, then so too is our art, our dance, our language, our imagination; so too are our ways to express a sense of the divine who is grandeur beyond all other. As creation diminishes, Berry cautions, so too does our sense of the divine, to the extent that "if a beautiful earth gives us an exalted idea of the divine, an industrially despoiled planet will give us a corresponding idea of God."<sup>37</sup>

33. *Ibid.*, 11, 37, 105.

34. Merton, "The Inner Experience," 328, 341.

35. Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*, 46.

36. *Ibid.*, 11.

37. Berry, "Economics: Its Effects on the Life Systems of the World," *Thomas Berry and the New Cosmology*, ed. Caroline Richards (Mystic, Conn.: Twenty-Third Publications, 1987) 17. See also Thomas Berry and Thomas Clarke, *Befriending the Earth: A Theology of Reconciliation between Humans and the Earth*, ed. Stephen Dunn and Ann Lonergan (Mystic, Conn.: Twenty-Third Publications, 1991) 8-10.

This connection between our symbols—based upon our appreciation of nature—and the way we are able to speak of God was also apparent to Merton.<sup>38</sup> As we have already seen, Merton contends that nature informs our prayers, acting as cables, medium, and message. Creation has a sacramental quality, a quality also studied by Berry.<sup>39</sup>

Both Berry and Merton recognize that the created world can inform our prayer and language of God. Both consider creation to be a manifestation of the divine, and as such, a way of approaching the infinite mystery. Berry extrapolates these views to propose a functional spirituality for understanding our relationship with the rest of creation; i.e., he extends the implications of these views to engage the ecological crisis of today. To this point, the thought of Merton and Berry shows considerable convergence. However, Berry's notion that creation is our "primary scripture," our first revelation of the divine, was not a concept that Merton had entertained. Yet, one wonders if Merton would be less comfortable with Berry's language—i.e., primary *scripture*—than with the underlying concept that creation is a revelation of the divine mystery and a mode of that numinous presence. In any case, both Berry and Merton suggest that there is a sacred dimension to creation.

#### *Creation Has a Sacred Dimension and Is Good*

Merton notes that, with the exception of humanity, all of creation necessarily constitutes a holiness in the sight of God. Nonhuman creation exists exactly as intended by the love and art of God. Its unique identities and natures, completely fulfilling the will of God, become its sanctity. "Their inscape is their sanctity. It is the imprint of His wisdom and His reality in them."<sup>40</sup> This terminology and the theological reflection it articulates reveal the impressions that the thought of John Duns Scotus and the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins had upon Merton, influences that merit a brief pause for closer consideration.

Scotus wrote that God has given each being its own "*haecceitas*," its own "thisness" or unique identity in the eyes of God, which accords each part of creation its special value and real worth. God's creative love has deemed that *this* particular person or creature should come

38. Kilcourse, *Ace of Freedoms*, 51, 74–75.

39. Merton, *Cables to the Ace*, 7. See also Thomas Berry, "The Passion of Mother Earth," *Passionists* 13:9–14.

40. Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 30.

into existence, and *this* singular identity would be reflected in its "*haecceity*."<sup>41</sup> It was Scotus's notion of *haecceity* which allowed Hopkins to develop his understanding of inscape. Writing in his journal in 1872 as he studied medieval philosophy in the Jesuit novitiate, Hopkins recalled his concept of inscape and remarked:

At this time I had first begun to get hold of the copy of Scotus on the Sentences . . . and was flush with a new stroke of enthusiasm. It may come to nothing or it may be a mercy from God. But just then when I took in any inscape of the sky or sea I thought of Scotus.<sup>42</sup>

Hopkins' description of inscape as "the essential and only lasting thing . . . species or individuality-distinctive beauty of style" recalls Scotus's *haecceitas* and the subtle doctor's contention that each element in God's creative landscape is intrinsically valuable because its unique existence was willed into being by God. Consequently, the inscape of each part of creation, reflecting the creativity of God's intention, becomes its sanctity.

Because the various elements of nonhuman creation perfectly satisfy their identity, Merton remarks, they have no problem. It is humans, whom God has left "free to be whatever we like," who are challenged with finding salvation and sanctity through the discovery of each person's true self. But we are not alone in this task, for we remain sons and daughters of God who are "called to share with God the work of *creating* the truth of our identity."<sup>43</sup> Merton concluded that

the world was made as a temple, a paradise, into which God Himself would descend to dwell familiarly with the spirits He had placed there to tend it for Him. . . . God made the world as a garden in which He himself took delight. . . . The love of God, looking upon things, brought them into being. . . . God creates things by seeing them in His own Logos.<sup>44</sup>

In view of God's continuous presence in creation, and since creation represents an outpouring of the Creator's love, creation is necessarily

41. Philibert Hoebing, "St. Francis and the Environment," (ms. from author) 14–15; later published in *Divine Representation, Postmodernism, and Spirituality*, ed. Ann W. Astelle (New York: Paulist Press, 1994).

42. Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Poems and Prose*, selected by W. H. Gardner (London: Penguin Books, 1988) 126. See also Hoebing, "St. Francis and the Environment," 6.

43. Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 31, 32.

44. *Ibid.*, 290–1.

good. Merton recognizes this goodness of creation.<sup>45</sup> As early as 1948, in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, he vigorously rejected any claim that the created world was intrinsically evil, especially since such a notion cast a shadow of suspicion upon the fact and subsequent doctrine of the incarnation of Christ.<sup>46</sup> Echoing the opening chapters of Genesis, Merton heralds in *New Seeds of Contemplation*, "There is no evil in anything created by God. . . . The world and everything made by God is good."<sup>47</sup>

Thomas Berry shares this understanding of creation as sacred and good, and also comments on its continuing relationship with the divine. Berry reminds us that "the divine always appears in some embodiment; no one ever worshipped matter as matter. Whatever is worshipped is seen as a mode of divine presence."<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, with perhaps the exception of the modern era, humanity has generally tended to be aware of an all-pervading mysterious power present within the universe. We have tended to believe that there is an ineffable, pervasive presence of the divine in the world about us. And while every form of existence is subsequently considered to be a mode of divine presence, we recognize that each existence is not itself divine; there is a distinction and difference between the two. The planet itself and every other existence, while awesome, intrinsically valuable, and a sacred community in its own right, are not specifically divine; there is a difference between the sacred and the divine. Berry explains, however, that "if there were a difference in the sense of separation, the created world would not be. I could not exist except for a divine presence."<sup>49</sup> Without God, there simply is no world, no creation.

Sallie McFague arrives at the same conclusions as Berry and Merton, but travels that journey based upon her model of the universe as the body of God. If the universe is the body of God, then divine embodiment as the universe makes all embodiment in that universe sacred, because the universe is a place where God is present. The various bodies of creation, as the visible signs or sacraments of God's invisible grandeur, take on a sacred quality. They are a means through which God can become sacramentally present to us. Such bodies are therefore

45. Thomas Merton, "Poetry and Contemplation: A Reappraisal," *Commonweal* 59 (1958) 89.

46. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 85.

47. Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 21, 24.

48. Berry and Clarke, *Befriending*, 19.

49. Berry and Clarke, *Befriending*, 19; cf. 10. See also Thomas Berry, "Creative Energy," *Cross Currents* 37:2-3 (1987) 179.

to be valued both as manifestations of the divine in an incarnated world and as a means through which we might seek an experience of union with God. The natural world is then understood to be "a concern of God and a way to God rather than limiting divine activity to human history."<sup>50</sup> The nonhuman dimension of the universe is subsequently too sacred and valuable to be desecrated; humans must live by an ecological ethic.

Once again our three interlocutors do not hold significantly different understandings of the sacredness of creation. The fundamentals are similar. Admittedly, both Berry and McFague employ a recognition of the sacredness of creation to address consciously the world's ecological status in a way that Merton has not. However, the reasons Berry and McFague believe that they can hold these positions mirror the fundamental concepts already found in Merton's works.

But before any further comparisons can be suggested, it is necessary to delve more deeply into Merton's christology. It is arguably impossible to comprehend this monk's life without discussing his understanding of our relationship with Christ. That relationship is central to Merton's identity and therefore to any appreciation of his thoughts. I will focus on the aspects of his christology that might suggest how he would speak to today's ecological issues.

## Christology

### *Centrality of Christ*

Merton asserted that "God's revelation of Himself to the world in His Incarnate Word forms the heart and substance of all Christian mystical contemplation."<sup>51</sup> "Faith in Christ, and in the mysteries of His life and death, is the foundation of the Christian life and the source of all contemplation."<sup>52</sup> It is through emptying ourselves in Christ, and in the discovery of who we are in Christ, that we arrive at our true self—the self that is one with God through Christ.<sup>53</sup> This understanding was

50. McFague, *The Body of God*, 54-55, 83-84, 128, 162, 184-5, 206. See also McFague, "An Earthly Theological Agenda," 95-96.

51. Thomas Merton, *The Ascent to Truth* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1951) 131.

52. Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 151-2.

53. Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968) 17-19.

central to Merton's writing and essential to the way he sought to engage life. He concluded that "whatever I have written . . . can be reduced in the end to this one root truth: that God calls human persons to union with Himself and with one another in Christ."<sup>54</sup>

Such a christocentric perspective can also be found in the earlier writings of Thomas Berry. In "Christian Humanism: Its New Universal Context" (1968), Berry states that

The world of man is a Christian world. There is no non-Christian world. Christianity is an absolute inseparable from human existence itself. The People of God is mankind. It is not proper to define the People of God as the church in the narrow sense of the word. . . . There are . . . more or less developed Christians.<sup>55</sup>

As far as Berry is concerned, if Christ is the source of all that is in creation, and the numinous reality ever present in cosmogenesis, and additionally the goal of creation, then the world is a Christian world. On a universal, macrophase level, Christianity is identified with "that which bears an identity with man's total spiritual and human formation . . . ; it infolds the entire world of man."<sup>56</sup> On a more microphase level, Christians are those who are baptized and institutionalized into the Christian churches, yet who bear within themselves this universal dimension, even if they are not aware of it.

Berry distinguishes between a universally Christian world within the context of Christ's presence in the world and a universally Christian world within the context of the Christian faith, particularly when this manifests within a specific individual. Berry states that "the Body of Christ is ultimately the entire universe. Otherwise neither the incarnation nor the redemption is complete."<sup>57</sup> Consequently, for Berry, there is no non-Christian world.

54. Thomas Merton, "Concerning the Collection in the Bellarmine College Library—A Statement, November 18, 1963," *Bulletin of the Merton Studies Center* (1971) 1:3. Quoted in George Kilcourse, "Pieces of the Mosaic, Earth: Thomas Merton and the Christ," *The Message of Thomas Merton*, ed. Patrick Hart (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1981) 129.

55. Thomas Berry, "Christian Humanism: Its New Universal Context," *Riverdale Papers* (Riverdale, N.Y.: Riverdale Center for Religious Research, 1968) 2:2.

56. *Ibid.*, 5.

57. Thomas Berry, "The Third Mediation: The Christian Task of Our Time," *Riverdale Papers* (Riverdale, N.Y.: Riverdale Center for Religious Research, 1979) 6:4.

Having recognized the centrality of Christ in the thought of both Merton and Berry, it is necessary to consider what role christology might play in the formulation of contemporary eco-theological thought. With this in mind, an overview of Merton's perspectives on the incarnation, the transformation of creation by Christ, and the cosmic Christ will be coupled with similar explorations of these same perspectives in eco-theological works.

### *The Incarnation*

In *Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton's Christ*, George Kilcourse has observed that during the course of Merton's life, the monk's christology evolved through various stages—from a descending christology bordering on Docetism to a more integrated christology that included the fuller mystery of immanence-with-transcendence. He increasingly explored and experienced the kenotic dimensions of Christ's incarnation, discovering Christ in the "weakness and defencelessness" of both himself and the wider world.<sup>58</sup>

Gradually Merton's entire life felt the impact of his growing awareness of the humanity of Jesus, the mystery of the crucifixion, and the "groaning in travail" of all of creation (Rom 8:22). As a result, Merton's quandary was no longer to free his true self from his false self to be resolved within the comfortable confines of an abstract theory. Its resolution demanded that personal experience be contextualized and lived within the mystery of the incarnation. Because of that incarnation, Merton noted, humanity enjoyed an intimate and inseparable unity with Christ, despite its weakness and failings.

[The] mystery of our vocation [is] . . . that the love of my man's heart can become God's love for God and men, and my human tears can fall from my eyes as the tears of God because they well up from the motion of His Holy Spirit in the heart of His incarnate Son.<sup>59</sup>

For this reason, humanity can accept its imperfections, seeking to be transformed through contemplation, so that the "ineffable and

58. Kilcourse, *Ace of Freedoms*, 4-9.

59. Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1958) 124, as quoted in Kilcourse, *Ace of Freedoms*, 103; cf. 27, 91-92, 102.

indefinable light of Christ" might penetrate its darkness.<sup>60</sup> Because of the dynamics of the incarnation, humanity can realize its divinization and overcome the failings of the modern world that challenge it.<sup>61</sup>

By virtue of Christ's entry into creation, Merton declared he was joyful to be a member of the same race in which God chose to become incarnate. Writing in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, a rather ecstatic Merton declares:

It is a glorious destiny to be a member of the human race, though it is a race dedicated to many absurdities and one which makes many terrible mistakes: yet, with all that, God Himself glorified in becoming a member of the human race. . . . I have the immense joy of being *man*, a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate.<sup>62</sup>

The contemplative monk was no longer turning his back on a despicable world. "The whole illusion of a separate holy existence [sealed within a monastic enclosure] is a dream."<sup>63</sup> In self-deprecating humor the reformed Merton notes in *Contemplation in a World of Action* that

due to a book I wrote thirty years ago, I have myself become a sort of stereotype of the world-denying contemplative—the man who spurned New York, spat on Chicago, and tromped on Louisville. . . . This personal stereotype is probably my own fault, and it is something I have to try to demolish on occasion.<sup>64</sup>

Merton had come to believe that the good God had begun with creation was perfected through the incarnation. God's love, which had not only initiated creation and destined Christ's entry into historical time, was further expressed when that entry was realized in Jesus of Nazareth. Creation, coming forth from God, is transfigured in Christ, so that "all things manifest Christ and God's goal for creation."<sup>65</sup>

Berry shares Merton's appreciation of the magnitude of the incarnation. Berry describes the incarnation of Christ into cosmic history

60. Thomas Merton, *The Monastic Journey*, ed. Patrick Hart (Kansas City, Mo.: Sheed, Andrew & McMeel, 1977) 20–21.

61. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964) 176–83. See also Kilcourse, *Ace of Freedoms*, 98, 120.

62. Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 157. (Merton's emphasis.)

63. *Ibid.*, 156; cf. 19, 51, 156–8.

64. Merton, "Contemplation in a World of Action," 376.

65. Kilcourse, *Ace of Freedoms*, 64; cf. 51.

as "the greatest revolution in the human order, the moment of the total recreation of man."<sup>66</sup> This is an event of such magnitude that Berry claims that Christianity itself has not grasped its full revolutionizing import. Had it done so, he insists, it would not have spent so much energy emphasizing the need for humanity to be redeemed from this world. It would have celebrated the entry of Christ into cosmic history and the immanence of the divine in the world, an immanence resident in a divine-human-nature communion. Indeed, Christianity would have espoused a more positive attitude toward the planet. For "if God has desired to become a member of the earth community, man himself should be willing to accept his status as a member of the same community."<sup>67</sup> If Christianity were to adopt such a positive perspective, and if it were to bring a fuller appreciation of the incarnation into its daily life, then, Berry concludes, the solutions to the planetary problems that beset humanity might be found in the context of a world pregnant with the presence of Christ. Humanity would come to realize that the incarnation brought divine presence to all aspects of creation.

McFague also extends the implications of the incarnation to this wider vision. She argues that "the primary belief of the Christian community, its doctrine of the incarnation [can] . . . be radicalized beyond Jesus of Nazareth to include all matter. God is incarnated in the world."<sup>68</sup> McFague reminds us that this is not a new understanding within the Christian tradition, since certain early Christian thinkers such as Origen held that the cosmos was "animated by the Word-Soul or the Logos of God," and that divine immanence pervaded all of the natural order, including nonhuman life forms.<sup>69</sup> Thus, God is present through the incarnation in every being of creation, and not only in those who hear the word. All of the cosmos subsequently becomes the dwelling place of God. Through this incarnation, McFague insists, "the entire universe is expressive of God's very being."<sup>70</sup> Matter is no longer inanimate substance, but throbs with the spirit of God.

66. Thomas Berry, "The Christian Process," *Riverdale Papers* (Riverdale, N.Y.: Riverdale Center for Religious Research, 1976) 4:8.

67. Berry, "The Third Mediation," 5.

68. McFague, *The Body of God*, xi.

69. *Ibid.*, 35. See also Sallie McFague, "Imaging a Theology of Nature: The World as God's Body," *Liberating Life*, ed. Charles Birch and others (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1990) 211–2.

70. McFague, "Imaging a Theology of Nature," 211.

It is worth noting that McFague is not suggesting an animistic view of creation, because she is not claiming that each part of the universe is animated through its own means. Nor is she saying that each being is a god; rather, that each being can be considered to be a means by which God becomes present. She recognizes the power of God in each aspect of creation, not each being as independently powerful. God empowers or animates creation, but creation is not self-animated.

While Merton, Berry, and McFague agree on the fundamental importance and magnitude of the incarnation, the latter two push that doctrine into a less anthropocentric realm. While they expand our understanding of the incarnation in order to propose an ecological ethic, they do so by drawing upon the same convictions that Merton held. In fact, the wider vision of McFague's reflection on the incarnation is at least suggested in Merton's comments on the "transfiguration" of creation by the incarnation.

#### *Creation Is Transformed Through the Incarnation of Christ*

With a profound awareness of the impact of the incarnation upon all of creation, and a deep appreciation of the sacramentality of the cosmos, Merton relished the presence of the divine mystery pregnant in the paradisaal world about him. For this contemplative monk, creation is transformed and reawakened by the presence of Christ. "The world *has* been transformed and illuminated" by and in the resurrection light, which is "in all things, in their ground, not by nature but by gift, grace, death and resurrection."<sup>71</sup> Once again readers of Merton encounter his affirmation of the goodness of creation. Just as he had affirmed creation's intrinsic goodness in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton restates his case in 1959:

In Christ the world and the whole cosmos has been created anew (which means to say restored to its original perfection and beyond that made divine, totally transfigured). . . . If God is "all in all," then everything is in fact paradise, because it is filled with the glory and presence of God, and nothing is any more separated from God.<sup>72</sup>

71. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, selected and edited by William H. Shannon (New York: New Directions, 1985) 644.

72. *Ibid.*, 566. Quoted in Kilcourse, *Ace of Freedoms*, 202.

While acknowledging the influence of Aquinas, Scotus, Bonaventure, and Dante, Merton restates this recurring theme in "Contemplation in a World of Action": in the work of these authors "we see a harmonious synthesis of nature and grace, in which the created world itself is an epiphany of divine wisdom and love, and redeemed in and by Christ, will return to God with all its beauty restored by the transforming power of grace."<sup>73</sup>

The fact that creation is transformed through the incarnation of Christ is clearly a consistent theme in Merton's work. But to speculate on how this transformation of the world might have eventually influenced Merton's apprehension of nature and the ecological challenges that presently beset us, I would argue that it is necessary to link his understanding of incarnation and this transformation with his thoughts on the cosmic Christ.

#### *The Cosmic Christ*

Two sources greatly influenced Merton's understanding of the cosmic Christ: the theology of Duns Scotus and the writings of the Greek Fathers.

Influenced by Scotus's notion that the incarnation was not primarily necessary because of sin, but was essentially inevitable because of God's love, Merton came to resonate with the subtle doctor's view that the cosmic Christ was not a postscript to the creative action proceeding forth from the mind of God. Instead, the cosmic Christ was God's first thought, forming the paradigm of creation. Creation, which was formed by the word and continues to manifest the word, is returned to full freedom through the additional epiphany of God's love in the incarnation of Jesus the Christ.<sup>74</sup> Philibert Hoebing, a Franciscan commentator on Scotus, recalls that the latter's belief in the absolute primacy of Christ meant that "every creature that comes from the creative act of God is marked by Christ and for Christ. Every individual is dignified by its relationship to Christ, who is the first of God's creations (cf. Colossians 1:15-20)."<sup>75</sup>

Drawing from the works of the Greek Fathers, Merton observed that from the beginning of time, God has permeated all of creation.

73. Merton, "Contemplation in a World of Action," 379.

74. Kilcourse, *Ace of Freedoms*, 31-32, 64, 110.

75. Hoebing, "St. Francis and the Environment," 17.

"God is everywhere. His truth and His love pervade all things."<sup>76</sup> He learned from these patristic theologians that even prior to the existence of humanity, Christ was the cosmic mediator who would additionally mediate the inclusion of all of humanity "in Himself in His Incarnation." Because humanity was intentionally created in the image of God, it was "already potentially united with the Word of God." Furthermore, God had "decided from all eternity to become man in Jesus Christ."<sup>77</sup> Biblical references such as Paul's depiction of Christ as the firstborn of all creation through whom all things in heaven and on earth were created also contributed cosmic elements to Merton's christology (see Col 1:15-17).

Similar "cosmic Christ" themes appear in the work of Berry. Berry argues that Christians need to "move from an excessive concern with the individual Jesus [of history] to the cosmic Christ in terms of St. Paul's Letter to the Colossians, [and] . . . the prologue of St. John's Gospel. This is the macrophase mode of the Christ reality."<sup>78</sup> That is, since the world originates in, through, and by Christ—the principle of intelligibility, the Word who is the creative context of all existence—there has been a Christ dimension to developmental time from time's very inception. The story of Christ is the story of the universe, not merely the story of a certain individual who lived at a particular historical period. Christ was not simply added to the cosmic history at some point fifteen billion years into its evolution. Christ has been part of the history of the universe prior to the emergence of humanity. According to Berry:

The Christ reality as this numinous reality [guiding creation] is there from the beginning. In other words, all things emerge into being within this numinous context. . . . Only after the experience of the Incarnation and of the gospels could we have the name [of Christ] functioning in this way. It is our way of identifying something that has been there from the beginning. . . . Anything that was created was created in that context.<sup>79</sup>

Therefore, Christ is part of irreversible, cosmological, developmental time, not merely human, historical time. In Berry's eco-theological un-

76. Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 151.

77. Thomas Merton, *The New Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1961) 134-6.

78. Berry and Clarke, *Befriending*, 77.

79. *Ibid.*, 78.

derstanding, Christ is a continuous part of creation history, and Jesus the Christ is the microphase mode of the macrophase or cosmic Christ.

Therefore, the *redemptive* dimension of Christ, while not to be undervalued, is not the whole story; the *creative* dimension of Christ must also be considered. When we become more aware of this latter aspect, Berry notes, we recognize that "there is a Christ dimension integral to the numinous dimension of the universe" throughout the course of cosmic history. Christ is revealed to us in the universe; the natural world becomes our primary scripture, our first revelation of the divine, the context within which we can experience the divine manifestation.

In and through the earth, Berry claims, humanity is able to experience community with the entire cosmic process. If the universe were different in any way, then we would conceivably be different as well. The universal must be what it is for us to be individually what we are; change any part of cosmogenic history and we would be different today. Therefore, everything has its individual or microphase mode, as well as its cosmic or macrophase context. The cosmos is consequently represented in us just as we are a part of the cosmos; there is necessarily a cosmic, macrophase dimension to the human that reflects our participation within the order of the universe. The cosmic Christ, who acts as both the numinous source of creation and the mysterious guiding presence within cosmogenesis, is additionally the point of convergence toward which the earth process is striving.<sup>80</sup>

As a consequence of these features of the cosmic Christ and our growing awareness of community with the rest of the universe, Berry believes that humanity is moving toward cosmic consciousness and a closer unification with the divine. As humanity continues in cosmogenic evolution toward ever increasing complexification and unification, we move beyond individual self-reflective human consciousness toward cosmic consciousness. We are moving toward a fuller union with the cosmic Christ. Berry also asserts that this new collectivity is not limited to the human. Instead, the cosmic person will become "in a special way the realization of the fullness of the earth, the goal of

80. *Ibid.*, 12, 73-76. When speaking, Berry sometimes refers to Carl Sagan's humorous yet insightful comment that it takes 15 billion years of cosmic history to make apple pie. Apple pies could not have existed prior to recent history. Their existence has required 15 billion years of cosmogenesis to unfold in just the way it has.

historical development" at the end of the cosmic process.<sup>81</sup> For most eco-theologians, this heroic journey toward this point of convergence in the cosmic person is not a spiritual journey of humanity alone, but the journey and story of the earth through its multiple transformations. The cosmic person of Christ has been present throughout the entire evolutionary emergence of the universe, present "in those elementary forms that are constantly striving toward their more complete fulfillment in the transforming experience toward which the cosmic process is moving."<sup>82</sup> It is this entire collective of cosmic evolution, not just humanity, that has been emerging and transforming toward an ultimate goal in Christ. Therefore, increasing unification with the cosmic Christ will involve all elements of the cosmos, not just the human dimension.

Merton also reflected upon increasing unification with Christ, but tended to limit his consideration to humanity alone. In "The Inner Experience," written in 1959 and revised intermittently but not published until after his death, Merton asserts that the resurrection and ascension of Christ permits the divinization of every person into the likeness of Christ through the action of the Holy Spirit. Revealing once again how the Greek Fathers influenced his work, Merton declares that through the mystery of the hypostatic union of Jesus Christ, the gap between God and humanity is bridged, allowing us to experience "our oneness with Christ" and to recognize "ourselves as other Christs." In fact, "God Himself must become Man, in order that in the Man-God, man might be able to lose himself as man and find himself as God."<sup>83</sup> Merton's bold statement admonishes each of his readers to seek his or her own "true inner face" or authentic self so that they might each discover their unique and true identity situated within the reality of God. For as humanity lost its sense of being one with the Creator and the rest of creation subsequent to the fall from paradise, humanity became an exile in the world. Its return to the true sense of being requires a return to its true identity in God.<sup>84</sup> And, Berry might add, humanity's return to its true sense of being also requires a reappreciation of our

81. *Ibid.*, 17.

82. *Ibid.*, 26.

83. Thomas Merton, "The Inner Experience," 327, 326. See also Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 157; cf. 150–51, 156.

84. Merton, "The Inner Experience," 325.

place within God's creation and a reengagement of the divine presence permeating all that is.<sup>85</sup>

During Merton's lifetime, the important consequences of viewing time as irreversible, evolutionary, and cosmological were not as developed as they would become in this last decade. Time was still primarily understood from within a human, historical perspective. The new understanding of time, emerging from astronomic sciences, was far from popular knowledge; few spoke of cosmic physics and the evolution of galaxies and planets. So it is not surprising that Merton did not engage Christ's cosmological dimension as much as he explored Christ's human incarnation. An understanding of irreversible, cosmological time is as necessary for grasping this fuller cognizance of the cosmic Christ as an understanding of the cosmic Christ is indispensable for probing the deeper meaning of irreversible, cosmological time. The two are interdependent.

But even if a new context has emerged for understanding the cosmic Christ, the foundational principles for our understanding of that dimension of christology are still to be found in Scripture and the works of Duns Scotus and the Greek Fathers, among others. Merton brought this foundational wisdom into dialogue with the context and issues of his day. Berry employs this same foundation within a contemporary, scientific understanding of the cosmos in order to address the present ecological crisis. Merton and Berry were writing for somewhat different eras, but each spoke to the important challenges of their time in order to reveal the deeper meaning of existence.

These dimensions of christology—the incarnation, the transfiguration of creation, and the cosmic Christ—have also influenced the formulation of eco-theological thought. Both Merton and contemporary theologians apply these perspectives to the issues before them. And in many respects they come to similar conclusions. However, the eco-theologians' reflections upon christology have caused them to push our understanding of the relationship among God, humanity, and the rest of the created world to new horizons; their reflections have drawn them to conclusions and consequences that Merton had not yet reached. Considering Merton's tendency to "push back the

85. Thomas Berry, "The Christian Process," *Riverdale Papers* (Riverdale, N.Y.: Riverdale Center for Religious Research, 1976) 4:19.

frontiers,"<sup>86</sup> one can only wonder how his evolving spirituality would have lead him to confront today's ecological issues.

### Some Closing Thoughts

There are many more parallels between the thought of Thomas Merton and Thomas Berry, thoughts that Berry extends to a critique of our ecological crisis. Included among these are their shared discomfort with the technological, consumeristic focus of our society (what Berry labels as our technozoic era of Wasteworld), the primacy given to economics over social justice, the lack of mystical experience in the lives of people, our stubborn attachment to paradigms that have failed (Berry's "paradigm addiction"), and our autism to the rest of creation. Such parallels and their implications might be explored further. However, an additional common thread relates closely to our current discussion, although it is not stated within a specifically theological context.

In 1968, Merton's essay "The New Consciousness" was published in *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*. In that discussion, using categories Berry would also later adopt, Merton concludes that

Christian consciousness today . . . will doubtless have to meet the following great needs of man: *First*; His need for community . . . with his fellow man. This will also imply a deep . . . seriousness in approaching those critical problems which threaten man's very survival as a species on earth. . . . *Second*; Man's need for an adequate understanding of his everyday self in his ordinary life. . . . Man needs to find ultimate sense here and now in the ordinary. . . . *Third*; Man's need for a whole and integral experience of his own self on all its levels, bodily as well as imaginative, emotional, intellectual, spiritual.<sup>87</sup>

These categories, although developed only for consideration of the human condition, reflect the three features of cosmic ordering that Berry has identified as a principle law of the universe, namely, community, subjectivity, and diversity. Berry argues that these three governing principles have directed the evolution of the universe from its

86. Jean Leclercq, "The Evolving Monk," *Thomas Merton, Monk*, ed. Patrick Hart (Garden City, N.Y.: Image Books, 1976) 102.

87. Thomas Merton, "The New Consciousness," *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968) 30.

explosive origin from the primal singularity fifteen billion years ago to the shaping of the earth and its present life forms. He notes that "every reality of the universe is intimately present to every other reality of the universe and finds its fulfillment in this mutual presence," although humanity has not adequately recognized its communion with the natural world. Second, each individual reality enjoys a mysterious interior depth that both determines its unique subjectivity or self and "enables each articulation of the real to resonate with that numinous mystery that pervades all the world." Finally, "reality is not some infinitely extended homogeneous smudge." Rather, reality is comprised of unrepeatable and irreplaceable unique articulations on a multitude of levels, which collectively comprise an integrated whole.<sup>88</sup>

While Merton is considering the elements that would constitute a Christian consciousness so that people might acquire a more mystical appreciation of creation and develop a more contemplative way of being, Berry is recognizing the principles that not only define the emergent properties of cosmogenesis, but also form the context for humanity to experience the mystique of the created world. If people were to experience such a mystique, Berry believes, humanity would be less inclined to partake in practices that devastate the planet and any of its inhabitants. While Merton's considerations are primarily focused on needs and mysticism for the human, Berry is providing a cosmological context and mystique of nature that integrates human action and reflection into a broader ecological perspective.

Rather than have his list appear to be too focused on the self, Merton pauses to suggest a fourth need for modern humanity. He contends that humanity must move beyond its "inordinate self-consciousness, [its] monumental self-awareness" in order that it might "enjoy the freedom from concern that goes with being simply what [it] is"—i.e., simply being, centered on God.<sup>89</sup>

Berry would undoubtedly welcome Merton's perspectives and recognize the common elements that they share. In fact, Berry has commented on one such mutual interest. In his *Riverdale Papers*, he wrote an essay entitled "Thomas Merton: His Interest in the Orient," in which Berry "pays tribute" to the way that Merton "mediated the difference between the Western prophetic and Eastern contemplative traditions, and thus enabled Christianity to emerge more completely

88. Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*, 44–46, 105–7.

89. Merton, "The New Consciousness," 31; cf. 24.

from its tribal context and enter more fully into the universal society of mankind."<sup>90</sup> As a recognized scholar on the Orient, having taught on these matters at Columbia, St. John's, and Fordham universities, Berry was well situated to review Merton's works on the spiritual traditions of the oriental world, namely: *Mystics and Zen Masters*, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, and *The Way of Chuang Tzu*. Berry applauds Merton's awakening to the spiritual traditions of the East in order to forge a more comprehensive spirituality that would facilitate humanity's attainment of fuller and truer being. He notes that Merton's reflections "assist in bringing about a sacralized universe, to enable the world to be in its full sense."<sup>91</sup> By entering into the mystique of the ordinary, Berry contends that Merton "sought an even deeper immersion in this realm of the sacred, in the silence beyond speech." As one who emphasizes the manifestation of the divine within the elements of the earth, Berry would tend to welcome Merton's appreciation of the sacredness and goodness of creation.

Were Merton alive today, it is plausible that his evolving spirituality would have brought him to many of the same conclusions as Berry. For example, Merton found certain aspects of Teilhard de Chardin's writings appealing, and Teilhard has strongly influenced Berry's cosmological constructions. Merton commended Teilhard's cosmic mystique and agreed with the Jesuit that "material things . . . are indispensable for our service and knowledge of Christ. The Lord not only manifests Himself to us in material Creation, He even gives Himself to us in matter sanctified and sacramentalized. . . . It is important to notice the sublimely eucharistic heart of the spirituality of Teilhard de Chardin."<sup>92</sup> Indeed, Merton echoes Teilhard's understanding of the evolution of matter when he asserts that "after a long precarious evolution matter has reached the point, in man, where it can become fully aware of itself, take itself in hand, control its own destiny."<sup>93</sup> This Teilhardian reference is also evident in Berry's claim that "the human is that being in whom the universe reflects on . . . itself . . . in its own unique mode of conscious self-awareness."<sup>94</sup> Further-

90. Thomas Berry, "Thomas Merton: His Interest in the Orient," *Riverdale Papers* (Riverdale, N.Y.: Riverdale Center for Religious Research, 1978) 5:17; cf. 3.

91. *Ibid.*

92. Thomas Merton, "The Universe as Epiphany," *Love and Living* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1979) 177.

93. Merton, "Contemplation in a World of Action," 382.

94. Berry and Clarke, *Befriending*, 21.

more, Berry claims that the Earth seems to have "given over to the mindsphere [noosphere] the major share of directing the course of earth development."<sup>95</sup> The parallels among Teilhard, Merton, and Berry seem quite clear on this matter.

These similarities notwithstanding, Merton was uncomfortable with Teilhard's optimistic appraisal of science and evolution; but in this concern he would again find a like-minded companion in Berry. Berry has also been critical of Teilhard's optimism, especially the latter's unconstrained confidence in scientific and technological progress.<sup>96</sup> And when Merton decried that the paleontologist's strong focus on evolution seemed to suggest that even God was becoming, or when Merton was critical of such notions in contemporary process theology, he would once again find a supporter in Berry.<sup>97</sup>

This camaraderie is not surprising. Merton and Berry have been fed by many of the same Christian authors; they both have had a fondness for Eastern literature and mysticism; they have employed similar writing styles and have been more practically and empirically orientated than theoretical. Both of their lives have been driven by meaningful reflection as they have sought to encounter their God in the midst of every moment. While formed by their respective Cistercian and Passionist traditions, they have nevertheless been compelled to engage the issues afflicting their times in order to offer the world a functional spirituality to deal with its malaise.

95. Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*, 19.

96. Berry and Clarke, *Befriending*, 25.

97. *Ibid.*, 28.