

Merton's "True Self" and the Fundamental Option

Mark O'Keefe, O.S.B.

An important development in contemporary Catholic theology is the effort to attend to spirituality as a source for theological reflection. Without denying the importance of the Scriptures or established doctrine, a number of Catholic theologians have argued that spiritual experience—and the theological reflection of contemplatives and mystics on their spiritual experience—is also a valid source for theological reflection.¹ This is no less true in moral theology than in doctrinal theology. In fact, I have argued elsewhere that moral theology and spirituality are intimately interrelated and ought to be understood as mutually enriching.²

The work of Thomas Merton offers a particularly rich source for revealing the power of spirituality and of spiritual experience to illuminate moral reflection and, of course, for moral theology to illuminate spiritual reflection. In this article, we will look at Merton's distinction between the true self and the false self as it sheds light on the somewhat controversial discussion of the fundamental option in contemporary Catholic moral theology. Bringing Merton's insights together with fundamental option theory will help to shed greater light on both and will further illuminate an authentic understanding of the Christian life as dynamic and holistic.

1. See, for example, William M. Thompson, *Spirituality and Christology* (New York: Crossroad, 1991).

2. Mark O'Keefe, *Becoming Good, Becoming Holy: On the Relationship of Christian Ethics and Spirituality* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist, 1995). See also Dennis J. Billy and Donna Lynn Orsuto, eds., *Spirituality and Morality: Integrating Prayer and Action* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist, 1996).

Our reflection will proceed in the following manner: first, we will sketch, in summary fashion, an understanding of the fundamental option, noting an important line of criticism that has been raised in response to it. Second, we will examine Merton's discussion of true self and false self, looking briefly at the relationship between the false self and sin. This will allow us, thirdly, to examine the relationship between Merton's insights and fundamental option theory as they mutually enrich one another in illuminating the dynamic and holistic structure of the Christian life. Finally, we will suggest how Merton's discussion of the relationship of the self and society can help to offer a more broadly social perspective on the fundamental option.

The Fundamental Option

Moral theologians have pursued the discussion of the "fundamental option" largely as a corrective to pre-Vatican II explanations of sin.³ The manuals of moral theology, the moral textbooks used in Catholic seminaries before the council, presented sin in a manner that came to be seen, in light of renewed biblical and theological studies, to be too act-centered, too individualistic, and too legalistic. Fundamental option theory has been used primarily to disclose how it is that sin is rooted at a level deeper than individual acts, that is, in a "fundamental option" against God.

The fundamental option theory has often been advanced by discussion of the biblical concept of the "heart" as the deepest core of the human person and by discussion of psychological insights into the deeper bases of human freedom.⁴ Perhaps the most sustained discussion of the bases of the fundamental option relies on philosophical and theological reflections on freedom, associated especially with the work of theologian Karl Rahner. Rahner identifies two levels of freedom: the level of categorical freedom which involves the conscious ability to choose between individual objects (i.e., the level of "free choice") and the deeper level of transcendental freedom from which categorical freedom flows.⁵ Transcendental freedom is the fundamental ability of

3. See, for example, Eugene Cooper, "The Notion of Sin in Light of the Theory of the Fundamental Option: The Fundamental Option Revisited," *Louvain Studies* 9 (Fall 1983) 363–82.

4. Bernard Häring, *Free and Faithful in Christ* (New York: Seabury, 1978) 1:164–222.

5. Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations* (New York: Crossroad, 1982) 6:178–96; and *Foundations of Christian Faith* (New York: Crossroad, 1982) 90–115.

the human person to dispose himself or herself toward or away from God. It is realized in and influenced by categorical choices between discrete objects but cannot be simply equated with these choices. Moral theologian Josef Fuchs makes a similar distinction, speaking of freedom of choice and a deeper level of freedom which he calls "basic freedom."⁶ Existing at this deep level of the person, the fundamental "option" is not a choice like any other, so that some moral theologians prefer to speak, not of "option" but of fundamental "stance." But, because the exercise of transcendental freedom is dynamic—that is, one's deepest self-disposing seeks an ever-deeper integration of the person's choices—it may be more accurate to speak of a fundamental "orientation" or fundamental "self-disposition."

For moral theologians influenced by Rahner and Fuchs, sin resides at the level of transcendental or basic freedom. True mortal sin involves a fundamental disposition of the person away from God, a life turned away from God. Sinful acts manifest this deeper reality of sin and sap the strength of a positive fundamental option, but sin cannot be simply equated with these acts.

Elsewhere, I have tried to demonstrate that fundamental option theory offers a valuable tool for understanding, not only sin, but the dynamism of the Christian life directed toward God—the life of grace, the journey toward holiness.⁷ While moral theologians have been using fundamental option theory to speak of the deep and tragically dynamic growth of sin in the human person, the theory offers even richer possibilities for enlightening the dynamic growth and integration of the life fundamentally oriented and disposed toward God.

As Rahner has made clear, the exercise of transcendental freedom seeks the integration of the human person around his or her fundamental option. Tragically, for the sinner, this means that the negative fundamental option naturally tends toward the integration of further sinful choices into the sinner's disposition away from God—sin breeds sin. Happily, the human person cannot dispose himself or herself completely and finally in this life, always leaving hope therefore that God's grace may yet be effective in the sinner's lifetime. On the other hand, the positive fundamental option seeks the integration of all of one's choices, and ultimately all of one's desiring, into a self-disposing to-

6. Josef Fuchs, *Human Values and Christian Morality* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1970) 92–111.

7. O'Keefe, *Becoming Good, Becoming Holy*, 44–56.

ward God as the source and goal of all authentic human desire. This insight helps to explain the inherent dynamism, holism, and integration of the Christian life, authentically lived as empowered by grace. Overcoming sinful choices against God, growing in habitual dispositions (virtues) for the goods that can lead us to God, tutoring our desires (asceticism) can all be seen as part of the integrative dynamism of the positive fundamental option, the life directed toward God.

We are in a position, then, to see how the discussion of the dynamic integration of the positive fundamental option can illuminate—and be illuminated by—the Three Ways, a classic tool in the Christian spiritual tradition for understanding the growth of the Christian life. The concept of the Three Ways describes the growth of the Christian life from the battle against mortal sin at the earliest level of the *purgative* way, through the *illuminative* way of growth in virtue “illuminated” by charity, and finally to the *unitive* way in which the Christian life reaches its penultimate goal. In the same way, as we will see, fundamental option theory can illuminate and be illuminated by Merton’s insight into the movement of the Christian life from the tyranny of the false self to the discovery and liberating of the true self.

Of course, fundamental option theory is not without its critics. Among these are Pope John Paul II himself who (without rejecting all forms of fundamental option theory) cautioned, in a 1984 apostolic exhortation,⁸ against certain possible directions in fundamental option theory. His concern has been more recently and more systematically addressed in his 1993 encyclical *Veritatis splendor*.⁹ The Pope’s primary concern is to reaffirm the traditional Catholic teaching that the human person can sin in an individual act, a possibility called into question by locating sin at the level of transcendental freedom rather than in the exercise of categorical freedom in choosing between discrete options. The Pope’s concern is shared by a number of moral theologians who have argued that the whole idea of two levels of freedom smacks of “dualism.”¹⁰ It is not my purpose here to attempt a defense of fundamental option theories of sin (though I suspect that a better nuancing of fundamental option discussions of sin might address the Pope’s concern); but I would like to summarize the other theologians’ charge

8. Pope John Paul II, *Reconciliation and Penance* (Washington: USCC, 1984) 56–64.

9. Pope John Paul II, *Veritatis splendor* (Washington: USCC, 1993) 98–108.

10. See, for example, articles in: William E. May, ed., *Principles of the Catholic Moral Life* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1980).

of dualism, because it provides an instance of how the spiritual tradition and spiritual experience can illuminate a moral theological discussion.

For the critics of fundamental option theory, freedom is understood to entail the exercise of free choice guided by the conscience, for which we hold people morally responsible, whether as worthy of blame or of praise. It is certainly true, say the critics, that some choices are more complete and give greater direction or definition to one’s life—for example, the decision to be baptized as an adult, to marry, to make a major career change, to enter professed religious life. We could speak of these as “fundamental options.” The substantive objection arises when fundamental option theorists want to speak of the existence of some deeper level of freedom as the foundation of free choice. In fact, Rahner, and many who follow his thought, argue that the exercise of transcendental freedom is not fully available to consciousness. One cannot attain a reflexive knowledge of one’s core freedom. It is manifested in our choices but not fully revealed in them. The critics, as mentioned above, argue that this theory of two levels of freedom, one of which is not available to reflexive consciousness, amounts to dualism, a split between the level of free choices and some mysterious deeper inner self that can be distinguished from the choosing self.

In my earlier work I suggested that the existence of an inner self, not fully available to reflexive consciousness, is a presupposition of traditional mystical literature. The human person encounters God, not only in a *manner* that cannot be described adequately in words but also at a *level* too deep for words (reflexive consciousness). The classic notion of a “dark night” of the soul describes an experience in which the person feels nothing, but in which God is, in reality, being encountered at a profoundly deeper level than human consciousness can grasp.

It is precisely at this point that we can usefully examine Merton’s discussions of the true self, discussions that are entirely in line with the classic contemplative and mystical discussions of the depth of the human encounter with God in prayer. The present study began with the observation that theology can benefit from attending to the spiritual experience and theological reflection of contemplatives and mystics. In the exposition that follows, we will suggest that a discussion of fundamental option theory may be entered more profitably from the experience of a spiritual master like Merton than in reaction to an older theology of sin. At the same time, we will suggest that

fundamental option theory, as briefly explicated here, can shed further light on Merton's less systematic theological discussions of self.

True Self—False Self

An important theme that runs through Merton's work is the distinction that he draws between the true self and the false self.¹¹ In various places, Merton uses a variety of terms to describe this distinction.¹² For the true self, he also uses the terms "real," "inner," "spiritual," and "deepest most hidden" self. He also speaks of the false self as an "external," "illusory," "smoke" or "superficial" self. In different contexts, these terms can have slightly different meanings and emphases. For our present purposes, we will take the various terms as synonymous, though it will be important to clarify what it means to speak of the "external" self as "false." Despite the variety of terms, and of real development in his thinking (as analyzed by Anne Carr), Merton's thought on this subject developed along sufficiently consistent lines to allow us to speak of a coherent, if not systematic understanding of the self.

For Merton, the "I" or "ego" of everyday consciousness and decisions is not the human person's true and deepest self. For Merton, Descartes' famous assertion of his "*Cogito ergo sum*" is quite profoundly wrong.¹³ The human person's truest self is the inner and hidden self, the deepest reality of the human person where he or she is truly sustained by a most fundamental union with God as the Ground of being—where, if God were not continually present to us, we would simply cease to exist. For Merton, then, union with God is, in a real way, less "attained" than "discovered" or "awakened" and then accepted and nurtured. This awakening of the true self allows the

11. For more in-depth examinations of Merton's understanding of the self, see Anne E. Carr, *A Search for Wisdom and Spirit: Thomas Merton's Theology of the Self* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988); Thomas M. King, *Merton: Mystic at the Center of America* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1992) 1–36; and at least two works of William Shannon: "Thomas Merton and the Discovery of the Real Self," *Cistercian Studies* 13 (no. 4, 1978) 298–308 and "Thomas Merton and the Quest for Self-Identity," *Cistercian Studies* 22 (no. 2, 1987) 172–89. For a more popular discussion, see James Finley, *Merton's Palace of Nowhere: A Search for God Through Awareness of the True Self* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria, 1978).

12. See Shannon, "The Discovery of the Real Self," 301.

13. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: Dimension Books, 1961) 7–9.

Christian to say with Saint Paul: "I live now, not I, but Christ lives in me" (Gal 2:20).

The "I" or "ego" of everyday consciousness is really an external or superficial self. At this level, it is certainly real enough, as it carries out the daily activities of human living and interactions. In fact, the external self is largely the self of everyday choices, good and bad, and of virtues and even of character. But, more deeply, the external self always retains an illusory character. It carries on the daily activities of life as if it encompasses the fullness of human existence; but, to the degree that it carries on these activities without cognizance of and conformity with the true self grounded in God, it remains cut off from a deeper reality.

Although it can be spoken of as a "false" self in the sense of being sinful; more basically, the false self is more superficial and illusory than essentially evil.¹⁴ Although the illusion of the primacy and separate existence of the external self is the result of original sin, it is not sinful in itself but simply not ultimately or deeply real. Still, personal sin, for Merton, starts with this external or illusory self, as it seeks to construct an edifice of pleasure, honor, and power to shore up its illusory existence. The false self wants to exist as if it were autonomous, as if the human person's deepest identity were not the self grounded in and united with God. This search for an illusory existence is the root of real, personal sin.¹⁵

For Merton, the dynamic of the Christian life can be described as the movement from the illusory reign of the false self to the discovery and awakening of the true self. This awakening is possible only because Christ first reaches out to us, working to unite us with him.¹⁶ Merton equates this life movement with the patristic and monastic understanding of the movement from image to likeness and with the effort to attain purity of heart, so much the goal of the monastic tradition.¹⁷ Perhaps we might also equate it with the task of ongoing conversion that stands at the heart of the monastic and, more basically, of the Christian tradition. Our present study attempts to demonstrate that we may also helpfully speak of the movement from false to true

14. *Ibid.*, 295–6.

15. *Ibid.*, 33–5. See also Carr, *Search for Wisdom*, 13; Finley, *Palace of Nowhere*, 35.

16. Thomas Merton, *The New Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy, 1961) 232.

17. Thomas Merton, *The Silent Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1957) 1–26.

self as the ongoing integration of the Christian's positive fundamental option.

It is clear that, for Merton, the true or real self is not fully available to consciousness.¹⁸ The real self cannot be examined like an object from outside. He speaks of the true self metaphorically as a "shy, wild animal" that can be glimpsed only in stillness and calm.¹⁹ For the Christian, therefore, the real self represents his or her life "hidden with Christ in God"; it shares in the hiddenness of God. This explains why, for Merton, the true self is "awakened" or "discovered," not in active self-reflection but in contemplation. Further, the hiddenness of the true self also explains, in part, Merton's interest in Zen meditation as an approach to an experience of "pure awareness" of the true self.²⁰

Fundamental Option and True Self

George Kilcourse has suggested a possible connection between Merton's discussion of the true self and fundamental option theory.²¹ Our brief exposition of both will now allow us to explicate the connection, though it will require some further clarification of each.

For William Shannon, Merton's "real self" can be understood as the human person's openness to transcendence (Rahner) or as the human capacity for the divine (Dan Walsh).²² Shannon concludes that the real self is "nothing other than the divine call at the core of our being to become one with God and in him with all others. It is the capacity for divinity, the openness to transcendence, that God creates in each one of us. It is the seed of God straining to burst the shell of the superficial self in order to actualize our capacity for the divine."²³ Similarly, Walter Conn, building on the thought of Bernard Lonergan equates the real self with the radical drive for self-transcendence.²⁴

18. Merton, *New Seeds*, 7–8, 279–80. See also Carr, *Search for Wisdom*, 30–1; King, *Mystic at the Center*, 25–8; and Shannon, "The Quest for Self-Identity," 184–5.

19. Merton, "Inner Experience," 5.

20. Carr, *Search for Wisdom*, 41–5. See Thomas Merton, "The Inner Experience (I)," *Cistercian Studies* 18 (1983) 6–9.

21. George E. Kilcourse, *Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton's Christ* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993) 53.

22. Shannon, "The Discovery of the Real Self," 301.

23. *Ibid.*, 308.

24. Walter E. Conn, "Merton's 'True Self': Moral Autonomy and Religious Conversion," *The Journal of Religion* 65 (October 1985) 524–5.

Transcendental freedom is the foundational ability of the human person to affirm his or her own truest purpose as a capacity for divinity precisely by saying "yes" to God. This exercise of transcendental freedom is a "yes" both to God and to our truest self, and the fundamental disposition of self for God is freedom's deepest purpose and the human person's most authentic fulfillment. The positive fundamental option, then, is the exercise of transcendental freedom by which the human person says "yes" to God and "yes" to one's truest self in God. The negative fundamental option is the self-contradictory exercise of fundamental option by which one says "no" to God and therefore "no" to one's truest self. It is to say "yes" instead to the illusory and sinful constructs of the external or false self.

The fundamental option shares in the hiddenness of the true self since it flows from the deepest core of the human person. Neither is available to conscious self-reflection. Rather, the fundamental option reveals itself in concrete exercises of free choice, most especially in the expressions of self-giving love that manifest a self disposed and surrendered to the God who is love.

Merton does not explicate, in any sustained or systematic way, the relationship between the true self and the external self. How is the everyday "I," the conscious self that makes decisions and even grows in virtue related to the deepest and truest reality of the human person? How can the conscious "I" truly be called "illusory" or "false"? Perhaps in recalling the somewhat ambiguous relationship between the transcendental and categorical levels of freedom, we can also shed light on the relationship between the true and the false selves—and vice versa.

The deepest and foundational level of human freedom is the level of transcendental freedom. The level of free choice, the categorical level, is the conscious realization of freedom in the world of discrete objects of choice. The categorical level, then, can be understood as an external manifestation or realization of freedom. It must be assumed that, because of human contingency and limit, not every individual choice is a complete realization of the human person's most fundamental self-disposing; but if human existence were not touched by sin, there would be at least a complete consistency between the two levels. Without sin, the deepest core of the human person and the deepest exercise of human freedom would find a consistent realization in individual free choices. Every individual choice would be in conformity with the authentic self-disposing of the person for God. But because of sin, there is not a complete consistency between the two

levels, as the traditional category of venial sin has suggested—that is, there are sinful choices that are not consistent with, but not completely contradictory to, the heart that is more basically turned toward God.

From this perspective, the conscious “I” and the exercise of free choice are certainly real. The objects of choice are real, and the conscious exercise of freedom in relationship to these objects is real. In itself, the conscious “I” is neither sinful nor even illusory; however, at the level of actual, historical human existence and experience, there is always a split between the deepest core of the human person and this conscious “I.” As Merton suggests, this split is the result of original sin.²⁵ The human person believes himself or herself to be an autonomous “I,” a subject independent of God who, in reality, is the very ground of every human existence. The conscious “I,” then, influenced by sin, becomes caught up in an illusion of autonomous existence. The exercise of free choice too becomes skewed, so that even the growth of virtue as a habitual disposing of freedom’s choosing, good in itself, retains an element of the illusory as long as it is cut off from its deepest meaning in a life directed to God (or, in more traditional Thomistic terms, as long as the development of virtue is not illuminated by charity).

It cannot be said, as Merton sometimes seems to say, that the conscious “I” is in itself false, illusory, or sinful; but Merton is certainly correct that original sin, partnered with the sinfulness encountered in society and confirmed and strengthened by personal sin, leads to the construction of a false, illusory, and sinful self that cannot be fully separated from the conscious “I” in this life.

The movement from the false self to the true self is not a movement of eliminating the conscious “I” but rather of “getting behind” it to its authentic roots in a self, more hidden but more real. It is the recovery of a more authentic unity between the inner and the external selves—or, perhaps, more accurately, it is movement to a more authentic unity realized in the unity of the whole person with God attained in Christ. It is therefore the elimination of the illusion of an existence autonomous from God, and the discovery and the grateful acceptance of a deeper unity with God. The false self—that is, the sin-constructed illusion of an autonomous self—is destroyed. The human person surrenders to God, surrenders to his or her truest self which has its existence only in God.

25. Merton, *New Seeds*, 280.

Fundamental option theory shows how this movement from false to true self is the very dynamic structure of the Christian life. The fundamental option, of course, is not an “option” in the sense of a one-time accomplishment, a once-for-all attainment. It is rather a self-disposing, a dynamic orientation of life in which human persons seek the integration of all their choices, exercises of categorical freedom, into their fundamental self-disposing toward God. The dynamic integration of the fundamental option is none other than the movement toward an ever greater consistency between the person’s most fundamental self-disposing and all of his or her discrete choices. It is therefore the ongoing de-construction of the edifice of the false self and the unifying of the conscious “I” with the person’s deepest self. We can see, along with Merton, that this is fully in line with such traditional concepts as the attainment of purity of heart and the life of ongoing conversion.

True Self and Society

Although it is true that, for Merton, the true self is “discovered” or “awakened” in contemplation, it is no less true that the true self is encountered and realized in self-giving love. The true self discovered in contemplation is revealed to be a self whose fulfillment is realized in love. In fact, as Merton says: “Love is my true identity. Selflessness is my true self. Love is my true character. Love is my name.”²⁶ Merton’s concept, then, does not enshrine solitary contemplation as a goal in itself. As Merton says: “A man cannot enter into the deepest center of himself and pass through that center into God, unless he is able to pass entirely out of himself and empty himself and give himself to other people in the purity of selfless love.”²⁷ The discovery of the true self is realized and authenticated in selfless loving. In this, Merton is consistent with his monastic tradition that sees the salvation of the monastic person to be worked out in the ongoing, daily life of bearing with the burdens and serving one’s brothers (or sisters) in community. In fact, for reasons that will be explained below, Merton is in line with contemplatives whose communion with God have led them to a greater, not lesser, commitment to the service of their brothers and sisters.²⁸

26. *Ibid.*, 60.

27. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1949) 41.

28. See Terry Tastard, *The Spark in the Soul: Four Mystics on Justice* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist, 1989).

In fact, Merton's unfolding of the distinction between true self and false self can help to illuminate the social ramifications of fundamental option theory. In speaking of the fundamental option as the deep self-disposing of the human person, neither the inherently social dimension of the human person nor the Gospel imperative to act for justice is immediately evident. The fundamental option may seem to imply that the ideal of the Christian life is essentially individual or even private. In contrast, Merton's thought, mirrored in his own life, holds together a contemplative ideal and a strong social commitment. His broader discussion of the deeper unity of the true self with other persons and of the tragic social edifice of false selves helps to suggest a broader, social understanding of the fundamental option.

First, in relation to the negative fundamental option, we can see that, for Merton, the illusory edifice of the individual false self has social roots and social ramifications.²⁹ As we have already seen, the weaving of the illusion of an autonomous existence by the external self is the result of original sin. This truly false and sinful self is then the root of personal sin and is further promoted by personal sin. But the construction of the edifice of pleasure, honor, and power in which the individual false self seeks its security has strong social connections. The illusion of the human person autonomous from God is promoted by the sinful elements of society. The constructs of pleasure, honor, pride, and power are appropriated from the tragic and fearful striving of other false selves, spread throughout society and extended through history. The petty and illusory construct of the individual false self contributes to the falsity and illusion already present in society.

The person's fundamental option cannot remain unaffected by the sinful illusion present in society. Certainly, the negative fundamental option, the person turned away from God, promotes the construction of the false self's shell of illusion and sin. The human person turned away from God is a self-contradiction, and the radical insecurity of the false self seeking autonomy from God can only seek security in a world of objects whose protection is ultimately illusory. In a world of sin, the false self finds, not so much allies (for each is seeking for its own individual security alone) but collaborators. In such a world, even the person whose life is fundamentally disposed toward God, feels the attraction of the illusion since no person, after the Fall, is born without the split between the true self and the external self. The positive fun-

29. Carr, *Search for Wisdom*, 73-4.

damental option is always threatened by the world of illusion and falsity constructed over time and extended across society, though the progressive integration of the person's freedom into his or her fundamental disposing creates an ever stronger defense against the temptation to accept the illusory autonomy of the human from God.

Merton's reflections, then, offer valuable insights into a theology of social sin and its relationship to the fundamental option. No less does Merton's thought help us to see the hidden but powerful connection between the true self and every other human person, and therefore between the positive fundamental option and the human community.

The true self, says Merton, grounded and fundamentally united with God, is necessarily and essentially related to every other self. The God who is the ground and sustaining power (the "hidden ground of Love") of my truest and hidden self is no less the ground of every other true self. Human discord and the illusion of individual persons autonomous from God and from one another is part of the illusion of the false self. In reality, the more that men and women are in touch with their truest self, the more that they realize that they are inherently and necessarily related to every other human person in God. Authentic solitude, then, promotes not a spirit of isolation or individualism but of profound connectedness. It is possible for the solitary contemplative to realize his or her unity with other persons far more deeply than people who live in a world of crowds and superficial contacts. The cloistered monastic person can realize a more profound relationship with humanity than the person absorbed in the secular world.³⁰

The positive fundamental option, then, as the disposing of the self toward God and therefore toward my truest self, draws the person more deeply into relationship with other persons. To dispose one's life toward God is to dispose one's life to those other persons whose lives are likewise grounded in God. To say "yes" to my truest self, as dependent on and in relationship with God, is to say "yes" to humanity, to other human persons, and to the human community. The positive fundamental option then is necessarily a commitment to social engagement and not an individual or private relationship with God. The person disposed toward God is disposed to the building up of the

30. See Thomas Merton, "Philosophy of Solitude," in *Disputed Questions* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1953) 163-93; and "Inner Experience," 121-6.

community of all. Merton's famous contemplative insight, while on the corner of Louisville's Fourth and Walnut,³¹ in which he suddenly realized his profound relationship with the people around him, can be understood in this light.

Conclusion

Catholic moral theology seems to be passing out of a period in which its principal concern focused on individual moral issues and the methodologies needed to address those issues. Surely, reflection of this type remains essential if the discipline of moral theology is to offer real guidance when difficult moral decisions must be made. At the same time, however, there seems to be a developing sense that moral theology must also offer a broader framework to give perspective to and to guide Christian living—the broader context in which individual moral decisions can be understood as integral to the person's entire life precisely as a Christian. It is dialogue with Christian spirituality that offers moral theology the language and framework for offering this more holistic and dynamic understanding of the Christian moral life.

One area of controversy in post-conciliar Catholic moral theology has been fundamental option theory which, though discussed principally to explain sin, offers one way in which the holistic dynamism of Christian living can be understood. Summarized above and discussed at greater length elsewhere, I have attempted to demonstrate that spirituality can shed light on certain areas of controversy about fundamental option theory, such as the hiddenness of the exercise of transcendental freedom. More specifically in this article, I have attempted to show that Thomas Merton's distinction between the false self and the true self helps to illuminate the two levels of freedom identified by Rahner as the basis for a good deal of fundamental option thinking. At the same time, moral theology can shed its own light on spirituality, and our discussion has tried to show that the dynamic integration of the Christian life, envisioned by fundamental option theory, can illuminate the movement from the false self to the awakening and liberation of the true self. Further, Merton's social perspective on both the false self and the true self helps us to place fundamental option theory into a broader social context.

31. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Doubleday, 1966) 158.

In conclusion, then, we can offer the following summary: the human person is created as a dynamic capacity for the divine and with a fundamental freedom given by God, most basically, so that we can say "yes" to God, to dispose one's self to God. This is our true self affirming, by the exercise of this basic freedom, its foundational union with God and therefore its own deepest and truest meaning. In a world and in lives without sin, this fundamental self-disposing would be manifest consistently in the choices to be made among the myriad of objects and options encountered in every human life. Each choice and action would be consistent with a deep experience of the communion between and among all people whose truest selves are deeply interrelated in the very Ground of their being.

But, of course, neither our world nor our own lives is ever experienced, in our present existence, as free from sin. Because of original sin, but promoted by social sin and strengthened by personal sin, every human person experiences a disjunction between the deepest reality of the true self grounded in God and the conscious "I" interacting with the external world of other persons, of objects, and of options. The external self quickly becomes a "false" and even a "sinful" self with the construction of edifices of power, success and material possessions that seek to promote an existence autonomous both from the true self and from its foundational union with God. Tragically, every individual false self is built up by the collaboration of other false selves; but, rather than promoting an authentic unity of persons, the interaction of false selves merely promotes an even greater individualism and masks the deeper unity of all persons (and indeed of all of creation) in God.

The task of Christian living (made possible only by grace) is to destroy the edifices of the false self so that the true self in God can be awakened and liberated and so that the foundational unity of all persons can be realized. Experienced most closely in contemplation, the true self is most clearly manifest in self-giving, self-transcending love. All of this is to say that the message of the Cross must become a reality in every Christian life: the false and sinful self that seeks an existence autonomous from God must die, and the true self must be born again in the self-giving love for God and others that is witnessed and made possible by Christ. The true self must be "born again" in Christ so that the Christian can say with St. Paul: "I live now, not I, but Christ lives in me" (Gal. 2:20).

Grounded in a dynamic capacity for the divine, the "yes" of the true self to God seeks an ever-greater integration of the person's choices and actions into this fundamental self-disposing to God. This is to say that the person's fundamental self-disposing seeks a new consistency and coherence between the true self and the external self of the conscious "I" so that all of the person's individual choices are authentic manifestations of the true self. We can say, then, that the fundamental option of the person, rooted in the true self, seeks an integration, integrity, and authenticity within the person and between the person's deepest reality and his or her external choices and actions. With Thomas Merton, we can describe this movement to greater integrity and authenticity as the movement from image to likeness, as the nurturing of true purity of heart, or as the life of ongoing conversion. The Christian life is the graced, integrating movement from the false self built up by sin to the triumph of the true self in Christ, lived out in daily existence in anticipation of our final communion with God in Christ.