

# CRYING WITH A LIVE GRIEF: THE MYSTICISM OF MERTON & TEILHARD COMPARED

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Scatched into one of Thomas Merton's personal notebooks, beneath some remarks about a book by Henri deLubac on Origen, is a poem on this great early Christian theologian, for whom, according to Merton:

. . . All antagonists,  
Bernards and Abelards together, met in this  
One madness for the sweet poison  
Of compassion in this man  
Who thought he heard all beings  
From stars, to stones, angels to elements, alive  
Crying for the redeemer with a live grief.<sup>1</sup>

These closing lines of Thomas Merton's poem characterize a distinctively Christian approach to the meaning of creation and for our ecological concerns of today. Certainly the cosmic dimensions of Origen's famed doctrine of *apokatastasis*, despite its Neo-platonic mode of expression, taking its inspiration from St. Paul's vision of a universe "groaning in expectation" for its redemption in Christ (Romans 8:20-24), also strongly reminds one of Teilhard's "Christogenic" vision of an evolutionary universe in which, in even more radically interpreted Pauline terms, Christ so "fills the

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1. See *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), pp. 640-641.

universe" (Colossians 2:10) that through him God becomes "All in all" (I Corinthians 15:28). Furthermore, I believe that person's own personal resonance to this theme—what poet could not respond to it?—and his nearly decade-long interest in Teilhard's thought, also point to what form a common theme in what otherwise seems to be two distinct mysticisms lived by two very different men of our time. The purpose of this essay is to explore the evidence for and some of the implications of their convergence of spirit if not always of mind.

#### THEMES AND VARIATIONS ON THE HYMN OF THE UNIVERSE

At first glance, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955) and Thomas Merton (1915-1968) would seem to have shared little in common other than both having been born in France, both were ordained into the Catholic priesthood, and both having become widely read writers in our century. Other than these similarities, one could not look for two Catholic writers of more dissimilar temperament, outlook, and even, to a large extent, different interests.

Teilhard, despite his wide range of reading, appears to have been unaware of Merton's existence. Merton, on the other hand, while very much aware of Teilhard's growing posthumous influence, seems to have read very little first hand of Teilhard beyond *The Divine Milieu*. Merton's reflections on Teilhard's spiritual classic of our time were first put together in a paper entitled "The Universe as Epiphany" which aroused the suspicions of his order's censors and which was never to see the light of day until published over ten years after Merton's death in *Love and Living*<sup>2</sup> along with a shorter article, entitled "Teilhard's Gamble," written much later as a review of Henri deLubac's book, *The Religion of Teilhard de Chardin*<sup>3</sup> at the request of the editors of *Commonweal*.

Nevertheless, Merton was exposed to a great deal of Teilhard's thought in discussions with professor friends from Bellarmine College in Louisville. But despite his friends' enthusiasm—or even partly because of it—he told a long-time correspondent, Sr. Thérèse Lentfoehr, in a letter of Feb. 5, 1961 that: "I'll wait until Teilhard is fully published and not misrepresented on one side or the other and when reading him does not imply joining a movement. I still like

2. Thomas Merton, *Love and Living*, ed. by Naomi Burton Stone and Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1979).

3. Henri deLubac, *The Religion of Teilhard de Chardin*, translated by René Hague (New York: Desclée, 1967). Hereafter referred to in the text as *deLubac*.

him." Then Merton adds, in parenthesis, a quote from *The Divine Milieu* that Teilhard borrowed from Galileo: "Eppur si muove!"<sup>4</sup>

"Still it moves!"—the expression is pregnant. Having been forced, as he told Sr. Thérèse, by his superiors to read a rebuttal of Teilhard's ideas by a "second-class theologian," Merton, suffering under severe restrictions upon his own writing, admired Teilhard's spirit in the face of his own censors. Nor could Merton have missed deLubac's quotation of a provocative passage from Teilhard's 1920 "Note on Progress" where common sense (and scientific dogmatism) says "nothing moves," philosophy says that nothing can move and theology that "nothing must move—religion forbids it!"<sup>5</sup> Galileo was forced to officially recant and desist from teaching the Copernican system, but all that could not change the orbit of the earth or the course of nature. Merton's interests may have been less in the realm of the natural sciences than were Galileo's or Teilhard's, but the impact of any reality on philosophy and theology cannot be long ignored.

Thus while in a 1965 letter to Marco Pallis, Merton complains about what he termed "the naïve fascination with Teilhard (though I think there is much that is good in Chardin, along with some grave illusions)"<sup>6</sup> he later commented to June J. Yungblut in a June 1967 letter that among the books on Teilhard sent to him by *Commonweal* was one that was "not after all a very inspiring book and it makes Teilhard look quite unrevolutionary. I don't know if that is the best thing for Teilhard or for the Church" (*HGL*, p. 636). So whatever Merton's reservations may have been, there appears to have been something in Teilhard that struck a sympathetic cord in Merton's heart. We must now listen with an ear tuned to what these harmonies might be.

#### THEOLOGICAL RESONANCES

As Thomas King, S.J. has pointed out in a short article

4. See Merton, *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends*, ed. by Robert E. Daggy (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1989), pp. 237-238.

5. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Future of Man*, translated by René Hague (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), p. 24.

6. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, selected and ed. by William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1985), p. 468. Hereafter referred to in the text as *HGL*.

"Thomas Merton on Pierre Teilhard de Chardin,"<sup>7</sup> that despite his reservations about Teilhard's celebrated and much misunderstood optimism and his enthusiasm for technology—he seems to have been especially appalled by Teilhard's apparently cavalier view of the nuclear bomb—nevertheless Merton shared Teilhard's passion to reground spirituality in the realities of this world. The sense of the oneness of all humanity, or even of the whole universe, with and in the "Body of Christ" is a theme of Teilhard's with which Merton could and did resonate in his own way.

King also cites Merton's love of the East and his predilection for Zen and its apprehension of the "suchness" of things as being Merton's own avenue to the "diaphanous" quality of the universe espoused by Teilhard. And against those who see monastic life as world-denying (as Merton himself largely did in his early days) Merton sees monasticism as living out, in the concrete interaction with the soil, the rootedness of spirit in matter.

Still, Merton seems to more or less confess in letters written to Abdul Aziz and to Rosemary Ruether (See *HGL*, pp. 61 & 498) to have never gotten around to reading Teilhard's major work, *The Phenomenon of Man*. While I suspect Merton would have been bored by this masterwork in what Teilhard called his "ultraphysics", Merton nevertheless grasped its essential message well. Matter and spirit are two sides of the same thing. Spirit is not to be found apart from matter, but in its transformation.

This not only comes through in Merton's earlier essay on "The Universe as Epiphany" but in such remarks as that found in his essay on "Pasternak's Letters to Georgian Friends" where Merton comments on Pasternak's view of man, who "by his work, is integrated into a growing and evolving present, a world that is fully engaged in organic development." Merton then remarks that "this ascesis is remarkably like that which Teilhard developed in *The Divine Milieu* where "by his work man grows with that world into what it is going to be."<sup>8</sup>

Again, Merton, in his commentary and introduction to a new edition of *The Plague* by Camus, contrasts Teilhard's integral view of creation as against the "false supernaturalism" of the "spiritual profiteer" portrayed by the character of the Jesuit Paneloux (*LE*, pp. 214-217.) And in another essay on Camus, "Prophetic Ambiguities:

7. See *The Merton Seasonal* (Vol. 10, No. 4) Autumn 1985.

8. *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, Ed. Patrick Hart (New York: New Directions, 1981), p. 90. Hereafter referred to in the text as *LE*.

Milton and Camus," Merton compares Teilhard's "Mass on the World"<sup>9</sup> to Milton's "hymn to light" in the opening of Part III of *Paradise Lost*—only that "Teilhard resolved (in his own mind) the conflict that makes Milton's Christ ambiguous," something more in line with Tillich's "New Man," although Merton adds that "a less naive reading of Teilhard may certainly help" (*LE*, p. 260).

However, Merton's later article on "Teilhard's Gamble," based on deLubac's book, was much more critical of Teilhard than his initial reaction to *The Divine Milieu* or this fleeting comparison between Milton and Teilhard. In fact, the some sixteen or more pages in a notebook kept by Merton<sup>10</sup> devoted to an analysis of Teilhard's thought, as well as the first versions of the typewritten manuscript for the review article, show that the finished version for *Commonweal* is even more critical than he originally intended.

The first of these additions, which takes up the top half of page 186 of the essay as printed in *Love and Living* (from "In each case..." to the end of the second paragraph) sharpens the comparison between Teilhard and Pascal and their similar attempts to re-center the universe on the uniqueness of humanity in the face of an expanded consciousness of the universe around us. Like Pascal's "wager" (Merton's essay was given the working title "De Lubac on Teilhard", then changed to "The Teilhardian Wager") "Teilhard's Gamble" consists in not seeing individual human freedom, as did Pascal, as the focal point of the universe, but in seeing humanity collectively as responsible for evolution. But unlike Pascal, who wagers that since man *needs* a saving God, that there must be one, "Teilhard gambles on *God's need for man*, since without man God's creative plan cannot be fulfilled." (Emphasis mine.) This leads logically to the incarnation, for

Man has an inescapable inner need to be the locus of the divine epiphany, because in him the universe has at last become conscious of itself. And [now quoting Teilhard

9. The Merton Studies Center, Bellarmine College, Louisville, Kentucky, has a copy of *Hymne de l'univers* sent to Merton and signed by the directress of the Fondation Teilhard de Chardin, Jeanne Mortier. Merton made several small marginal marks in the section containing "Le Messe sur le monde".

10. One of several notebooks devoted to literary criticism by Merton, among the so-called "holographs" kept in the archives of the Merton Studies Center. The pages in question are from notes taken in March-August 1967.

himself] "the universe by structural necessity cannot disappoint the consciousness it produces."<sup>11</sup>

#### A MAJOR DISSONANCE: TEILHARD AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

Or can it? Isn't this "structural necessity" of a redeeming incarnation a bit too neat? Merton's own temperament as well as his own conversion experience seem to have directed his own theological inclinations more in the direction of Karl Barth's more apocalyptic views of a God who redeems through an interruption of human history, through a pure act of "grace" in the sacrifice of Christ than to Teilhard's all but inevitable appearance (in Teilhard's mind at least) of the Christ-Omega at the end of time.<sup>12</sup> Barth is said to have termed the theological emphasis on the incarnation as the act of redemption, as the "Anglican Heresy!" If so, this had to have been Teilhard's major heresy as well.

To Merton, it would seem that this optimistic "wager" of Teilhard combined with his "Scotist"<sup>13</sup> view of the inevitability of the incarnation independent of the Fall and any need for redemption also accounts for Teilhard's presumed tendency to downplay evil. Where Pascal bets on man's individual freedom, Teilhard bets on the species, seeming to overlook its potential for evil. This is where Merton added another sentence to the first draft of his article, specifically:

Teilhard does not seem to notice the wounds of mendacity and hatred which have been inexorably deepened in man by his practice of technological warfare, totalitarianism, and genocide (LL, p. 190).

11. Thomas Merton, *Love and Living*, Ed. Naomi Burton Stone and Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1979), p. 186. Hereafter referred to in the text as LL.

12. See Merton's remark about Teilhard compared to Barth in regard to the Incarnation as revelation in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, (New York: Doubleday, 1966), p. 9. Hereafter referred to in the text as CGB.

13. So-called, despite its Johannine roots and its early adumbration by St. Irenaeus, because of the apparent contrast between the views of St. Thomas Aquinas and John Duns Scotus. Aquinas finally admitted the validity of the Scotist view in his little known *Compendium theologiae* Chapter 201.

Perhaps—or maybe not. Too bad Merton never seems to have read some more of Teilhard's essays such as "The Grand Option" in *The Future of Man*.

One may argue with Merton's assessment of Teilhard on these issues, even Merton hinted that Teilhard has been widely misinterpreted on this score. Merton's strongest remark (the Dec. 10, 1964 letter to Marco Pallis) on what he called Teilhard's "naïve optimism" appears to be qualified a year or so later in a (Apr. 24, 1965) letter to Martin E. Marty where he speaks about "this time when among Catholics one is faced with a choice between an absurdly rigid and baroque conservatism and a rather irresponsible and fantastic progressivism à la Teilhard" (HGL, page 454). It is important that Merton distinguished between Teilhard and the *teilhardians*.

Nevertheless, I would suggest that a more careful rereading of the conclusion of *The Divine Milieu* might have given Merton a different impression, for it is almost apocalyptic in tone. Teilhard stresses that not only does the potential for good increase with humanity's continued evolution, but also the potential for evil as well. A final clash is inevitable. So although Teilhard's celebrated optimum remains—he believed the world would not end until the full potential of evolution is realized—in the end it is an optimum based on the redeeming power of Christ.

Still, Merton rounds off his essay on "Teilhard's Gamble" with the addition of a critical remark largely borrowed from deLubac so the effect that although "Teilhard has made an inspired guess and built upon it a mystique of hope...", he perhaps overestimated his own originality and oversystematized in a "black and white schematization, a naïve polarization of 'yesterday' and 'tomorrow'" (LL, p. 291).

Yes, perhaps so, but this was not Teilhard's intention. Merton, I think, might have seen him in a different light had he lived to see some of Teilhard's later published remarks about his presumed "system." Instead of seeing himself as a theorist or systematizer, Teilhard preferred to think of himself as one whose function is similar to that of a poet or even a musician:

Those who do not hear the fundamental harmony of the Universe which I try to transcribe (fortunately many do) look in what I write for some kind of narrowly logical system, and are confused or angry. Fundamentally, it is not possible to transmit directly by words the perception of a quality, a taste.

Once again, it would be more to my purpose to be a shadow of Wagner than a shadow of Darwin. Taking myself as I am, I see no better course than to strive by all means to reveal Humanity to Men.<sup>14</sup>

#### MYSTIQUE OR MYSTICISM?

Such was Teilhard's assessment of his own vocation and the "mystique" which he himself hoped to inspire. But just as his scientific critics were quick to point out—the British biologist Peter Medawar once dismissed Teilhard's writing as "theological science-fiction"—so too his theological critics were inclined to see him more as a visionary than as a serious professional theologian. For Merton, who longed to hear this "fundamental harmony," these charges meant little. Rather, with his own broadened sense of the mystical dimensions of reality, Merton probed, with the help of deLubac's summary, the more strictly *mystical* implications of Teilhard's thought.

Merton's personal notebook jottings and quotations contain strong indications that he saw Teilhard's "mystique of hope" as more *mystical* than strictly scientific, but it was a "mysticism" that demanded an expanded understanding of that word.

#### A PASSION FOR THE ABSOLUTE

This expanded understanding of mysticism holds true in two ways: the first is regarding the *object* of mystical vision, for despite his own immersion in the mystical artistry of Blake, Merton seems to have first regarded Teilhard's expanded ideas with some skepticism, as evidenced by the occasional insertion of question marks (even double ones) in his notes.

Thus, on the top of the third page of Merton's notes on deLubac's book appears the query "The mysticism of Teilhard??" From this caption there runs an arrow to the middle of the opposite page, where he notes (in underlining) that "for Teilhard '*mysticism...is the science and art of attaining simultaneously and each through the other, the universal and the spiritual.*'" And after this,

14. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Letters to Two Friends*, Translated by Helen Weaver (New York: New American Library, 1968), pp. 58-59.

Merton also adds these phrases: "Resonance to the all," "Passion for the Absolute" and "sense of plenitude."

Merton then copied a series of quotes from Teilhard as given by deLubac (I have supplied missing words within brackets):

"[Sometimes, when I am immersed in rocks and fossils,] I experience a nameless bliss [in remembering] that I possess, in one total, incorruptible and loving Element, the supreme Principle in which all [subsists and] has life." (From a letter to, L. Zanta, Oct. 15, 1926; see *deLubac*, page 88.)

Then follows Teilhard's words about

"...love of a God who...continually greater than all the forms in which one moral teaching and theology present him to us." (From an unidentified letter: *deLubac* page number not clear.)

and

"This one basic vision of union between yourself, my God, and the universe."<sup>15</sup>

Then paraphrasing a quote from a letter of Teilhard's, Merton notes that:

"True mystical sense is a question of [the soul developing a sense of] an absolute that is at once universal and personal."<sup>16</sup> Finally, at the bottom of this list of series of quotations, we find the phrase 'The science of being "caught up" by God' followed by a reference to page 226 of deLubac's book where Teilhard is quoted as saying:

I experience a sort of peace and sense of plenitude at feeling myself advancing into the unknown, or more correctly, into what cannot be determined by our own means...I have an almost physical sensation of God catching me up and clasping me more closely as if— with the road ahead disappearing, and

15. From Teilhard's "Mass on the World", as published in *Hymn of the Universe*, Translated by Simon Bartholomew (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), p. 36.

16. See Teilhard's *Letters from a Traveller* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), pp. 177-178; Letter of May 4, 1931.

men, beside us, fading away... only God were *ahead* and *around*, *thickening* (if I may use the word) as we advance.<sup>17</sup>

This last passage is from a letter written from the front during the First World War. Had Merton been able to see the passage in full in its original context it would have jarred his pacifist convictions to no end. Of particular interest, I think, would have been the words missing in the first of the dotted spaces:

So long as we live in the context of factors that depend on our own choice or that of other men, we have the illusion of being self sufficient, and it seems to me that the sphere that we then move in is one of great impoverishment. But the moment we feel ourselves dominated and tossed about by a power that nothing human can master...(*The Making of a Mind*, p. 207).

In other words, Teilhard's remarks on this occasion deal with a situation that is out of human control—certainly the case when it comes to war. But it is also reminiscent of those passages in *The Divine Milieu* where Teilhard spoke of those "*passivities*" by which and through which God refashions us into fit material for his kingdom, for the "Pleroma" or the fullness of God's presence in his universe.

Merton had already written in his first essay on Teilhard, "The Universe as Epiphany," that he was most impressed not only with Teilhard's treatment of the place of human activity in the spiritual life but even more with his view of suffering and death, those passivities over which we have no control (See *LL*, pp. 179-181).

But then in his notebook preparations for "Teilhard's Gamble" Merton was driven back to the first chapter of deLubac's book where he speaks of "The Essential Core" of Teilhard's "Religion" or "religious thought" (the original title in French was *La pensée religieuse du Père Teilhard de Chardin*). Merton notes that we are not discussing Teilhard's theology on the one hand, or his religious practices, on the other. We are discussing, says Merton (*LL*, pp.

17. As quoted by deLubac from Teilhard's letter of Oct. 4, 1917 to his cousin Marguerite Teilhard. See Teilhard de Chardin, *The Making of a Mind*, Translated by René Hague (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), p. 207.

187-188) the peculiar combination of scientist and mystic that Teilhard was.

#### THE "SCIENCE OF SCIENCES"

It is here that we run into the second aspect of Teilhard's expanded definition of "mysticism," that which deals with the *subjective* element, namely, the emphasis on the kind of human *activity* that can be conceivably described as "mystical."

Accordingly, on the third page of these entries in Merton's notes we find this series of teilhardian quotes from page 14 of deLubac's book. However, I must first point out that the question marks in the first and fourth quotation were added by Merton, not deLubac.

"Mysticism [is] the Science of Sciences?...the only power capable of synthesizing the riches accumulated by other forms of human activity"?

This quotation is followed in rapid succession by six more or less direct quotations drawn from the same page of deLubac's book. Thus, mysticism is described in the following terms:

"The only means we have for examining the real in its prodigious magnitude."

"The mystical vibration is inseparable from the scientific vibration."

"To reach the secret of the Real... the scientific quest, however positivist it may claim to be...is universally animated...by a mystical hope"?

He [Teilhard] is fascinated above all by "the direct continuation...(of scientific aspects of nature) in mysticism".

Finally, in two quotes taken from Teilhard's "Mass on the World," there is a reference to mysticism as: "a plainer disclosing of God in the world" and the statement that:

"the true mystical science, the only one that counts," is "the science of Christ through all things"

"in the Church"[...] "the christic pole of the earth".

Clearly, Merton seems to have been fascinated by Teilhard's expanded view of mysticism, but the added question marks clearly betray Merton's continued reserve. Despite Teilhard's exalted treatment of the transforming power of the "passivities" involved in the human condition, Teilhard's emphasis on human *activity* seems to have troubled Merton, and nowhere is this more evident in Teilhard's treatment of the more traditional, and especially of the oriental mysticisms.

#### PASSIVITY AND PANTHEISM

This uneasiness with Teilhard's outlook on the East surfaces only a few pages further on in Merton's notes, where he initiates some critical remarks with this paraphrased (and underlined) quote from another wartime letter of Teilhard:

The true task of man—not to 'return to fundamental oneness...' But 'a summons to master the universe, to examine all its secrets, to become one with all men in a higher community in which conscious minds will be illuminated by convergence in which consciousness will have freed or penetrated matter.' (As taken from *deLubac*, page 144.)

This quotation also initiates the last series of Merton's notebook remarks on Teilhard's "mysticism." By now, Merton was deeply immersed in his own studies, particularly of Buddhism and Zen. And as many other critics of Teilhard's thought on this matter have pointed out,<sup>18</sup> Teilhard's own attitudes and impressions regarding the oriental religions suffered from oversystemization, vague generalities, and perhaps not a little prejudice—although it should be pointed out that his impressions, particularly of Buddhism, were also influenced by long years of association with both modern Western educated Chinese, and extensive travel into some of the more remote areas of China and Mongolia. But there can be no question but that Teilhard characterized most of oriental religion, as well as a major part of Christianity, as world-denying, and rejected this tendency wherever he thought (rightly or wrongly) it was to be found.

Philosophically speaking, while Teilhard claimed that the tendency toward "Pantheism," loosely taken as the quest to find God in

18. See Ursula King, *Towards a New Mysticism: Teilhard de Chardin and Eastern Religions* (New York: Seabury, 1981).

all things, underlies all religion, that a true or acceptable form of pantheism (or "eu-pantheism" as he would term it in some of his essays on the subject) would be "a perfect mutual transparency in a perfect mutual communion" (see *deLubac*, page 153) he would reject any form of "confusion, a merging in the All" (*deLubac*, p. 156). On the contrary, Merton believed that the kind of depersonalized union that Teilhard rejected "is not really found in any of the great oriental systems" and that Teilhard was probably really fighting his own tendencies which were "evidently a kind of Hegelianism and Spinozianism."

Rightly or wrongly (and I say this about either Teilhard's or Merton's generalizations) the problem was, for Teilhard, not simply one of the loss of personal identity in some great "All". It was the problem of *passivity* in the face of the task of "Building Up the Earth" or continuing the work of creation. For Teilhard, the survival of the individual human personality, no matter how strongly he affirmed it, has to do even more with the survival of the human species and the implications this has for the meaning of evolution than it does with the individual (and often selfish) pursuit of personal immortality. If humanity represents evolution become conscious of itself, then the disappearance of all humankind due to the inability of our universe to sustain life would represent the devolution of the cosmos. Certainly this is the same concern, albeit in less abstract terms, that informed Merton's protest against war, particularly war in the nuclear age. Merton's own response to this threat, a response which was to upset his superiors and many churchmen and a large segment of his readers, was also a rejection of such passivity.

#### CONTEMPLATION IN THE WORLD OF ACTION

This last note of criticism, with its fear of excessive passivity in the face of the world's needs, forms the background for our final comparison between Merton and Teilhard. Here we have to center on two issues, first of all the balance between contemplation and action in general, and then, more specifically, in light of this, the relevance of monastic life today.

#### THE CONTEMPLATIVE VOCATION

Just as much for Merton, as for Teilhard, there could be no legitimate contemplation without some action. If Merton in his *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (especially the reference to

Teilhard on page 294) could have understood Teilhard's fear of human passivity in the face of annihilation, I think too that Teilhard himself might have understood the contemplative vocation better had he been aware of Merton's own activism. And if Merton distrusted Teilhard's enthusiasm for technology and was particularly disturbed by his seeming complacency over the advent of nuclear weapons, Teilhard also was rather suspicious of monastic life, particularly where it seemed to fail to come to grips with the challenges of the modern age.

But there is a certain paradox in all of this. Among the evidence is a letter to Jeanne Mortier, who acted as his secretary back in Paris, attempting to dissuade her from joining the "Little Sisters of Jesus" (Charles de Foucauld's group of missionary contemplatives). It is not enough, Teilhard felt, to share the lot of the poor or simply to pray—what is called for is an effort to *change* their situation.<sup>19</sup>

Yet, at the same time, when Merton summed up his impressions of Teilhard in ten points on the last page of his notes on the deLubac book, not only did he note all Teilhard's world-affirming tendencies and his vision of a world converging on "the total Christ" but also particularly remarked on Teilhard's affirmation of, even praise of contemplative life, quoting words from *The Divine Milieu* where Teilhard describes the life of prayer (and Mary as its model) in terms of "a pure soul...as active in this world, by virtue of its sheer purity, as the snowy summits..."<sup>20</sup> to which Merton added "good for a Gethsemani calendar!" He might have quoted as well this passage from "The Mystical Milieu":

Seeing the mystic immobile, crucified or rapt in prayer, some may think that his activity is in abeyance or has left this earth: they are mistaken. Nothing in the world is more intensely alive and active than purity and prayer, which hang like an unmoving light between the universe and God. Through their serene transparency flow the waves of creative power, charged with natural virtue and grace. What else but this is the Virgin Mary?<sup>21</sup>

19. Letters #58 & #59 (March 21 and April 14, 1952) to Jeanne Mortier. Unpublished: Archives of the *Fondation de Teilhard de Chardin*, Paris.

20. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu*, Translated by René Hague (London: William Collins & Sons; New York: Harper & Row, 1960), p. 114.

21. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Writings in Time of War*, Translated by René Hague (London: Collins, 1968), p. 144.

Of course these two passages are "early Teilhard" not unlike the early (and sometimes excessively monastic) Merton in *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Merton's effusions on monastic communities as "powerhouses" of grace were to be toned down considerably, and no doubt Teilhard's ideas of the contemplative's function in this world were to be modified somewhat. Somewhat, but not greatly. Later on, much later on, Teilhard was to extol research as the most progressive or evolution-enhancing of all human activities, and, in so many words, insist that not only had scientific research assumed all the characteristics of a religion but that *mysticism* itself as "the science of sciences" is the *highest form of research!*<sup>22</sup>

Would Merton have agreed such enthusiasm about the role of mysticism in human evolution? Merton's thoughts about the transforming power of the life of prayer seem to have become more and more privatized in their scope, even while his writing apostolate reached out more and more beyond the realm of strictly "religious" (or should I say "pious") concerns. Some might say that this turning to the outside world was prompted by his loss of belief in the power of pure prayer. In the light of Teilhard's later remarks, I don't see it quite that way. Indeed, Teilhard's final, still unpublished "Journals"<sup>23</sup> show a surprising interest in the world-transforming even nature-altering potentialities of prayer.

But even if Teilhard was incorrect about the latter, there can be no doubt that it was the self-altering power of contemplative prayer which in fact transformed Merton's monastic consciousness from its inward-turning world-despising stance to its later openness and responsiveness to the challenge of world-transformation. If the great number of quotations that Merton copied from deLubac's book are any indication, he was taking a hard look at some of Teilhard's ideas along this line.

If this was the case, would an enthusiastic embrace of Teilhard's own view of "contemplation in a world of action" have propelled Merton out of his hermitage sooner or later? Many critics

22. See especially the essays, "The Mysticism of Science" [Mar. 1939] in Teilhard's *Human Energy*, translated by René Hague (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973) pp. 163-181, and "Reflections on Happiness" [Dec. 1943] in *Toward the Future*, pp. 127-128.

23. Vols. XIII-XXI (1944-1955, I-IX) in the archives of the Society of Jesus, Chantilly, France, where the power of prayer is hinted at in terms of the "*plasticité*" and "*coextensivité*" of nature.



of Merton have dared to ask that question. For Merton, I think, the answer was no. He knew that the contemplative vocation that God had given him was also meant to be expressed in his gift for writing. What better place than the hermitage for that? But more tellingly, Merton's enthusiasm to see monastic life reformed in a way to even more effectively implement its contemplative core and goal, even at the expense of being even more isolated from the world, gives the lie to the notion that Merton somehow thought monastic life was useless or counterproductive to the needs of both Church and World.

#### THE FUTURE OF MONASTIC LIFE

Nevertheless, despite Teilhard's high estimation of the evolutionary role of contemplative mysticism, he was considerably less sanguine about the future of monasticism. In addition to his more specific criticism (voiced to Jeanne Portier) of vocations that only sought to identify with the poor rather than change their conditions, Teilhard remarked a number of times in other letters and in his notes about his general impression that monasticism seemed to be preoccupied with preserving the past rather than moving into the future. A good example of this is the Sept. 13, 1953 note from Teilhard's "Journal" XX (VIII) which remarks on how the "push" (*pousée*) of modern monasticism, particularly in its more strict forms, is more toward "survival" (*survivance*) than "birth" (*Naissance*)—of something new.

In the same way, Merton was very much aware that a crisis of faith when it comes to the value of contemplative life, particularly in its monastic institutional form, was not far off. This concern is much in evidence in his final talk, the paper "Marxism and Monastic Perspectives" which Merton delivered at the meeting of Asian Catholic Monastic Superiors in Bangkok just a few hours before he died. It also contains a reference to Teilhard.<sup>24</sup>

If the reference to Teilhard is a fleeting one, in terms of the thesis of Merton's paper, it is significant, for in addressing the challenge posed by Marxism, Merton also addresses exactly the objection that Teilhard had regarding traditional monastic life.

Communism, not just in its dictatorial regimes—although these obviously have affected, even destroyed, monastic life in many

24. See *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, edited by Naomi Burton Stone, Brother Patrick Hart & James Laughlin; consulting editor: Amiya Chakravarty (New York: New Directions, 1973), p. 331.

countries—but even in its more academic neo-Marxist forms (as represented, for example, by the philosopher Marcuse) challenges the presumed otherworldliness of the monastic life and its contemplative noninvolvement in the affairs of daily life. Monasticism seems to be the epitome of the "pie in the sky when you die" sort of religious alienation. Merton notes that because Teilhard's approach directly contradicts this attitude, that he is widely read and much appreciated in communist countries, and by some Marxist intellectuals, like Roger Garaudy in France.

Merton's answer to this is that at the *heart* of monastic charism, as distinct from its institutional form, or even apart from its religious identity as Christian, Buddhist, Hindu or whatever, is that *conversion* of life or inner transformation which enables the monk, as one who stands apart from ordinary life, to see the deeper reality of things, persons, events—even of the world itself. The challenge of Marxism to monasticism is to use this contemplative insight in such a way that the world becomes *transformed* by it.

In the face of this challenge the monk, according to Merton, instead of fleeing from involvement with materiality and soaring off into another world, must see himself as one who is called to immerse himself even deeper in the realities of this world, but in such a way as to see through its fleeting appearances and dividedness to realize its inner unity and connectedness. To discover this hidden dimension and to act in consonance with it is not only to achieve one's own liberation from the superficialities of life, but to become a source of liberation for the world. Yet to accomplish this, the monk must live a life of paradox, the seeming contradiction that Teilhard, with his zeal, especially as a priest, to be "merged and submerged...in the pains and in the blood of a generation" (*The Divine Milieu*, page 80) would find hard to accept about the monastic vocation. To the contrary, Merton was to write:

The monk belongs to the world, but the world belongs to him insofar as he has dedicated himself totally to liberation from it in order to liberate it. You can't just immerse yourself in the world and get carried away with it. That is no salvation. If you want to pull a drowning man out of the water, you have to have some support...There is nothing to be gained by simply jumping in the water and drowning with him (*Asian Journal*, p. 341).

If there seems to be a note of caution, or even of contradiction here, it is because the monastic charism is primarily a prophetic one—to point the way for the world to discover, in the midst of its own materiality, the deeper wellsprings of the spirit. In other words at the heart of the monastic or contemplative vocation is the discovery and revelation of what Teilhard called the “diaphanous” nature of matter and the world, and of the transforming power of the spirit which is born through and in it.

Still, if it is this note of earthy groundedness in Teilhard’s mysticism that Merton found so intriguing, it is also, in its implications for Christian religious life, which for so long had assumed such an unworldly stance, more than a bit disturbing. Perhaps it is this element, so fundamental to Teilhard’s thought, much more than any fleeting and for the most part unpublished criticisms about monasticism, that have given the impression that Teilhard’s vision of Christian life in the world is totally at odds with monastic life and which found its most alarming echo in Merton’s own characterization of his, own monastic vocation as that of a “Bystander”—perhaps a “guilty” one at that!

So too, has not monasticism’s insistence on celibacy as integral to the monastic vocation found little sympathy from those who extol the teilhardian insistence on the interrelatedness of sexuality and spirituality, of human and divine love? Despite Teilhard’s defense of celibacy as a decisive step forward in the evolution of sexuality, he himself had little patience for the strict segregation of the sexes that has characterized most forms of vowed religious life (see “The Evolution of Chastity” [1934] in *Toward the Future*, pp. 60-87). Perhaps it is this element, more than any critique of monasticism’s remoteness from modern life, that has done more to empty the monasteries since the highpoint of Merton’s influence before the vocational crisis of the post-Vatican II church. Indeed, the general atmosphere of pessimism that surrounds the vocational “malaise” in today’s church has been often traced, by conservatives and liberals alike, at least in part, to Teilhard’s influence. Certainly Merton was aware of difficult days to come.

#### CONCLUSION

Nevertheless, I would venture to guess that even this period too shall pass. Already the mania for an almost compulsive activism in the church shows signs of having run its course. A new interest in spirituality, not just as a means for replenishment for the apostolate,

but as both a means of human fulfillment and self-transcendence has been rediscovered after its too-long abandonment to the orientalist and the New Age movement. Perhaps once the poor of this world have become liberated to share the wealth of the first world’s middle class, they too shall discover the hollowness of earthly prosperity and similarly, perhaps the spiritual power of matter revealed in sexuality will lead to new appreciation of celibate life, not as an escape from the responsibilities of love but as a radical choice testifying to the incompleteness of all love that does not find its fulfillment in God. If so, both Teilhard and Merton, seen more in terms of their complementarity rather than their differences—or is it perhaps in terms of a higher unity that differentiates—will have played their part.

It is this final element of self-transcendence, this sense of incompleteness reaching out for *fulfillment* that underlies all mysticisms, however diverse their starting point. It is what, in essence united the very different approaches to life, and the very different talents that drove Merton and Teilhard, each in his own way, to seek the fulfillment beyond self that Teilhard called the “*pleroma*”: the mysterious synthesis of the uncreated and the created—the grand completion (at once quantitative and qualitative) of the universe in God.”

That Merton never adapted Teilhard’s celebrated terminology to express this eternal longing of God and creation for each other is perhaps to Merton’s credit or maybe of little account. “Redemption” perhaps will serve just as well. And certainly the cosmic dimensions of this redemption, so dear to Teilhard is there in Merton’s “Origen” whose hero, like Merton himself, in his most teilhardian of moods, celebrates:

...all beings,  
From stars to stones, angels to elements, alive  
Crying to the Redeemer with a live grief.