

letters; Kilcourse quotes this at length (223). The quote seems to be a very apt summary of Merton's Christological directions.

This suggestion that Kilcourse at times tends to overstate does not diminish the strengths of *Ace of Freedoms* with which I began. The overstatements make valuable and suggestive insights vulnerable. Kilcourse must be complimented for his extensive familiarity with the entire Merton corpus; his integration of Merton's autobiographical, Christological, and spiritual insights; and his willingness to see in spiritual/mystical writings and poetry a matrix and source for theology. This latter in particular is perhaps the major achievement of Kilcourse. "Mining" what we might ordinarily think of as nontheological sources such as letters and poetry yields particularly rich theological insights. The book is certainly to be recommended to Merton readers for a fuller and deeper knowledge of his Christology and spirituality.

IV

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George Kilcourse's book, which beautifully allies theology and imagination, invites comment from many different points of view. Primarily a work of interpretation that takes us through the corpus of Thomas Merton, it offers a fresh Mertonian perspective in which theology, autobiography, and self-identity converge (1-2). It deserves review as a work of interpretation, but the theological themes that emerge out of it are just as deserving of comment. In addition, one could develop a meta-reflection on the interrelation of the personal spiritual quest and authentic theology as it emerges in this work, discerning in Merton not just a spiritual guide but also a contributor to theological method. I have been asked to focus on *kenosis*, an architectonic theological theme that surfaces at many strategic points in the writings of Thomas Merton and runs through the whole of Kilcourse's book. A theme both classical and contemporary, it has elicited theological creativity down through the centuries.¹ It fosters the develop-

1. One would normally evoke the kenotic Christologies of the 19th and early 20th centuries, but more to the point is Luther's creative response to this theme. The Lord/slave dialectic of Philippians 2:6-11 plays a key role in his theology of grace, as we see in *Freedom of a Christian*. The terms he uses to translate two key

ment of a Christology both faithful to the past and incisive as it addresses the present. The image from Merton's antipoems *Cables to the Ace*, from which Kilcourse chooses the title of his work, evokes the origin of this theme in the kenotic Christ (178). In many cardgames, the ace can be either the lowest card, below the deuce, or the highest and most powerful card in the deck. The kenotic Christ is ace in both senses, voluntarily bereft of power but in his powerlessness bringing the unflinching and eventually triumphant power of God's love into an unredeemed creation.

The scriptural passage that roots this theology of the kenotic Christ is the *carmen Christi* of Philippians 2:6-11, a poetic composition whose core is generally recognized as reflecting very early strata of New Testament times. The one who did not consider his rightful status of being recognized as God's equal something to cling to, but rather chose to let go of it in an act of self-emptying, is rewarded by the God who exalts him and gives him the name above all names, enabling the whole creation to recognize him for who he is, Lord, and acclaim him to the glory of God the Father.

This passage has occasioned the spilling of much ink down through the centuries and even to our own day: it is a favorite topic of many monographs and articles. Variant readings abound. It looms large in any effort to piece together the patterns of evolving New Testament thought, and one's preferred interpretation of its verses will contribute decisively to one's view of how New Testament Christology developed and how Christology ought to further unfold in our own day. At times one gets the impression that this sequence is reversed: one's Christological preferences, high or low, Spirit or Word, may lead one to emphasize this or that particular aspect of the passage, to adopt or exclude this or that possible connection with other texts, scriptural or extrascriptural. No matter from which end of the theological spectrum, such hardened choices set aside the multifaceted mystery-laden character of this poetic text. By contrast, Thomas Mer-

verbs in that hymn, *Entäußerung* (self-emptying, alienation) and *Aufhebung* (exaltation, sublation), as well as the Lord/slave dialectic, has had a marked impact on the thought of Hegel, and through Hegel, on that of Karl Marx. Cf. Abraham Rotstein, "The Apocalyptic Tradition: Luther and Marx," *Political Theology in the Canadian Context*, ed. B. Smillie (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1982) 147-208.

ton and his interpreter adopt an approach that is open to the paradoxical inclusiveness of this text.

It is not my role to offer a judgment on various interpretations of this scriptural passage or to judge the accuracy of Kilcourse's interpretation of Merton. Others better qualified can and will do that. However as a systematic theologian for whom the theme of *kenosis* has always exercised a keen fascination, I will mainly comment on the significance for a kenotically based theology of what has emerged in Kilcourse's interpretation of Merton. In brief, Merton as he appears in these pages does not offer a fully formed theology of *kenosis* but does offer precious clues and a powerful stimulus toward the contemplative exploration of the kenotic vein that runs so deeply and constantly throughout Christian thought.

The *Kenosis* of Christ Jesus

Let me begin with a brief comment on the *kenosis* of Jesus Christ as it emerges in Kilcourse's interpretation of Merton. What I detect is a classic mainline interpretation quite consistent with Christology as it has developed through the councils and official Church teaching. Indeed, *kenosis* emerges as a powerful tool for holding together traditional affirmations about the personal unity and unique divine status of Christ and the requirements of our age for a Christology that honors the full humanity of Jesus. One may get the impression that *kenosis* enables a shift from descending Christology "from above" to ascending Christology "from below," but it is clear from Kilcourse's interpretation that the shift for Merton is not from the former to the latter but from a perspective that is exclusively descending to a Christology that embraces both ascending and descending movements. Indeed, *kenosis* is at the heart both of the descending dynamic by which God becomes identified with his chosen Servant in hiddenness, anonymity, and finally death, and of the ascending dynamic by which that Servant, in the darkest moment of his struggle, totally surrenders to and finds himself in the mystery of God. The Philippians text clearly speaks of the second dynamic, offering as model worth imitation Christ Jesus who chooses to assume and be faithful to the form of the slave, obeying unto death; but it intimates the first dynamic, which roots the second and which comes to full recognition in the second half of the

kenotic hymn. At the heart of Jesus' ascent to God there is God's condescension, God's irreversible and total choice to be with us rather than against us, for us rather than against us, in the person of Jesus Christ perfectly human and perfectly divine, as Barth tells us in *The Humanity of God*.

Kilcourse, in the footsteps of Rahner, connects the descending and ascending modes of Christology in Merton with metaphysical and salvation-historical approaches to Christology (92). Kilcourse's evident allergy to rigid, static, arthritic, algebraic-like theology may be justified, but I would prefer to emphasize that the recognition of the impact of *kenosis* and the shift to salvation history in Merton are a recovery of an authentic metaphysical outlook in which being, action, and relation are integrally related.²

The Wider Range of *Kenosis*: The Self

The kenotic theme in Christology is not limited to the kenotic hymn in Philippians. Other scriptural passages allude to this theme in brief but striking formulas.³ Those who crafted that hymn drew on an image that resonates widely in Scripture. In Philippians it applies to Jesus Christ and how he chose to live his life. But this text implicitly refers to the counterimage of Adam, who, promised equality with God on God's terms and in God's time, chooses to grasp for what had been

2. A recent attractive example of such a retrieval can be found in Norris Clarke's *Person and Being (The Aquinas Lecture, 1993)* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1993). Bernard Lonergan pursues the same kind of agenda by his rediscovery of the open-ended intellectualist basis of Aquinas' thought, quite distinct from its rigid conceptualist presentations in many Scholastic manuals of the 19th and early 20th centuries.

3. The two best instances from other Pauline writings are found in 2 Corinthians 8:9 and 2 Corinthians 5:21. These texts delineate the same structure of taking on weakness, but in this case the beneficiaries are not Christ who is exalted but the Christian who receives salvation from Christ in a holy exchange. The theme of the Christ who comes to serve rather than to be served comes up in the Synoptics, in Mark 10:45 and Matt 20:28. John's Gospel makes the same point using the image of the grain of wheat that falls into the ground and dies in order to bear fruit (John 12:24), an intensification and a personalization of the synoptic parable of the sower. Just as *kenosis* is proposed for imitation by Paul, this example of self-gift is proposed by John: cf. the washing of the feet, which occurs soon after the grain of wheat passage in his Gospel.

destined for him in due time as God's free gift. It also applies to the community itself, but that is the theme of the next section of this review.

The reference to Adam urges us to reflect on the import of *kenosis* for Christians of all times. Christ and Adam lay out two paths for us to take, that of Christ, kenotic, in which the acceptance of the self in all its emptiness and poverty leads to the gift of self-fulfillment, and that of Adam, antikenotic, in which the self refuses to accept its own limitations and vainly seeks to bestow fulfillment upon itself, ending up in death rather than life. In his life and ministry Paul seeks to follow the model of Christ; and he himself becomes an example of *kenosis*, urging the followers of Jesus to live their lives kenotically within a world that remains ambiguous and unfinished, waiting for an ultimate fulfillment, which is gift.⁴

This *kenosis* does not, in the illuminating phrase of Karl Barth's commentary, consist in a giving up or a giving away but in a letting go. The inner self—that of Christ as well as ours—is so secure in its identity that it can empty itself out, in the case of Christ of all that to which it is entitled, in ours of the illusory claims for recognition to which we cling. The inner self thus emptied out can without reserve explore totally new ways of objectifying itself, knowing that it will always perdure as the subject, implicitly but ineluctably present as mystery, as generative source.⁵ By contrast the person out of touch with this deep source—remember that the counterpoint to Jesus in the kenotic hymn is Adam—is insecure, becomes fixated on a “false self,” clings to a pattern of behavior and self-presentation that is familiar, predictable, and subject to the person's own control, that keeps at

4. The themes briefly evoked in this paragraph are more fully developed in my article “Kenosis Old and New” in *The Ecumenist* 12 (1974) 17–21, and in my book *Patience and Power: Grace for the First World* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist, 1988) 95–106, 181–85, 267–71.

5. The subject in this sense is a favorite theme within transcendental Thomism. It emerges abundantly in Rahner. A particularly creative instance is his “Dogmatic Reflections on the Knowledge and Self-Consciousness of Christ,” in *Theological Investigations* 5:193–215. It is exploited methodically in the works of Lonergan. A parallel to Rahner that summarizes his position is found in “Christ as Subject: A Reply,” in *Collection I*, pp. 164–97. The implicit, generative, inescapable subject is the subject as subject. This subject can never be totally objectified. The self as object can be offered a helpful entry into the mystery of the self, but it can also hinder access to it.

bay aspects of the fuller self that, though threatening and disruptive, are invitations to fuller integration and authenticity.⁶

Merton's interest in *kenosis* is not narrowly Christological. Rather, *kenosis* is at the heart of the spiritual quest for authenticity—monastic, Christian, and human—that consumed his life. In his own way Merton follows in the footsteps of Paul, who witnesses to *kenosis* in his own life and urges Christians to embrace it in theirs. The merit of Kilcourse's book is that he brings this out in Merton's work. From the outset he tells us that Merton's questions were

focused through the effort of aligning Christ, self-identity, and the autobiographical process within a single lens. Jesus' question “who do you say that I am?” (Mark 8:29) perdures as Merton's ultimate question (2).

At heart gift rather than achievement, genuine self-fulfillment is to be found in letting go of our self-willed identity,⁷ in relaxing “the psychic and spiritual cramp that knots us in the painful, vulnerable, helpless ‘I’ that we all know as ourselves” (131). In other words, we are to let go of the sclerotic, neurotic, false self that hinders our authentic development and to allow ourselves to operate from the God-ward emptiness that abides at the very heart of our created selves. Merton's voice in this collaborative and converging quest of authentic subjectivity is well worth hearing.

The Wider Range of *Kenosis*: The Community

The kenotic hymn not only refers to the Servant described in the Song of Isaiah 52 and 53 but also adopts the humiliation/exaltation structure of that passage. The figure of the Isaian Suffering Servant may be a mysterious personal agent of God's provident designs, and that is the meaning that emerges in Philippians 2:6–11, but in its origi-

6. A contemporary development of this theme is found in the writings of R. D. Laing. Cf. his *Politics of Experience* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967) and his *Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965).

7. The theme of wilfulness and willingness, its expressions in contemporary psychological literature, its pertinence for a theology of grace, and its connection with the development of authentic subjectivity are explored in Laporte, *Patience and Power*, 177ff., passim.

nal context it likely also refers to the chosen community itself, which through the insights hammered out on the anvil of its anguish and tribulation becomes a suffering servant community through which a newer religious consciousness dawns on the world.⁸

For all that, the community dimension is far from lacking in the Pauline hymn. Paul's reason for inserting this hymn, probably with adaptations of his own making, was to develop a powerful antidote to the factionalism, the "me first" attitude, that was destructive of the fragile community he had founded. The same concern emerges elsewhere, above all when he deals with the Corinthian community. *Kenosis* vitally affects communities as well as persons because only authentic kenotic persons can make up communities of loving interaction, and only such communities are propitious for the shaping of such persons.

We find this communal concern clearly reflected by Merton when he urges the Church to be more kenotic, especially in the writings of later years that are less subject to Cistercian censorship, and perhaps to the auto-censorship of the younger monk still forging his mature identity (160–69). There is the institutional Church bent on protecting its identity, its claim to authority, for which listening is difficult and teaching easy, which is *a priori* suspicious of any new movement of thought, but there is also the Church that is not afraid to risk losing itself in the *diaspora* because it knows that whatever unanticipated transformations happen, it will essentially perdure because its identity is secure, its charismatic endowment without fail. The Merton who in his later years becomes less concerned with the intrainstitutional issues of monastic life, and more resonant with the currents of thought and experience that shape the world as a whole, is a powerful instance of this shift. In this later phase, monastic life is meant to be not escape from the world but participation in its struggles and sufferings (124).

Merton is not particularly original in this extension of *kenosis* to the Church and its institutions. Kilcourse, however, also shows that

8. One of the keenest exponents of the genesis of this heightened religious consciousness in the tribulations of Israel is Eric Voegelin in his *Order and History. Volume One: Israel and Revelation* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1956). The beauty of the Isaian text, 52:13 to 53:12, which unfolds this image for us, is that its poetic imagery is multivalent and mysterious. One cannot easily exclude from it reference to a mysterious individual destined to play a key role in salvation history, nor reference to Israel itself as a community that achieves redemptive significance through its own sufferings.

for Merton language, which makes community possible, is itself kenotic. His antipoetry unmasks the self-inflated, self-referential speech that characterizes our culture, in which words so often do not speak truth but are used to disguise special interests. Free and unobsessed—that is, kenotic—persons are capable of prophetic speech, of *parrhesia* (172). This dimension is becoming increasingly crucial as power is concentrated in the hands of those who can at their pleasure inform, withhold information, or disinform.

This line of reflection opened up by Merton is well worth pursuing. The quality of our dialogue with one another within the various communities to which we belong is essential if genuine community is to be built and maintained. Further exploration along the following lines may be fruitful. If Christ is the supreme example of *kenosis* for us, if he is the enfleshed Word of God, his use of language and practice of dialogue cannot but be instructive to individuals and communities. The Synoptics present us with a Jesus who speaks by allusion, in image, discreet about himself but clear and firm about the kingdom and its essential nearness. In John's Gospel the one who speaks the word becomes the Word, but nonetheless we find there a Jesus who is a supremely skilled dialogue partner, able to create the space within which people can come to life-shaping commitments in an atmosphere of trust and freedom. Merton explored this kenotic form of speech in his antipoetry and invites us to a more wide-ranging exploration as we seek ways to speak that are more effective because they are more liberating.

The Wider Range of *Kenosis*: Interreligious Dialogue

The theme of dialogue takes on a more precise focus as Merton enters more and more into dialogue with non-Christian monks. Interreligious dialogue has come into the limelight in recent years, with different models vying for supremacy. Are we to remain in the Christological inclusivist position formulated by Karl Rahner and countenanced in the documents of Vatican II, or should we move to a more integral pluralism, a theocentric relativism, as Paul Knitter puts it in *No Other Name*, in our approach to religious truth, mitigating our claims in the interest of making dialogue possible, allowing that what may be ultimately true for me might not be so for someone else? Merton does not appear to make a theoretical contribution to these questions, but his

practice of dialogue is instructive because it is open and kenotic. Merton continues to proclaim the Savior, but proclaims him kenotically. No less can be expected if *kenosis* is at the heart of the salvation extended to humankind through Christ, if our assurance comes from seeing through a glass darkly rather than face to face.

If we do not see Truth face to face, we cannot rest until we have encountered every dimension or facet of the truth as present in our fellow human beings and allowed ourselves to be shaped by each of them. If we believe that Christ is at work bringing about total reconciliation in and through our efforts at following in his footsteps, then we can simply let him do his work and not worry about protecting ourselves and the limited truths we have managed to formulate. The Spirit of Christ will prompt us with the dialogical responses that are appropriate to time and circumstance. Paradoxically, kenotic dialogue will be as radical and as authentic as the hope in Christ that anchors it is without flaw or hesitation.

What has been advanced in the above paragraphs draws on the practice of dialogue that became more and more characteristic of Merton rather than with any explicit theory of dialogue he may have devised. Indeed, what Merton begins to articulate as a result of this dialogue is the relationship between the selflessness at the root of Christian *kenosis* and the selflessness at the core of the spiritual quest of the world religions with which he entered into contact. He rejoices in the elements of convergence while remaining firm on maintaining what is specifically Christian, without always being able to formulate it. Interrupted by his death, that dialogue remains incomplete.

Concluding Remarks

George Kilcourse makes a good case for development in the thought of Thomas Merton on kenotic Christology. The rigid structures of manual theology held him back in his years of training as a monk, and he saw the world primarily as something from which to escape through monastic life in order to be shaped into a new identity in Christ. During this period of delicate inner reconfiguration he explored that form of life and the spiritual commitment that animates it in somewhat more conventional terms. But then if one reviews later writings, one finds a more nuanced assessment of the world that he had left, a sharper sense of what was disordered about it, as well as

unbounded compassion for those who suffer within it and solidarity with those who have undertaken the struggle for liberation. While Kilcourse is careful not to nail down too precisely the times and circumstances that led to this profound shift, he singles out the year 1958 as a watershed year for Merton (92). I am not in a position to comment on whether or not there is an intimate correspondence between pivotal experiences of that year and the evolution of his thought, but I would like to offer an exploratory comment out of a theology of *kenosis* on the nature of this shift.

This comment is stimulated by a medieval author mentioned incidentally in Kilcourse's book (30) but who evidently does not play a significant role in Merton's thought. I am referring to Richard of St. Victor and his *Four Grades of Violent Love*. Richard offers an account of the kenotic maturation of love within the life of the Christian that appears to fit the development of Merton's thought and practice. This relatively unknown medieval text deserves study on its own terms, but for now the broad pattern it develops will have to suffice. In a first stage (1) the soul returns to itself in meditation, but then (2) it rises above itself in contemplation, and (3) is totally carried into the mystery of God in ecstatic union. So far we have a fairly standard presentation of the three ways: purgative, illuminative, and unitive. But for Richard the pinnacle is not there. In a fourth stage (4) the soul goes out of itself toward God's world in compassion, thirsting for that world as God thirsts for it. Ascent is followed by descent. Escape from the world is followed by return to the world.

The key shift from third to fourth stage helps to articulate the nature of the shift in Merton's thought and practice. At a certain point the need to be correct seems to be superseded by the need to be compassionate. There appears to be a corresponding shift in which the kenotic dimension, at first couched in the pale terms of a conventional Christology that was very reluctant to allow a genuine humanity of Christ that made any difference, becomes gloriously alive for him and enlivens many aspects of his search for truth and fulfillment.

The shift from distraction to ecstasy to compassion in Richard of St. Victor helps us to articulate a twofold *kenosis* in Merton. The earlier *kenosis* entailed in Merton's conversion consisted in the stripping away of the false self and the corresponding emergence of the inner self, a *kenosis* that Jesus, the sinless one, did not undergo, but that Christians seeking to be conformed with Christ must experience.

The second *kenosis* consists in an imitation of the *kenosis* that the earthly Christ did undergo in solidarity with our sin, letting go of the prerogatives and recognition to which he is entitled because of his authentic inner Self. The first *kenosis* leads us from a distracting and seductive world to the inner self fulfilled in God; the second leads us from the inner self to its enfleshment in a complex and messy world. The first is an escape from the world; the second a return to the world.

This distinction is present, for instance, in the life of Augustine, who enthusiastically leaves the world behind in his first conversion but reluctantly returns to it as bishop in his second. Merton writes about the first *kenosis* with some eloquence. The second, at a certain point in his life, appears to take over very powerfully, but he does not articulate it with the same clarity.

What then is Merton's contribution to a theology of *kenosis*? He shows how *kenosis*, rather than remain frozen and lifeless, can regain its original dynamic and function widely throughout the whole range of theology. What speaks most eloquently in Merton's theology of *kenosis* is that it is rooted in image and in praxis rather than in a mere quest for orthodox formulae. One discerns at work deep respect for the received tradition, yes, but also the stirrings of a God-given experience and the challenges of a world deserving of compassion.

What is Kilcourse's contribution to the interpretation of Merton? He has succeeded in bringing out with insight and connaturality Merton's contribution to a theology of *kenosis*, leading the reader to dwell on images and clues that he or she may have hurried past in haste to get to the "theological bits." He has kept together, as is fitting, *kenosis* in thought, *kenosis* in language, and *kenosis* in action, and has illuminated their interrelation in the life and thought of Thomas Merton.