

Standing before God: Merton's Incarnational Spirituality

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'From now on, everybody stands on his own feet'.¹ Many will recognize this as the definitive counsel that inspired a Tibetan abbot to initiate an exodus into India as Chinese forces overwhelmed his native land. Thomas Merton rehearses this tale just minutes before his premature death in Bangkok.

As *The Asian Journal* records, Merton embraces this declaration as a summary statement of 'what Christianity is all about' and, perforce, 'what monasticism is all about'.² Thus, here we have a unifying foundation for the whole of a baptized or spiritual life, whether inside or outside a cloister – with Merton's caveat that '[t]he spiritual life is something that people worry about when they are so busy with something else they think they ought to be spiritual'.³

With this latter statement Fr Louis has indicated that the 'spiritual life' is simply an integrally human life. The difficulty, he once protested, is that 'the Spiritual Life' is construed 'as a part, a section, set off as if it were a whole'.⁴ It is only misguided and 'an aberration to set off our "prayer" etc. from the rest of our existence, as if we were sometimes spiritual, sometimes not'.⁵ Our 'life in the Spirit', he underscored, is an all-embracing response to the liberating Word of Divine love, not

1. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (ed. Naomi Burton, Patrick Hart and James Laughlin; New York: New Directions, 1973), p. 338.

2. Merton, *The Asian Journal*, p. 338.

3. Thomas Merton, *Day of a Stranger* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith, 1981), p. 41.

4. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns* (ed. William H. Shannon; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985), p. 357.

5. Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love*, p. 357.

received merely 'as a truth to be believed but as a gift of life to be lived...'.⁶

If there is 'too much conscious 'spiritual life' floating around us',⁷ the great problem and impediment to authentic growth in one's approach to God, to life in Spirit and Truth, to being true and being real, to being authentically human, is the dichotomous and dualistic model that so frequently pervades religious discourse and ecclesial existence. Idolatry remains the great conundrum of the churches today, Merton told the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions in Santa Barbara before embarking on his Asian journey. Too often, Christian churches simply substitute their own idols, entrapping the faithful in erroneous and fruitless orientations: ' "This one is a better one because it is a more spiritual one", or something like this. But we must get rid of the idols.'⁸ Any life that would divide a human being from himself or herself is, by definition, diabolical – that is the etymological meaning of 'diabolical' (to divide). 'When one comes into existence as a human being, then prior to every other obligation is the obligation to be what one is: a human being.'⁹ In biblical terms the issue is creatureliness; one is challenged to be and become the creature one was made to be, faithful to the Divine fashioning. 'Any type of perfectionism that tries to take us beyond our human reality or to put us outside it (to make us gods) will only cheat us of our own humanity.'¹⁰

Arguably, the archetypal Adam's initial culpability was the inability or unwillingness to be the creature he was made and meant to be. Being human was beyond him: the finitude, contingency, inherent imperfection of his situation were eschewed in an originating flight that sought to make him anything but creaturely. He craved the perfection of

6. Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love*, p. 357.

7. Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love*, p. 355.

8. Walter Capps, *Thomas Merton: Preview to the Asian Journey* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), p. 53. See Merton's judgment in *Faith and Violence* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), p. 202: 'It is certain that much of our supposed Christianity is in fact a deplorable cult of idols'. In his early years Merton also contributed to the dualism and dichotomy of spiritual ecology, and he would subsequently bemoan and dismiss *The Seven Storey Mountain* as one such work: '[W]hen I wrote it, I still did not understand the real problems of the monastic life, or even of the Christian life either. And I was still dealing in a crude theology that I had learned as a novice: a clean-cut division between the natural and supernatural, God and the world, sacred and secular... Since those days I have acquired a little experience... life is not as simple as it once looked in *The Seven Storey Mountain*' (Thomas P. McDonnell, 'An Interview with Thomas Merton', *Motive* [October 1967], pp. 32-41.

9. Merton, quoted in McDonnell, 'An Interview with Thomas Merton', p. 35.

10. Merton, quoted in McDonnell, 'An Interview with Thomas Merton', p. 35.

a more spiritual, less onerous being. So many of the spiritualities of yesterday, and perhaps even of today, endorse just such an evasion of creatureliness through one spiritual idol or another. 'Getting to heaven' does not mean betraying the earth or the earth of our humanity.

In other words, whatever 'spiritual' may mean, it does not mean being or becoming less human. Irenaeus, and even Augustine of all people, have made this perfectly clear. 'Now the soul', Irenaeus has written, 'and the spirit are certainly a *part* of the man, but certainly not *the* man; for the perfect [or complete] man consists in the commingling and the union of the soul receiving the spirit of the Father, and the admixture of that fleshly nature which was moulded after the image of God'.¹¹ Persons are 'spiritual', Irenaeus sums up, 'because they partake of the Spirit, and not because their flesh has been stripped off and taken away...'.¹²

Augustine tells us, in *The City of God*, that 'the flesh' is not responsible for our 'vices and ill conduct'; in fact, 'it was not the corruptible flesh that made the soul sinful, but the sinful soul that made the flesh corruptible'.¹³ Subtly, he points out that whoever 'extols the nature of the soul as the chief good, and condemns the nature of the flesh as if it were evil, assuredly is fleshly both in his love of the soul and hatred of the flesh; for these his feelings arise from human fancy, not from divine truth'.¹⁴ Thus, he underscores earlier in the same work, 'We do not desire to be deprived of the body, but to be clothed with its immortality. For then, also, there will be a body, but it shall no longer be a burden, being no longer corruptible'.¹⁵

Thomas Merton sums up the issue succinctly: 'Our first task is to be fully human'.¹⁶ Obviously, this task is not one that needs to be conducted within monastery walls.

In fact, in the waning years of his life, Merton seemed less inclined to endorse monastic life; or rather, he perceived that the foundational monastic stance might be embraced just as easily – and quite possibly more fruitfully – beyond ecclesial institutions. Thus, it is precisely 'in the world' that the true monk may be expected to reside today. As the

11. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* V.vi.1, in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (eds.), *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*. I. *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), p. 531, Irenaeus's emphasis.

12. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* V.vi.1, p. 532.

13. Augustine, *The City of God* XIV.3, in Philip Schaff (ed.), *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, II (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1907), p. 264.

14. Augustine, *The City of God*, XIV.5, p. 265.

15. Augustine, *The City of God*, XIV.3, p. 263.

16. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), p. 83.

conclusion of the first chapter of *Contemplative Prayer*, Merton employs Dostoyevsky to highlight two monastic archetypes: a compassionate Zossima, who identifies with the suffering world, and the regimented, rigid ascetic Therapont (Ferapont). Opting for the former, Merton observes that 'the Zossima type of monasticism can well flourish in offbeat situations, even in the midst of the world. Perhaps such "monks" may have no overt monastic connection whatever.'¹⁷ In a justly celebrated letter to *The National Catholic Reporter* (written around the same time and published 11 January 1968), Merton highlights freedom as the monastic charism, then cautions that today 'in order to be a monk one must learn to be a non-monk: or try it in other words, outside the conventional framework'.¹⁸ In truth, the institution so often betrays the monastic charism; the genuine and radical education, or preparation, for the 'paradise' of transformation 'does not exist in most monasteries. It is a forgotten art.'¹⁹

If the monk's call is to stand before God, then all are united in this basic stance. Indeed, the monk is 'like other men, and his problems are basically those of other men and other Christians'.²⁰ This is to say that all humanity is united in the same predicament: from now on everybody stands on his own feet.

This may evoke echoes of Heidegger, Kierkegaard, even Irenaeus, the first theologian outside of the New Testament canon.

Heidegger was concerned that instead of *being there*, standing in naked truth, *Dasein* – you and I – fled, escaped and fell into the mindless mass of a collectivity.²¹ Kierkegaard was concerned that religion had become – or always had been – just such an escape. Christianity did not exist, he said, only Christendom, a cultural artifact, a social fraud, a personal deceit.²² The greatest deceit was that one's entire life was play-

17. Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1969), p. 31.

18. Thomas Merton, 'Merton: Regain the Old Monastic Charism', *The National Catholic Reporter* (January 11, 1968), p. 11.

19. Merton, *The National Catholic Reporter* (January 11, 1968), p. 11. Cf. Thomas Merton, *Love and Living* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1979), pp. 8-9; *idem*, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, pp. 179-80, 207-208; and *idem*, 'The Secular Saint', *The Center Magazine* (July 1968), p. 94: 'the monastic institution is suffocating the monastic charism'.

20. Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, p. 48, Merton's emphasis.

21. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson; New York: Harper & Row, 1962).

22. Søren Kierkegaard, *Attack Upon 'Christendom'* (trans. Walter Lowrie; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968).

acting: we have forgotten how to exist, he observed, forgotten how to exist as a *human being*.²³ Humanity would rather be out in space, on the moon (he said in 1846), than down to earth.²⁴ Anything but being human, concretely human. His remedy? The only solution to our dilemma, the only way to be constituted human, Christian, and a self, all in one, all at once, was to stand before God, to *exist before God*.²⁵

There is no doubt that Merton was preoccupied with similar themes toward the end of his life. 'The Church', he complained, 'is preached as a communion, but is run in fact as a collectivity, and even as a totalitarian collectivity'.²⁶ Nor did the monastery escape this blight: 'The social "norms" of a monastic family are also apt to be conventional, and to live by them does not involve a leap into the void – only a radical change of customs and standards'.²⁷ Unaccountably – because the New Testament call summons the Christian to rebirth, to become a new being in Christ. One is not the same person 'with a new set of activities and a new lot of religious practices'.²⁸ To the contrary, one's 'new creation' transcends the norms and attitudes of any and every enculturation. 'This includes transcendence even of religious practices'.²⁹ Appealing to Kierkegaard, Merton suggested that the key to this conundrum is 'the question of conformism and security. When one becomes a "believer" in a well-established and accepted group he no longer needs the concern and the risk of freedom that are demanded in real faith'.³⁰

The monk's faithfulness is not to a set of formulas or to structures or to buildings or to costumes, and certainly not to a medieval – or archetypal – mystique.³¹ Nor is the monk justified by formal or official prayer, 'even if it be the spiritual work of the *opus Dei*', or by any specific

23. Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (trans. D.F. Swenson and W. Lowrie; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1941), pp. 225, 223, cf. 216.

24. Cf. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 113; *idem*, *Christian Discourses and the Lilies of the Field and the Birds of the Air* (trans. W. Lowrie; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), p. 77.

25. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death* (trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), see, e.g., pp. 13–14, 79: 'The self is a relation that relates itself to itself... and relates itself to that which established the entire relation. The human self is such a derived, established relation, a relation that relates itself to itself and in relating itself to itself relates itself to another... existing before God, by becoming a human self whose criterion is God!'

26. Merton, quoted in McDonnell, 'An Interview with Thomas Merton', p. 41.

27. Thomas Merton, *Wisdom of the Desert* (New York: New Directions, 1960), p. 10.

28. Merton, *Love and Living*, p. 200.

29. Merton, *Love and Living*, p. 193.

30. Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love*, p. 221.

31. Cf. Merton, *The Asian Journal*, p. 340.

function on behalf of the Church.³² As a Christian, a monk is called to life – as are all human beings: ‘I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly’ (Jn 10.10). A monk’s business, Merton says, is life itself; as a hermit, he would avow: ‘What I do is live. How I pray is breathe’.³³ This faithfulness to life is the burden and business of all. ‘The glory of God’, Irenaeus writes, ‘is a living man’.³⁴

Thus, the essence of monastic life, as of all Christian life, is the inner revolution and transformation of the new being.³⁵ The Fathers of the Church called this transformation divinization or deification: ‘God was made man that we might be made God’. This classic statement comes from Athanasius,³⁶ but it has origins in Irenaeus³⁷ and was echoed by Clement of Alexandria, Basil the Great, Gregory Nazianzen, Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine of Hippo.

Our earth, Irenaeus would say, is the locus of this divinizing interchange and vivifying encounter – or, better, the earth of our humanity. To diagram the perspective of this Church Father, a vector might be drawn toward the southeast from a northwest quadrant, an arrow pointing downward to an arc representing the earth. Such might schematize the incarnating Word. With perhaps humor and sadness, and anticipating Heidegger by almost two millennia, Irenaeus suggests that, nevertheless, we are absent and not *there*. If not, then where are we? To complete the diagram, a vector can be drawn upward from the earth’s arc toward the northeast quadrant, an arrow pointing to the stars, suggesting a humanity shooting for the heavens.

The consternation in Irenaeus’s tone is unmistakable. Our species, ‘only recently created’ and still in an infantile stage, is impatient, insatiable and ungrateful, ‘unwilling to be at the outset what they have also been created – men subject to passions...’³⁸ We are yet infants ‘but go beyond the law of the human race’, and before we have grown into

32. Thomas Merton, ‘The Monk as Marginal Man’, *The Center Magazine* (January 1969), p. 33; *Contemplation in a World of Action*, pp. 202, 9.

33. Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, p. 9; *idem*, *Day of a Stranger*, p. 41. And see *idem*, *The Courage for Truth* (ed. Christine M. Bochen; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1993), p. 279: ‘We are here to live, and to “be”...’.

34. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, IV.xx.7, p. 490; ‘living, indeed, because he partakes of the Spirit...’ (V.ix.2 [p. 490]).

35. Merton, *Love and Living*, p. 193; *idem*, *The Asian Journal*, pp. 337, 340.

36. *On the Incarnation of the Word* 54.3, in Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (eds.), *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, IV (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2nd series, 1957), p. 65.

37. *Against Heresies* III.xix.1, p. 448.

38. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* IV.xxxviii.2, 4, pp. 521, 522.

maturity, we 'wish to be even now like God [our] Creator...'³⁹ Instead of suffering developmental travail and the onus of contingency, we insulate ourselves against 'the infirmity of [our] nature', defying our earth and bypassing the 'due time' of temporal existence for an imagined divine omnipotence.⁴⁰ In fact, this is only the unremitting and unrelinquished narcissism of childhood, transposed to invincible singularity. As we know today from astrophysics, singularities, with their incalculable gravitational pull, are points of infinite density and infinitesimal volume, black holes of infinitely distorted space-time. Irenaeus simply queries, 'How, then, shall [one] be a God, who has not as yet been made a man?'⁴¹

God may have become human that we might become divine, but our first task, as Merton tells us, is to be fully human.⁴² Becoming human: this is the Christian task; being human: this is Christian spirituality – being human, we then have common ground with God, for it took the Word of God to articulate the truth of being human. It's as if God had said, you wouldn't or couldn't be human and creaturely, so I who am infinite became finite, I who am eternal became temporal, I who am absolute became relative and contingent. Thus, if I can become human, so too, by my Word, can you.

Contemporary psychiatrist Harold Searles concurs with Irenaeus. An individual, human identity, he says, is a precarious phenomenon, never conclusively established, and adamantly, if unconsciously, resisted. Frustrated by the poverty of existence and the specter that one is merely mortal, we harbor unquenchable fantasies that nuclear power or some more magical energy will propel us beyond the circumscription of our earth into infinite interstellar realms, definitively 'breaking the chains that have always bound our race to this planet...'⁴³ We have nothing but aversion for mundane existence, his clinical findings tell us, with 'mother earth', emblematic of all finite reality, recalcitrant 'to our yearnings for unfettered omnipotence, and we want to be rid of it'.⁴⁴

Merton has also discerned this same trauma working itself out as the structures of power project 'a centrifugal flight into the void, to get *out there*, where there is...nothing but the bright, self-directed, perfectly obedient and infinitely expensive machine...propagating its own kind in

39. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* IV.xxxviii.4, p. 522.

40. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* IV.xxxviii.4, xxxix.2, pp. 522, 523.

41. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* IV.xxxix.2, p. 522.

42. See n. 16 above.

43. Harold F. Searles, *Countertransference and Related Subjects* (New York: International Universities Press, 1979), p. 241.

44. Searles, *Countertransference and Related Subjects*, p. 241.

the eschatological wilderness of space...⁴⁵ Our terrestrial self is the problem, Kierkegaard affirms, and we 'despair over being human'.⁴⁶ Whatever our theories or principles or dogmas, and however much they may inspire or transport us effortlessly to a 'seventh heaven', 'when one begins to do any of it, one becomes a poor existing individual human being who stumbles again and again, and from year to year makes very little progress'.⁴⁷ It's no wonder that we yearn desperately to be freed from the gravity of our 'pedestrian despairs' for unencumbered flight through the heavens.⁴⁸

Nevertheless, there is no doubt, 'Earth's the right place', poet laureate Robert Frost confides, 'I don't know where it's likely to go better'.⁴⁹ It is there alone, upon the earth, that we stand before God. What we seek in the heavens is found only on the earth. 'No one has gone up to heaven except the one who has come down from heaven...' (Jn 3.13) This reversal of direction is the ultimate—and foundational—metanoia and conversion. Novelist Walker Percy, one of Merton's compatriots, makes explicit what is implicit in Searles, Kierkegaard and Irenaeus: we are faced with the challenge of reentry; we must get back to earth.⁵⁰ We must, Merton says, return to ourselves.⁵¹ Indeed, the path (to heaven and to God) lies through the earth of our humanity. Augustine records in the *Confessions* that he looked everywhere for God but found God only in himself.⁵²

If we must first find ourselves 'in order to find God...in and through the depths of our own soul', finding oneself is not an easy task.⁵³ We begin with an intuitive and felt appreciation for silence and the simplification of life.

The clutter and tempo of existence have robbed us of perspective, obscuring our mortgage to collective illusion and power. Our needs proliferate, but always within the compulsion of one predetermined program or another, as we mass with this herd or that, forever stampeding

45. Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966), p. 73, Merton's emphasis.

46. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 317, and cf. p. 113; and Kierkegaard, *Christian Discourses and the Lilies of the Field and the Birds of the Air*, p. 77.

47. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 229.

48. Cf. Merton, *Raids*, p. 73.

49. Robert Frost, *The Poetry of Robert Frost* (ed. Edward C. Lathem; New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1979), p. 122.

50. Walker Percy, *The Last Gentleman* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1966).

51. Thomas Merton, *The New Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux), p. 63.

52. *Confessions* 10.27.

53. Merton, *The New Man*, p. 63; *idem*, *Contemplative Prayer*, p. 87.

toward oblivion. Trapped in functions and roles, abetted by a culture that is eager to keep us captive to its expedient misdirection, '[o]ur best energies are wasted... We fail to use our powers in being true to that which is most hidden, most unique, and most demanding in the ground of our own freedom.'⁵⁴

Increasingly subtle but ever tightening demands for conformity gradually and hermetically seal each in the collectivity's system, so that none may conceive any identity or reality apart from its arrogant despair.⁵⁵ An incipient disengagement is challenging; inertia threatens, so 'one must *want* to begin. Even if the thought of it comes clothed in a good coat of nonsense and imagination.'⁵⁶

As simplification grants space to survey a wider horizon, an appropriate silence begins to impart a new and certain awareness, awakening us to the disquieting fact that in large measure our intelligence has been absorbed 'in the crass and thoughtless servitude of mass society'.⁵⁷ While we seek to become 'rooted in fidelity to *life* rather than to artificial systems', resolving to 'remain outside "their" categories' and free of 'public and collective ideas', a deeper awareness may begin to emerge.⁵⁸ Through silence, disengaging from the collective mind, we may discover a freedom to attend to our own thoughts, but we also begin to hear the cry and longing of our heart.

This will inspire us, perhaps impel us, to seek moments or create opportunities to attend to this not entirely comforting phenomenon. Sitting in a favorite chair, beside a brook, beneath a tree, we may be alarmed to discover how chaotically our mind seethes or how painfully our heart beats: 'the heart of man can be full of so much pain, even when things are exteriorly "all right" ... there is no explanation of most of what goes on in our own hearts...' ⁵⁹

Sitting for twenty or thirty minutes at a stretch may prove to be an unaccountably ascetical burden. One is not so much (consciously) praying as opening to a new horizon or dimension of being, only vaguely and inchoately sensed. Bewilderment is likely to be the greatest burden. It is easily conceived that one is completely wasting time. In due course,

54. Thomas Merton, *Opening the Bible* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1970), p. 72; *idem*, *Raids*, pp. 16, 173.

55. Merton, *Raids*, pp. 14, 16, 53.

56. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), p. 238, emphasis added.

57. Thomas Merton, *Honorable Reader: Reflections on my Work* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), p. 64.

58. Merton, *Raids*, pp. 156, 158, 161; Merton's emphasis.

59. Thomas Merton, 'Christmas Morning' (mimeo circular letter [1966]).

however, the frantic mind grows noticeably less busy, while the restless heart grows incrementally and tranquilly more sober. At such a moment, one eventually senses that one is becoming present to oneself. A relaxed, comfortable, even familiar, peace attends until one day, with both wonder and apprehension, the awareness grows that there is a Presence in the presence. Few are not disconcerted.

Although graver moments will ultimately arise, this is one occasion when we may have 'to call into question the whole structure of [the] spiritual life'.⁶⁰ However positive one's silent encounter may be, there is an unnerving sense that 'in order to be true to God and to ourselves we must break with the familiar, established and secure norms and go off into the unknown'.⁶¹ Merton cautions that 'God is not in words, and not in systems, and not in liturgical movements, and not in "contemplation" with a big C, or in asceticism or in anything like that...'.⁶² What remains is the 'wilderness of the human spirit',⁶³ and the recognition provokes dread. Compounding one's insecurity, 'the unconscious makes its hidden power felt in obscure disturbances'.⁶⁴

Greater still, perhaps, can be a sense of ignominy and guilt. We may very well be unnerved that a Presence, ostensibly the Lord's, appeared within us, and there's little doubt that we are not worthy of such a visitation. It may take quite some time before we gather sufficient nerve to sit silently once again, present to ourselves, open to the deeper dimensions of our being. In fact, we'll probably avoid the opportunity in fear and trembling, distracting ourselves anew with the bustle of life.

More gnawing may be the guilt. One feels guilty to have trespassed or stumbled upon, however inadvertently, this inscrutably hallow domain. One thing is certain: feelings of 'lostness', wretchedness and sin have so habitually plagued us, that we infallibly know we are undeserving and necessarily guilty participants.⁶⁵ Operative here, at least in major part, is what Heidegger calls ontological guilt.⁶⁶ This precedes any notion of ethical or ontic guilt, products of our misfeasance, malfeasance or non-feasance. Heidegger says that we *are* guilty; guilt is not something that we do; guilty is who and how we are. Our contingency, finitude and fragility are experienced as guilt. At some dimension of our psyche we

60. Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, p. 96.

61. Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, p. 26.

62. Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love*, p. 17.

63. Thomas Merton, 'Solitude', *Spiritual Life* 14.172 (1968), pp. 171-78; cf., *Contemplative Prayer*, p. 29: 'the inner waste of his own being'.

64. Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, p. 96.

65. Cf., Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, p. 26.

66. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, pp. 325-35.

comprehend that our being is not our own. We are like survivors of an air crash: all have died but we alone, and we feel guilty to be in existence. How we got here we do not know; but we do know that our life is not our own. Whether it has been begged, borrowed or stolen, we're aware – at some level – that our existence is leaning hard on nothing, and we feel guilty to be here. We *are* guilty, Heidegger says, and what we must do is simply *be* this being we are; we must embrace our guilt: we must accept our finite, contingent, gratuitous being.

This is exactly the call we now experience. We must enter into our guilt, our insecurity, our dread, agitation and anguish. This is our human and creaturely condition; to reject ourselves is to reject our creator. To flee ourselves is to banish our maker.

The encounter is impossible without faith. The entire engagement, the exhausting – and never ending – journey, is 'ordinarily traveled in darkness. We receive enlightenment only in proportion as we give ourselves more and more completely... We do not first see, then act: we act, then see'.⁶⁷ This is dynamic biblical faith – *pistis*, more aptly translated as *trust*. *Pistis* is a relational word; at root it means confidence in, reliance upon, trust in – and therefore we entrust ourselves *to*.

God is not above using come-ons: God may have 'made himself accessible to our mind in simple and primitive images' or through an occasional and consoling presence, but if we are to deepen and grow, we must be content when God is seemingly absent, 'invisible, inscrutable, and beyond any satisfactory mental representation'.⁶⁸

It is more than likely that the benign Presence will have long ago evaporated into piercing absence, but the Presence was sufficient to indicate our necessary direction: it lies within. Relying on and trusting the incarnating Word – if God embraced our wretched creatureliness, then it must be OK for us to try – we take a deep breath and enter an apparent void. 'The depth of the human abyss...', avers one of Merton's favorite theologians, 'stretches into the depths of God'.⁶⁹ This is the proper domain of the monastic encounter, the depth dimension of our existence. As Merton so often attests, this is 'the level of death, and that can only be reached [in] prayer'.⁷⁰

If prayer alone can penetrate this depth, it 'begins with the acceptance

67. Thomas Merton, *The Ascent to Truth* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1951), p. 48.

68. Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, pp. 96-97.

69. Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, VI (Baltimore: Helicon, 1969), p. 78.

70. Thomas Merton, *Thomas Merton in Alaska: Prelude to the Asian Journal* (New York: New Directions, 1989), p. 157; cf. *idem*, *Contemplative Prayer*, p. 40; *idem*, *Raids*, p. 17.

of my own self in my poverty and my nearness to despair, in order to recognize that where God is there can be no despair...'.⁷¹ God is faithful, and '*my very existence is the sign that God loves me*'.⁷² Throughout the engagement this will creatively sustain us, however we may feel and whatever the ordeal.

Our inner depths resemble nothing so much as a vast, unexplored sea, an 'ocean of unexploited forces'.⁷³ One is forced, in this 'apparently irrational void', to face the relentless duty 'of being [one's] own pilot in a sea that is sometimes treacherous and seldom charted'.⁷⁴

We quickly recognize 'our nothingness and helplessness', which can prove a joyful liberation, but this is also 'a time of hazard and of difficult options' as we remain 'suspended in the void', face to face with fears and doubts and 'with the Abyss of the unknown yet present'.⁷⁵

Entrusting our inner life to providential power, we incipiently abandon habitual defenses that long protected us against inexorable, unconscious forces that were 'too great for us to face naked and without protection'.⁷⁶ We confront the indigence and turmoil of our 'own humanity and that of [our] world at the deepest and most central point where the void seems to open out into black despair'.⁷⁷ Now listening intently 'to the deepest and most neglected voices that proceed from [this] inner depth', one faces the worst, only to be surprised by hope and promise.⁷⁸ 'From the darkness comes light. From death, life. From the abyss there comes, unaccountably, the mysterious gift of the Spirit sent by God to make all things new...'.⁷⁹

Through the multiple tempests of these explorations, we have found ourselves more and more centered or focused. The sham, mask and fabrication of everyday living can never be salvaged, nor would we ever wish that they were. If 'this humble and courageous exposure to what the world ignores about itself—both good and evil'—has issued in excruciating blessings, this essential engagement has also provoked a re-evaluation of our 'self-commitment to the invisible God'.⁸⁰ Moreover, we

71. Thomas Merton, *The Monastic Journey* (ed. Patrick Hart; Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1992), p. 173.

72. Merton, *The Monastic Journey*, p. 173, emphasis added.

73. Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, p. 179.

74. Merton, *Wisdom of the Desert*, p. 9; 'Solitude', p. 172.

75. Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, pp. 86, 96, 38.

76. Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, p. 96.

77. Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, pp. 27–28.

78. Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, pp. 25, 28.

79. Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, p. 28.

80. Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, pp. 27, 96.

begin to see, or at least intuit, that if we must find ourself before we can find God, we must concomitantly find God in order to find our self. Such are the dialectical ironies of paradox. Our identity 'is hidden in obscurity and "nothingness", at the center where we are in direct dependence on God'.⁸¹ Thus, self-realization in the truest sense is 'less an awareness of ourselves than an awareness of the God to whom we are drawn in the depths of our own being'.⁸² From now on, we comprehend, one must stand before God.

Henceforth we seek, in traditional monastic language, 'to "find our heart", that is, to sink into a deep awareness of the ground of our identity before God and in God'.⁸³ The heart is 'the inner sanctuary where self-awareness goes beyond analytical reflection and opens out into metaphysical and theological confrontation with the Abyss...'.⁸⁴ Rather than meditate 'in the mind', focusing on dogmas and mysteries of the Faith, we seek 'a direct existential grasp...of the deepest truths of life and faith, *finding ourselves in God's truth*'.⁸⁵ Endeavoring to reach this center, we seek to dwell in and from 'the deepest ground of our identity in God'.⁸⁶

Here the irony intensifies to an infinitely cruel degree. If our identity, our self, is found only in and through and before God, before God we are nothing.⁸⁷ What is worse, in 'finding' God we find, and have, nothing to hold on to, for we obtain neither a thing nor an object that can be prized. God may be the utterly and wholly other, but 'God is not experienced as an object outside ourselves, as "another being" ...'.⁸⁸ In the 'prayer of the heart', we don't seek 'to know *about* God as though He were an object like other objects'; we seek the source of life and the transcendent ground of being; we seek 'a living contact with the Infinite Source of all being'.⁸⁹

Borrowing a term from Louis Massignon, Merton speaks of the *point vierge* of the spirit, the creative center of our nothingness where we meet and come alive in God.⁹⁰ This 'absolute poverty' is 'untouched by sin

81. Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, p. 87.

82. Merton, *The New Man*, p. 122.

83. Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, p. 87.

84. Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, p. 38.

85. Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, p. 82, cf. pp. 87, 98; Merton's emphasis.

86. Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, p. 82.

87. Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, p. 86, and cf. text at n. 81.

88. Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love*, p. 310.

89. Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, pp. 82, 98; *idem*, *Faith and Violence*, p. 222; Merton's emphasis.

90. Merton, *Conjectures*, pp. 135-36.

and by illusion, a point of pure truth... which belongs entirely to God'.⁹¹ This inscrutable center 'is the pure glory of God in us. It is so to speak His name written in us, as our poverty, as our indigence, as our dependence, as our sonship.'⁹² This poverty or nothingness 'is in fact our being, understood as pure gift, pure affirmation'.⁹³ It is difficult to comprehend that 'what we experience as void (if we experience it at all) is the fullness of a being that is not at our own disposal', yet it is precisely into and through the emptiness and void of our utter indigence that we realize 'the intimate union in the depths of [our] own heart, of God's spirit and [our] own secret inmost self...'.⁹⁴ This union, Merton tells us, is 'not only of minds and hearts, not only of 'I and Thou', but [it is] a transcendent union...in which man and God become, according to the expression of St. Paul, "one spirit"'.⁹⁵

United at this center, where we dwell in Spirit and Truth, we 'will experience the love and mercy of God', Merton promises, 'and find [our] true identity as a person to whom God has been merciful and continues to be merciful'.⁹⁶

In the healing ambience of this mysterious encounter, the quest that began with a recognition and tentative embrace of our vulnerability, limitations, neediness and mortality now blossoms in a graced and transforming restoration as 'we accept ourselves as totally given', a celebration of the gift-giving God.⁹⁷ This is the work of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of kenosis and incarnation, the power – and freedom – by which the Word of God emptied himself and became human, embracing the totality of our condition, not excluding death (Lk. 1.35, Phil. 2.5-8).

Merton underscores that our life should issue from the Spirit's presence within us. 'The foundation of our life is that the Spirit is given and that we are led by the Spirit'.⁹⁸ It is precisely the Spirit 'who is carrying on the work of forming the new creation', transforming and restoring all in Christ.⁹⁹ It is through this Spirit that 'God's love has been poured into our hearts' (Rom. 5.5).

Thus the 'core of our personality in its fullest possible and in its most

91. Merton, *Conjectures*, p. 142.

92. Merton, *Conjectures*, p. 142.

93. Merton, *Conjectures*, p. 243.

94. Merton, *The Monastic Journey*, p. 173.

95. Merton, *Faith and Violence*, p. 222; cf. *idem*, *The Monastic Journey*, p. 173.

96. Merton, *Thomas Merton in Alaska*, p. 160.

97. Merton, *Thomas Merton in Alaska*, p. 161; and see *idem*, *The Asian Journal*, p. 307.

98. Merton, *Thomas Merton in Alaska*, p. 77.

99. Merton, *Thomas Merton in Alaska*, p. 89.

fully developed sense is our response to this Divine Love'.¹⁰⁰ Liberated in the freedom of the Spirit, our restored self 'is not its own center and does not orbit around itself; it is centered on God, the one center of all,...in whom all are encountered, from whom all proceed'.¹⁰¹ In consequence, as a new creation, we are 'disposed to encounter 'the other' with whom [we are] already united anyway "in God"'.¹⁰²

Perforce, our ground, source or center opens out to the entire world. Discovering our own inner ground is 'the way to find the real "world"', entering into 'vital spiritual contact with those around us', for at our center we discover 'a primordial *yes* that is...the "yes" of Being itself...'.¹⁰³ At this center, 'I am mysteriously present at once to my own self and to the freedoms of all other men...'.¹⁰⁴ We are 'ready for the love and service of others', celebrating the reality of all.¹⁰⁵ There can be no doubt, 'if the deepest ground of my being is love, then in that very love itself and nowhere else will I find myself, and the world, and my brother and Christ'.¹⁰⁶

Thus 'our' center and font, we intuit, is a transcendent ground of openness and infinite generosity, affirming and communicating itself to all that is. 'Openness', Merton says, 'is not something to be acquired, but a radical gift that has been lost and must be recovered (though it is still in principle "there" in the roots of our created being)'.¹⁰⁷ In saying this, he is intimating that openness is the image of God. Without openness there is no life, no love, no creation.

Relying on Gregory of Nyssa or, more accurately, Jean Daniélou's

100. Merton, *Thomas Merton in Alaska*, p. 159.

101. Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968), p. 24.

102. Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, p. 24.

103. Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, p. 152; *idem*, *The New Man*, p. 68; *Conjectures*, p. 243, Merton's emphasis; cf. *idem*, *Love and Living*, p. 9.

104. Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, p. 152. Cf. *idem*, *The Asian Journal*, p. 334: 'in each one of us the Christian person is that which is fully open to all other persons'.

105. Merton, *The New Man*, p. 68.

106. Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, p. 153. This paragraph of the present essay employs both ontological (Merton's 'metaphysical') language and the explicitly Christian language of love. About the conflation of these two discourses, that of being and that of love, Merton remarks: 'I would say from the outset that the important thing is not to *oppose* [the] gracious and prophetic concept to the metaphysical and mystical idea of union with God, but to show where the two ideas really seek to express the same kind of consciousness or at least to approach it, in varying ways' (*Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, p. 25, Merton's emphasis).

107. Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, p. 25.

interpretation of Gregory,¹⁰⁸ Merton stresses that we are engaged in a never-ending encounter. *Epektasis*, ever moving beyond ourselves, is 'a basic law of the spirit'; whatever we may realize, whatever may have come to birth within, 'we must pass on to the unknown'.¹⁰⁹ The soul, Gregory says, 'never ceases to stretch forth to what lies before, going out from her present stage to what lies ahead'.¹¹⁰ God continues to draw us onward, so that 'the soul grows by its constant participation in that which transcends it...'.¹¹¹

Merton acknowledges that a monk is a strange and marginal person who has no recognized station or official status in contemporary culture. Remaining outside of all establishments, such a person 'withdraws deliberately to the margins of society with a view to deepening fundamental human experience', impelled by the hunch that accepted and accustomed ways of living grant no entrée to the heart of life and that life, especially Christian life, demands a trek into the wilderness of one's own forbidding interior.¹¹² The doubt and self-questioning underlying all life, and exponentially aggravated by the presence of death, must be negotiated as we 'pierce through the irrelevance of our life, while accepting and admitting that our life is totally irrelevant'.¹¹³ There can be no 'relevance', we discern, without transcending ourselves, and we transcend ourselves precisely by embracing the contingent, creaturely, finite existence that is graciously ours, incarnating through the creative and incarnating Word. Recognizing our powerlessness and encountering our poverty through and through, this self-transcending ultimately draws us to 'the inner ground of our being where [God] is present to us as our creative source, as the fount of redemptive light and grace'.¹¹⁴

Our struggles are 'sometimes intolerable', Merton admits, but '[t]he Spirit within our heart cries out to the Father', he paraphrases St. Paul; and we know this is with 'sighs too deep for words' (Rom. 8.26).¹¹⁵ Dedicated 'to rebirth, to growth, to final maturity and integration', the

108. Introduction to Gregory of Nyssa, *From Glory to Glory: Texts from Gregory of Nyssa's Mystical Writings* (ed. Jean Daniélou; trans. Herbert Musurillo; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961), pp. 56-71.

109. Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love*, p. 354.

110. Gregory of Nyssa, *Commentary on the Songs of Songs* (trans. Casimir McCambley; Brookline, MA: Hellenic College Press, 1987), p. 223. Cf. Phil. 3.13-14.

111. Gregory of Nyssa, *From Glory to Glory*, p. 190.

112. Merton, *The Asian Journal*, p. 305.

113. Merton, *The Asian Journal*, p. 307; cf. *idem*, *Contemplative Prayer*, p. 26.

114. Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, p. 101.

115. Thomas Merton, 'Toward a Theology of Prayer', *Cistercian Studies* 13 (1978), pp. 191-99 (192, 198).

marginal monk seeks 'to go beyond death even in this life, to go beyond the dichotomy of life and death and to be, therefore, a witness to life'.¹¹⁶

When Merton says that the monastic impulse is essentially lay, that is, non-clerical or non-priestly, he not only ratifies Benedict's basic insight, but also indicates that not being institutionally religious is no barrier to the depth dimension of the monastic encounter.¹¹⁷ Being a 'lay' (a purely canonical cipher) Christian is in itself no detriment, although the monastic life does require discipline, and serious discipline, that the cloister can protect and promote. Nevertheless, Merton might add, with one of his impish grins, 'the real contemplative standard is to have no standard, to be just yourself. That's what God is asking of us, to be ourselves.'¹¹⁸

'Be human', Father Louis urges us, 'in this most inhuman of ages; guard the image of man for it is the image of God'.¹¹⁹

116. Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, p. 210; *idem*, *The Asian Journal*, p. 306.

117. Walter Capps, *Thomas Merton: Preview to the Asian Journey* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), p. 49. Merton says: 'Oh, yes, I should not be a priest. I didn't want to be a priest, but it was part of the system, so I became one... But the monk should not be a priest. The monk is a layperson in the desert, who is not incorporated into the hierarchy. The monk has nothing to do with an establishment.' Cf. *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, ch. 60.

118. Merton, quoted in David Steindl-Rast, 'Recollections of Thomas Merton's Last Days in the West', *Monastic Studies* 7 (1969), pp. 1-10 (5).

119. Merton, *Raids*, p. 6.