FAITH SEEKING UNDERSTANDING

THOMAS MERTON'S INTEREST IN KARL BARTH

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C O N T E N T S

ABSTRACT

This study evaluates Thomas Merton's interest in Karl Barth, an interest centered on two important, though sometimes misunderstood, figures in Barth's theology: Anselm and Mozart. Merton finds in Barth not a theology that he can entirely agree with, but a theological method he considers primary. This method is called 'faith seeking understanding.' Both Barth and Merton begin with Christ in their search for understanding: Barth, in the *Logos* of God and Merton, in the *Sophia* of God. The movement from revelation to theological understanding and religious experience provides Merton the freedom to engage his religious other while avoiding both apologetics and syncretism.

RÉSUMÉ

Cette étude analyse l'intérêt de Thomas Merton pour Karl Barth, un intérêt centré sur deux figures importantes, bien que parfois incomprises, présentes dans la théologie de Barth : Anselme et Mozart. Merton voit chez Barth non pas une théologie qu'il approuve entièrement, mais plutôt une méthode théologique qu'il considère de la plus haute importance. Cette méthode est appelée 'la foi en quête de compréhension.' Merton et Barth débutent tous deux avec le Christ dans leur quête de compréhension: Barth, avec le Christ en tant que *Logos* de Dieu, et Merton, avec le Christ en tant que *Sagesse* de Dieu. Le mouvement de la révélation à la compréhension théologique et à l'expérience religieuse procure à Merton la liberté de s'ouvrir religieusement à l'autre, tout en évitant autant l'apologétique que le syncrétisme.

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ABBREVIATIONS

for Writings by Merton [1.1/1.2/1.3] and Others [2/3] *

AcF	[2]	Kilcourse, Ace of Freedoms, 1993
AsJ	[1.1]	Merton, Asian Journal, 1973
AmBR	[1.3]	Merton, St. Anselm and His Argument, 1965
ArAn	[3]	Boutin, L'argument d'Anselme, 1990
AsTr	[1.3]	Merton, Ascent to Truth, 1951
CC	[1.3]	Merton, Christian Culture & Oriental wisdom, 1962
CD		Recorded Conferences by Merton
CD II.1	[3]	Barth, Church Dogmatics II.1, 2004
CGB	[1.3]	Merton, Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander, 1966
CoT	[l.3]	Merton, Courage for Truth, 1993
CWA	[1.3]	Merton, Contgemplation in a World of Action, 1971
DO	[3]	Barth, Dogmatics in Outline, 1959
DST	[2]	Grayston, T. Merton: Development of a Spiritual Theologian, 1985
DWL	[1.1]	Merton, Dancing in the Water of Life, 1997
EnS	[1.1]	Merton, Entering the Silence, 1996
FaV	[1.3]	Merton, Faith & Violence, 1968
FQI	[3]	Barth, Fides Quaerens Intellectum, 1953
GNV	[1.2]	Merton, Gandhi & Non-Violence, 1965
HCT	[3]	Tillich, History of Christian Thought, 1968
HeBl	[2]	Higgins, Heretic Blood, 1998
HGL	[1.2]	Merton, Hidden Grund of Love, 1985
HW	[1.2]	Merton, At Home in the world, 1995
IE	[1.3]	Merton, Inner Experience, 2004
InCM	[1.3]	Merton, Introduction to Christian Mysticism, 2008
LaL	[1.3]	Merton, Love & Living, 1980
LeL	[1.1]	Merton, Learning to Love, 1997
LH	[1.2]	Merton, Life & Holiness, 1963
LiE	[1.2]	Merton, Literary Essays, 1981
LLD	[3]	Leclercq, Love of Learning & Desire for God, 1961
MAG	[1.3]	Merton, My Arguments with the Gestapo, 1975
MerH	[2]	Dieker & Montaldi, eds. Merton & Hesychasm, 2003
MonS	[1.3]	Merton, Reflections on Recent Studies of Anselm, 1965
MZM	[1.3]	Merton, Mystics & Zen Masters, 1967
NM	[1.3]	Merton, New Man, 1995
NSC	[1.3]	Merton, New Seeds of Contemplation, 1962
OB	[1.3]	Merton, Opening the bible, 1970
OSM	[1.1]	Merton, Other Side of the Mountain, 1998

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* See bibliography. – Other abbreviations are indicated in Siegfried M. Schwertner, *International Glossary of Abbreviations for Theology and Related Subjects*. Berlin & New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1992, 2nd ed.

RaU [1.3] Merton, Raids on the Unspeakable, 1966
RNPT Merton, Reading Notebooks (see p. 12, note 1)
RoJ [1.3] Merton, Road to Joy, 1989
ScCh [1.2] Merton, School of Charity, 1990
SeD [1.3] Merton, Seeds of Contemplation, 1967
SfS [1.1] Merton, Search for Solitude, 1996
SSM [1.3] Merton, Seven Storey Mountain, 1998
SWS [2] Carr, Search for Wisdom & Spirit, 1998
ThC [3] Tillich, Theology of Culture, 1959
TKB [3] Balthasar, Theology of Karl Barth, 1951
TMV [2] Cunningham, T. Merton & Monastic Vision, 1999
TTW [1.1] Merton, Turning Toward the World, 1996
TWS [2] Thurston, Tradition of Wisdom & Spirit, 1995
VTM [2] O'Connell, Vision of T. Merton, 2003
WAM [3] Barth, W. A. Mozart, 1956
WaS [l.3] Merton, Waters of Siloe, 1979
WCSS [3] Metzger, Word of Christ & World of Culture: Sacred & Secular, 2003
WCT [1.3] Merton, Way of Chuang Tzu, 1965
WGWM [3] Barth, Word of God & Word of Man, 1957
WiF [1.2] Merton, Witness to Freedom, 1994
ZBA [1.3] Merton, Zen & Birds of Appetite, 1968

INTRODUCTION

Thomas Merton and Karl Barth may seem like strange bedfellows: Merton, a pioneer of interreligious dialogue, and Barth, a staunch defender of true religion as revelation; Merton, who possessed a generous natural theology, and Barth, who famously declared, "Nein!" to Emil Brunner on the possibility of a natural theology and moreover proclaimed that he regarded the *analogia entis* as "the invention of the antichrist" (CD II.1, 81ff); Merton, a modern mystic, and Barth, a theologian of 'mediate' and allegedly 'objective' truth; Merton, who did much to reinvigorate monasticism within the growing secularization of the Western world, and Barth, who rejected any 'rule' apart from simple obedience. The chasm that seems to separate these two theologies might appear unbridgeable. However, Merton himself saw not only commonality, but even the necessity of a perspective like Barth's.

If nothing else, Merton and Barth share a fateful day: December 10, 1968. Together they would grace the front page of the *New York Times* in the obituaries. Although they died on the same day, Barth had already lived a long life (born in 1886), while Merton, born in 1915, died abruptly by accidental electrocution during his Asian journey. Both men influenced a generation through successful religious literary production, and both were active and influential in social resistance: Barth, against Nazi Germany through the Confessing Church, and Merton, for civil liberties during the American black civil rights movement, and against the Vietnam War and nuclear proliferation in general. While it is highly unlikely that Barth ever read anything of Merton's works, Merton read at least a little of Barth.

Thomas Merton's interest in Karl Barth represents a small but significant piece in the puzzle of Merton studies. As Merton moved into the 'world' in the latter part of his life through inter-religious dialogue, social criticism, and even romantic involvement with his nurse, "M," Karl Barth's words reminded Merton in various ways of the 'wholly other' God and His unique work in the world through his incarnate Son. Merton and Barth approached theology – and God! – in radically different ways, but Merton was challenged by the prophetic voice of evangelical Christianity that he found in Barth.

Through consistent, empathetic, and careful interaction with Barth's thought in the last decade of his life, Thomas Merton not only appreciated but even praised and utilized Barth's theological vision. The problem is that some of Merton's interpreters are willing to look at Merton through the lens of experience alone. To be sure, Merton was taking the experiential aspects of Christianity very seriously. He is quite rightly called a modern Christian mystic, rooted as he was in the apophatic tradition and theologically at home writing from his own experience of God. His early and continued interest in the American and English romantics – especially William Blake (1757-1827) – provides thorough evidence of Merton's appreciation for God's immanence. But it must also be stated that Thomas Merton 'liked' Karl Barth, and that very few have said it.[1]

The point of this study is not to discredit that which has been said, and said again, concerning Merton as a spiritual and mystical theologian, for this really is the true Merton. Of course, at times, this will become a duty when it seems apparent that certain

[1] There is no need for an extensive overview of the secondary literature on this topic. Our focus is sufficiently narrow that there is little in the way of previous scholarship. However, for a brief introduction see W. Clancy, "Karl Barth and Thomas Merton: Grace as Demand" (1969 – see # 2): 11; C. Scovel, "Mozart, Merton, and Karl Barth" (1991 – see # 2): 5-8; and, very recently and more significantly, a lecture given by R. Williams on the fortieth anniversary of their deaths (December 10, 2008): "Not Being Serious: Thomas Merton and Karl Barth," http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/2070.

words about Merton have neglected his larger vision. The purpose of this study is to rebalance the common picture of Merton. One may also call it a theological minority report: a simple reminder of the complexity of Merton's thought, and also of some of its ambiguity. By the end of his life Merton was on the front line of the Church's involvement with the world, and there is no special reason to believe that he had things 'worked out' in his mind – let alone in his writing – when he so abruptly died. Merton was wrestling with very diverse ideas and was trying somehow to hold them together within his own person. The few comments that we have from Merton on Karl Barth portray a monk who was willing to wrestle with the difficult question of the relationship between revelation and religious experience. In fact, Merton was unwilling to evade the challenge of God's breaking into the world in Jesus Christ even if that meant a convenient theology of religions or a simplistic basis upon which to build a common ground for peace. Instead, Merton placed the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation at the very centre of his thought and life in an attempt to hold all things together in Jesus Christ.

This study is placed under the heading of 'faith seeking understanding.' It is an investigation into theological epistemology insofar as it seeks to understand how Merton did refer God's self-revelation to humans; it is a theology of culture insofar as one recognizes Merton's intense desire to contribute to a peaceful world; it is also a theology of interreligious dialogue, since Merton saw mutual understanding through dialogue to be a significant means toward this peaceful end. All this is rooted in Merton's interest in Barth and in the theological 'program' of faith seeking understanding.

Chapter one of this study deals with preliminary issues that contextualize Merton's interest in Barth, and the following two chapters are the substance of the

argument. Chapter two deals with Merton's interest in Anselm through Barth, and chapter three deals with Merton's interest in Mozart, also through Barth. Facing the so-called rationalism of Anselm, Merton affirms Anselm's use of reason rooted in the *Logos* of God, while covertly emphasizing the experiential aspects of faith; exploring religious experience through Mozart, Merton affirms the use of wisdom rooted in the *Sophia* of God, while covertly emphasizing the continued importance of the Bible and doctrine for faith.

These two themes in Merton are by no means a new discovery. Lawrence Cunningham sums them up best: "It was this figure of Christ who is both Word and Wisdom, through whom the world is created and sustained, that gave [Merton] a fundamental contemplative principle both for his life of prayer and his conviction about the spiritual unity of humanity" (TMV 11). The purpose of this study is to show how these themes were developed in a very particular way around Merton's interest in Karl Barth. Fundamentally, Thomas Merton saw in Karl Barth an incarnational theology beginning with faith in Christ and then seeking understanding in reason and wisdom, which serves as a revealed 'point of contact' for engagement with the world.

C H AP T E R O N E

BARTH AND REVELATION

1.1 Merton, Reader of Barth: A Brief Survey

A superficial glance at some of Merton's more popular writings is enough to convince one that he was interested in Barth, although his thought is foreign to Barth's theological perspective. However, in order to grasp the depth of many of Merton's popular works of spirituality, it is necessary to dig into some of his theological engagements.

Merton immersed himself in the writings of the Church Fathers, he took very seriously his duty as Master of Scholastics at the monastery of Gethsemani (in Kentucky), and he was continually in contact with some of the most important theologians of his day. Looking through the volumes of his now published journals[1] and the six volumes of his written correspondence, one can see the wealth of influences that Merton consistently drew upon. By no means was Karl Barth as important to Merton as was Jacques Maritain (1882-1973), but his name is right up there with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Paul Tillich, Rudolf Bultmann, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Teilhard de Chardin, or Karl Rahner to name a few. Nor can we say that Merton was wholly in agreement with Barth. In fact, he distanced himself from Barth quite dramatically on occasion. On the Protestant side Merton was more in accord with

[1] For the majority of his adult life, Merton kept a journal that was not to be published until twenty-five years after his death. This mine for Merton scholarship was finally published between the years of 1995 and 1998 (see # 1.1). - Aside from these journals, Merton also kept so-called 'Reading Notebooks' (RNPT) made up primarily of quotes from various authors and then his own notes and interactive comments. This unpublished material may be accessed at the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer; on the Catholic side, as a young man he learned much from Jacques Maritain and in his later days his interest grew toward von Balthasar and Rahner. However, Merton did engage with Barth in a fruitful manner, considering him as a guard against some of the more extreme modern theologies that were neglecting the traditional in favour of friendship with 'the world.'

There are two errors to avoid in evaluating Merton's interest in Barth. Merton must not be judged in the light of Barth's rigorous thinking. This would not be fair to a "theologian of experience"[2] who never intended to lay out his theology in an orderly way, and Barth's theological precision would certainly crush the creative output of Merton. Second, Barth must not be judged in the light of Merton's knowledge of him. While Merton had a certain interest in Barth, he did not read enough to have a full appreciation of his theology. Merton read several works that spanned Barth's career, though only enough of Barth's later writings to have glimpses into the evangelical theologian's amenability to Catholic theology,[3] although Barth's early thought intentionally set out to distinguish Catholic from Protestant theology. Our task is to show the extent to which Merton found common ground with Karl Barth, and how Barth actually influenced Merton's thought. It is also to propose an even more substantial agreement between Merton and Barth than perhaps even Merton himself was able to envision.

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[2] Merton is consistently called by scholars a "theologian of experience" or a "spiritual theologian" in line with the great monastic theological tradition. See for example D. Grayston, *Thomas Merton: The Development of a Spiritual Theologian* (1985 – see bibliography # 2). For a particularly lucid discussion of spiritual (or "monastic") theology, see J. Leclercq's chapter "Monastic Theology," in LLD 233-86. - Merton notes in *The Ascent to Truth* (AsTr 121) that many theologians are also mystics. He refers to Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure, Augustine, Bernard of Clairvaux, and Gregory of Nyssa. Merton actually calls mysticism, "theology as experience" (AsTr 133).

[3] Barth's later theology accepts the classical formulation of grace building upon nature. See for instance K. Barth, *The Humanity of God* (1960 – German original, 1956; see bibliography # 3).

There is no evidence that Barth had any interest in Merton. And it must be admitted that much of Merton's interest in Barth can be credited simply on the popularity Barth enjoyed in the theological world, beginning with his *Epistle to the Romans* (first edition 1919; second edition 1922) and continuing through his monumental *Church Dogmatics* (1936-69). Anyone serious about theological inquiry in the years between the two World Wars had to read Barth. However, American interest in Barth lagged behind that of Europe in large part because of a language barrier. Merton was no exception: he had studied German in school (DWL 91 [3/19/64]), but he was not fluent enough to read complex theology without great effort.[4] Therefore, by no means was Merton on the forefront of Catholic interest in neo-orthodoxy.

Merton's awareness of Barth dates back to his 1941 novel, *My Argument with the Gestapo*.[5] In this novel, he simply lists Barth's name alongside William Blake, Jakob Boehme, and Gautama Buddha, rounding out the reading list of one of his fictional characters (MAG 142). However, not until 1960 is there evidence that Merton was himself reading Barth. Merton's private journals, held from publication until twenty-five years after his death, contain twenty-one separate entries that refer to Barth between the years of 1960 and 1967.[6] Many of these references are redacted and published in

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[4] In a letter dated September 27, 1964, Merton writes to Hans Urs von Balthasar that he is reading the first volume of *Herrlichkeit,* but that he is working through it very slowly and with much difficulty (ScCh 241). Later Merton would switch to the French translation, although he found it deficient (ScCh 312; LeL 91). Merton and von Balthasar would correspond primarily in French.

[5] Merton, a young English professor at St. Bonaventure University, only two years after completing his master's degree at Columbia University on William Blake and only months away from entering the Cistercian monastery called Gethsemani, wrote in 1941 a manuscript he titled, *Journal of My Escape From the Nazis*, first published in 1969 as: *My Argument With the Gestapo* (see bibliography # 1.3).

[6] These references range from simply mentioning Barth's name to paragraph long quotations with Merton's commentary following: TTW 47 (9/14/1960); TTW 48 (9/16/1960); TTW 49 (9/16/1960); TTW 49-50 (9/17/1960); TTW 51 (9/23/1960); TTW 155 (8/22/1961); DWL 7 (8/13/1963); DWL 20 (9/30/1963); DWL 22 (10/4/1963); DWL 23 (10/7/1963); DWL 24 (10/9/1963); DWL 26-7 (10/24/1963); DWL 27 (10/26/1963); DWL 27 (10/27/1963); DWL 28-29 (10/28/1963); DWL 29 (10/29/1963); DWL 86 (3/6/1964); DWL 91 (3/19/1964); DWL 279 (8/12/65); LeL 12 (1/28/1966); LeL 248 (6/10/67).

Merton's popular book *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*.[7] Between 1963 and 1967 Merton mentions Barth's name on eight separate occasions in letters to various correspondents.[8] Barth's name appears in several other books by Merton[9] and, notably, Merton takes up Barth's thought in 1967 in his short, posthumously published book called *Opening the Bible*.[10] Most significantly of all, Merton draws on Barth's book, *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum* (1931), in his own evaluation of Anselm's contemplative theology[11] and in two articles on Anselm's life and thought (1965, 1966), expressly informed by Barth's book. (more on this in chapter 2)

Living in the monastery Merton's reading of contemporary literature and theology was limited primarily to the books friends and correspondences would send him. It is not always easy to tell what exactly Merton read of Barth because Merton is not meticulous about citing his sources in his journals or his books. However, given the restricted date range most of his references to Barth fall within, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that his reading of Barth was quite limited. The following material represents the majority of Merton's library on Barth. Beyond the two sources mentioned above, *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum* (1931) and *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (1928),[12] Merton also read a collection of Barth's essays on *Christmas* (1931) in 1960,[13] his

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[7] 1966. - See CGB iv, 3, 8-9, 10-11, 144, 176, 182, 284, 288-89, 303-05, 311, 317.
[8] Father Kilian McDonnel (ScCh 189 [12/20/63]); R.J. Zwi Werblowsky (HGL 586 [01/01/64]); Hans Urs von Balthasar (ScCh 219 [7/3/64] & ScCh 312 [9/12/66]); Karl Rahner (HGL 497 [3/16/64]); Julien Green (CoT 273 [9/22/63]); Maso Abe (WiF 331 [5/12/67]).
[9] See SeD 150; FaV 191, 237; MZM 191; ZBA 5, 17.
[10] 1970. - Merton draws substantially on WGWM 27, 34-36, 85.
[11] See "St. Anselm and His Argument" (1966 – see bibliography # 1.3) and "Reflections on some Recent Studies of St. Anselm" (1965 – see bibliography # 1.3).
[12] These two books may still be found in Merton's preserved library at the Thomas Merton Center in Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY. The former Merton read in the French translation by Jean Carrère, *La Preuve de l'Existence de Dieu* (Delachaux & Niestlé, 1958), although Merton had access to the English translation for some time at least (AmBR 248).
[13] See TTW 47 & 48. - Merton describes this publication as "essays (homilies) on Christmas" and the editor, Victor A. Kramer, inserts the following notation: "[translated by Berhard Citron, London, 1959]."

Dogmatics in Outline (1959) in 1963,[14] and Barth's short book *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart* (1956) in 1960.[15] In response to this final book Merton writes a journal entry that evolves and finds its way to the opening pages of *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (3-4). Although this pericope by Merton on "Barth's Dream" is whimsical and free, it speaks to the heart of Merton's reservations toward Barth and will therefore provide the fulcrum upon which our third chapter will rest.

With regard to secondary literature, the only evidence that Merton read works about Karl Barth may be found in his two articles on Anselm. The first footnote in his "Reflections on some Recent Studies of St. Anselm" refers the reader to Henri Bouillard's article, "La preuve de Dieu dans le *Proslogion* et son interprétation par K. Barth."[16] Likewise, the second footnote in Merton's "St. Anselm and His Argument" cites the same article by Henri Bouillard, and moreover refers the reader to Bouillard's three volume study of *Karl Barth* (Paris, 1957).[17] Merton quotes Bouillard who suggests that *Fides Quaerens Intellectum* is "the key to Barth's *Dogmatik*," a fact that Hans Urs

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Merton indicates their subject matter (at least what is interesting to him) to be "The gratuity of Agape, the helplessness and transiency of Eros" (47), as well as a section on faith that he appreciates and comments upon (48).

[14] Trans. G. T. Thomson (New York: Harper & Row, 1959). See DWL 20, 23, 26, 27, 29; CGB 303, 311; see also RNPT 56 where Merton quotes Barth in a line G. Kilcourse picks up on as the title of his book on Merton's Christology, *Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton's Christ* (1993 – see bibliography # 2): Barth says, "Tell me how it stands with your Christology and I will tell you who you are" (DO 66). - I have not exhausted the material on Barth available in Merton's *Reading Notebooks*. Paul M. Pearson, the director of the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University (Louisville, KY), informed me that there are additional *Reading Notebooks* held at Syracuse University (Syracuse, NY) that contain references to Barth, and I have not thoroughly scanned all *Reading Notebooks* at the Thomas Merton Center. Rather than providing an extensive historical background to Merton's interest in Barth I have chosen to focus on some of the theological themes that are important for the present study.

[15] Trans. Clarence K. Pott (1986 – see bibliography # 3); see TTW 49, 50. - Although Merton never explicitly cites this text, comprised of four brief essays on Mozart, his various quotations make it quite clear that he had access to all four essays in some form or another.

[16] *Spicilegium Beccense* (Paris: Vrin, 1959), pp. 191ff.

[17] As Kilcourse suggests, "there is evidence that Merton had read Henri Bouillard's *Karl Barth"* (AcF 246, note 84). - This suggestion is due to Merton's reference in this article.

von Balthasar first pointed out in his important volume on *The Theology of Karl Barth*[18] and that Barth himself concedes – pointing to von Balthasar – in the "Preface to the Second Edition" of his *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum* (FQI 11). It would seem that Merton was never able to read von Balthasar's classic study, expressing in a letter to von Balthasar his desire to do so but citing his difficulty with German as an obstacle. (ScCh 312 [9/12/66])

Merton's ambivalent opinion about Barth may easily be seen in a letter he writes to Father Kilian McDonnell on December 20, 1963; his words describing Barth are indeed complimentary, and still, he immediately qualifies his praise by expressing one of his concerns with Protestant theology in general:

> I have read a little Barth this year and like him very much indeed. You will, I hope, see an article of mine on Anselm in the ABR [American Benedictine Review], which deals with Barth's study among other things. I think that Barth is almost the one among theologians alive today that I like best, not that I am a great reader of contemporary theology. I am about to begin Rahner's new book (*Christian Commitment*). One of the problems that preoccupies me in dealing with Protestant theologians is their apparent complete discounting of nature and of the fact that man is made in the image and likeness of God, and that grace is a "new nature," etc. I can see the beauty and austerity of the approach and its religious impact is profound and in many ways very Christian, but at the same time one cannot, it seems to me, be fully Christian and neglect the other approach, Greek though it may sound. (ScCh 189)

In these words, some of the major themes that dominate Merton's evaluation of Protestant theology – especially in his book *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* – are in capsule form. Throughout his writings Merton will accuse Barth of discounting nature,

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[18] Hans Urs von Balthasar's thesis aims to show that Barth's theological approach moved from dialectic to analogy, which enabled him to preserve God's good creation. However, Barth develops what he calls the *analogia fidei* in opposition to the *analogia entis*, the latter being for him the fundamental error in Catholic theology. Von Balthasar sees this shift occurring first in Barth's *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum*. – It would be too far afield to discuss whether and to what extent Barth's *analogia fidei* could be more precisely called *analogia relationis*, as Hans-Rudolf Müller-Schwefe suggests in *Der Standort der Theologie in unserer Zeit* ([series "Kleine Vandenhoeck-Reihe," 62]. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1961, 2nd ed.), pp. 62 & 65-67. On this see Maurice Boutin, *Relationalität als Verstehensprinzip bei Rudolf Bultmann* ([series "Beiträge zur evangelischen Theoplogie," 67]. Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1974), pp. 340-41.

and he leans instead toward Dietrich Bonhoeffer's theology. He points to Barth's 'austere' faith in contrast to his own desire to promote Christian culture, and he continually wrestles with the Hellenization of Catholic theology, particularly the influence of Greek philosophy upon Christian mysticism.

It would lead too far afield to contextualize and analyze Merton's every statement on Barth. The goal here is to provide the reader with a general analysis of Merton's interest in, and disagreement with, Barth. Focusing primarily on *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander,* this chapter will refer back to Merton's published journals from which the content of *Conjectures* is drawn. His own qualification in approaching Protestantism is important to begin with:

> Though there are frequent references to Barth and Bonhoeffer, among others, this is not a book of professional ecumenism.[…] On the contrary, the approach is completely personal, informal, and tentative. I simply record ways in which theologians like Barth have entered quite naturally and easily into my personal and monastic reflections, indeed, into my own Christian world-view. To put it plainly, the book attempts to show how in actual fact a Catholic monk is able to read Barth and identify with him in much the same way as he would read a Catholic author like Maritain – or indeed a Father of the Church. This is not a critical – if sympathetic – analysis of Protestant thought by a Catholic, but a Catholic sharing the Protestant experience – and other religious experiences as well. This is not to say that I am in perfect agreement with everything in Barth and Bonhoeffer, still less in J.A.T. Robinson. That would be impossible, since, in the first place, these writers are not in agreement with each other, and all of them make statements which a Catholic would not readily accept as they stand. Nevertheless, some of their books have proved relevant and stimulating to me in a cloistered and contemplative monastery. In the climate of the Second Vatican Council, this no longer requires apology or justification. (CGB vi)

Kilcourse quotes this passage in *Ace of Freedoms* (AcF 110) and thus reminds that Merton is sharing in "the Protestant experience," but not attempting a critical "analysis of Protestant thought." That being said, Merton is hardly atheological in his various musings; the difference is a matter more of style than of content.

Merton briefly notes his fondness for Barth in letters to both Karl Rahner (HGL 497 [3/16/64]), and to Hans Urs von Balthasar (ScCh 219 [6/3/64]). However, his interest in Barth exceeds simply quoting him here and there, or affirming his appreciation of the evangelical theologian in one-line quips. There is sufficient evidence to suggest that Merton evaluated and even incorporated some of Barth's thinking into his own. The aspect of Barth's theology that intrigued Merton was the relationship between nature and grace. Even more significant is what von Balthasar calls their epistemological equivalent: reason and faith (TKB 136-37). How may God be known? Through the revelation of his creation, or only through the special revelation of God in Jesus Christ? That both the order of creation and salvation are a matter of revelation is a significant fact that must be emphasized for both Barth and Merton. Kilcourse narrows in on this by suggesting that Merton's interest in Barth coincides with von Balthasar's following affirmation of Barth that "The natural order, for all its inner laws and conditions, ultimately rests upon *a gratuitious happening (the Incarnation) and the history that flows from it*."[19]

To sum up Merton's interest in Barth, one could say that he viewed Barth's theology as one half of the picture: limited, unbalanced, and yet true. Barth himself would hold a similar view of his early theology in 1956: the emphasis on the deity of God to the neglect of God's humanity.[20] Merton continually uses Barth as one pole of his own

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[19] AcF 246, note 84, quoting TKB 266. - There is evidence that Merton recognized this as Barth's position: "Barth's concept of evil – that to which God has denied existence, and which we affirm by our choice. The world is grace, resting entirely in the word of grace which is creation" (TTW 24 [10/9/63]). However, Merton criticizes Barth for demeaning nature, or at least not carrying his Incarnational theology through to its logical conclusions. We must keep in mind the limited picture Merton had of Barth and of the changes Barth made over his lifetime. As we progress it will become apparent that Merton saw two sides to Barth he was not totally able to reconcile.

[20] Barth re-evaluated his position as a young theologian, without making corrections to his previous work, in a lecture given in 1956 on *The Humanity of God* (see bibliography # 3) in which he acknowledges that formerly he emphasized the deity of God and that now he must emphasize God's humanity. He argues that the former was a "true word," though only "partially in the right" (*The Humanity of God,* 42).

search for truth. He pits Barth against other theologians in an attempt to work out his own synthesis, and often he finds Barth salutary for his attempt.

1.2 An Unprincipled Reality

Merton contrasts Barth over against Gemistus Pletho who wanted to revive the Olympian gods; Merton calls him a "pitiful, symptomatic, symbolic figure of the humanist renaissance," whereas Barth comes "with his earnest, reforming Christianity, and his insistence that the Incarnation makes it impossible to invent even a Christian god – or to reach into 'the infinite' to select our own concepts (idols) of them. Two extremes, but Barth is salutary. There is so much truth there, so much of the Gospel."[21] Merton then quotes Barth: "Revelation never has a recognizable form, its wisdom and power can never be proved, its triumph is never apparent, its success is not tangible and its benefit not for immediate enjoyment," – and comments: "Never? Never! Still, though too absolute, acceptable." Although here Merton calls Barth's position "too absolute," something about Barth's attitude toward revelation resonates with him. Kilcourse suggests that the nature of revelation as "the primary act of God's gratuity" would have rung true with the monk's "experience of *lectio divina*, the monastic reading of Scripture as the event (*dabar*) of grace" (AcF 110). The revelation of God in Jesus Christ must remain in Merton's eyes spontaneous and free, which does not mean chaotic but rather unsystematic, more specifically personal instead of deterministic. Kilcourse calls "Christ's epiphany […] surprise, gift." (AcF 110)

Before the passage on Barth and Pletho, Merton quotes Barth in his *Christmas* sermon: "The eternal light which entered the world at Bethlehem, is, if its testimony can

[21] TTW 49 (9/16/60). - Pletho was a Byzantine philosopher, born ca. 1355 in Constantinople (editor's note).

be trusted, certainly the most unprincipled reality one can imagine. The fact that God became man cannot be kept in a system. […] It cannot be proved." (TTW 48 [9/16/60]; see also CGB 9). For although humanity is made in the image of God, God's ways are higher and God's will cannot be equated with our own. The concept of proof here will take on great import as Merton seeks to understand Barth's view of Anselm: for Barth, 'proof' means striving after God without the need of God's assistance, that is, grace. In this respect Merton wholeheartedly agrees with Barth: whether one speaks of 'wisdom' or 'power' or, in the case of Anselm, 'reason,' one cannot reach God – or 'invent even a Christian god' – apart from the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

1.3 Taking God Seriously

Merton's above commentary on Barth's *Christmas* sermons introduces a persistent thread through his journals based on the word 'serious' that may be followed for years to come.[22] Seriousness as an issue is a matter of standing in the middle of God's justice and mercy, and of refusing to take either lightly. By the "eternal light which […] is […] the most unprincipled reality one can imagine," Merton understands Barth to mean "the eternal light to believe in the Gospel and not take *one's own convictions* quite so seriously. To be, therefore, merciful" (TTW 48). Three years later the term resurfaces in "A magnificent line from Karl Barth:"

> Everyone who has to contend with unbelief should be advised that he ought not to take his own unbelief too seriously. Only faith is to be taken seriously; and if we have faith as a grain of mustard seed, that suffices, for the devil has lost his game. (DO 20. - See DWL 20 [9/30/63] and also CGB 303)

[22] In his journals, Merton's use of the term 'serious' is often directly related to his study of Barth (see for instance TTW 48 (9/16/60); DWL 20 (9/30/63); DWL 26 (10/24/63); DWL 27 (10/26/63); DWL 27 (10/27/63); also CGB 317, and a letter to Julien Green (CoT 273 [9/22/1966]). - The continuity becomes clear in *Conjectures* as Merton strings together his various meanderings on Barth into a sequence of thought culminating in a discussion on heresy (CGB 303-07); more on this in chapter 2.

Merton comments extensively on this passage in *Conjectures*, heartily agreeing with Barth (CGB 304), although he applies Barth's advice to the Catholic emphasis on 'good works.' He suggests that good works "are necessary but they are not to be '*taken seriously*.' The Catholic dogma of justification never told anyone that he had to take his good works *seriously* in the sense of trusting completely in his own righteousness, for to take one's good works seriously is to be a Pharisee." Merton's insightful commentary points away from faith as something within oneself that one may "possess," "watch," or be "obsessed" about, and toward God as some-One who may be "trusted."[23] He writes: "In taking faith seriously it is God whom we take seriously, not ourselves, not our faith. I do not take faith seriously as something which I definitely possess, but I take seriously God Who gives me faith and renews that gift, by His mercy, at every moment, in spite of my unbelief" (CGB 304). "This," he adds, "is one of the central intuitions of evangelical Christianity, and it is something which we must all learn."

The issue of seriousness works its way even into Merton's literary criticism. On October 26, 1963, he copies in his journal the following words by Barth:

> One thing still holds, and only this one thing is really serious, that Jesus is the victor. A seriousness that would look back past this, like Lot's wife, is not Christian seriousness. It may be burning behind – and truly it is burning – but we have to look not at it but at the other fact, that we are visited and summoned to take seriously the victory of God's glory in this man Jesus and to be joyful in Him. (DWL 27 [10/26/63]; see DO 123)

These words by Barth draw Merton back to the novel by Julien Green, *Chaque homme dans sa nuit* (1961), and he applies Barth's thought to the novel.

> This is appropriate to what I was thinking about the grim and fearful seriousness with which Julien Green takes evil. […] The fear that one's obsession with evil

[23] In his journal Merton says, "Faith is not important as it is 'in us.' Our faith is 'in God,' and with even a very little of it, God is in us" (DWL 20 [9/30/63]).

> may be a sign of not being "of the elect.[…]" Certainly we tend to *experience* evil more than good – that divine good which is present to us in hope. But there is always the false Christian optimism which tried to "experience" the Kingdom in what is not the Kingdom. Nevertheless, the victory of Christ makes all joy possible even in the midst of evil, for what we experience as evil is no longer serious unless we insist on making it so for ourselves. (DWL 27 [10/26/63]).

In his article "To Each His Darkness" (RaU 27-33) Merton attempts to unravel the "world of closely enmeshed contradictions" created in Julien Green's novel. He suggests that Green "creates this awful consistent universe in which everything *may be* serious, very serious, vitally serious" (RaU 28). It is a world where no one receives salvation,[24] and hell has been predetermined by an "inexorable will." One of Green's characters is a Calvinist (RaU 30), and it is apparent that some of Calvin's theology lingers in the atmosphere of the novel. Merton shifts the attention away from Green's despairing world onto Green himself. Perhaps, he suggests, it is Green's "fear of his own creative gift, his temptation to mistrust the danger of his art because he can never forget for one moment that it is rooted in Eros" and that "Eros is also full of death" (RaU 29). This fear Merton immediately repudiates for the "terrible analogies" it certainly calls for: if creativity itself is so full of death, then might not God, in whose image we are created, also create "only in order to destroy?" Contrasting magic and religion, and raising the former through aid of the latter, Merton proclaims that religion must contain magic, only "transformed, transfigured, exorcised, clean, free" (RaU 29). Grace purifies and raises a fallen nature. This seriousness, however, goes both ways: Merton tenaciously opposes Green's pessimism, but balks at "the unspeakable triviality of popular religion which consists in *not* taking the possibility of damnation seriously any more!" (RaU 30) Ultimately, it is the terrible consistency of a world without a personal – and therefore free

[24] In a 1966 letter to Merton, Green criticized him "for misreading the novel's hero, who forgives his murderer and so is 'saved'" (CoT 273; editor's note).

– God that Merton rejects. Here we are reminded again of the systematization that Barth rails against when Merton proclaims: "There is, above the consistent and the logical world of justice, an inconsistent illogical world where nothing 'hangs together,' where justice no longer damns each man to his own darkness. This inconsistent world is the realm of mercy" (RaU 31). Seriousness guards against both a false optimism and a deterministic pessimism, grounded as it is in the God of both justice and mercy. True optimism or, as Merton calls it, "Christian" optimism "is full belief and hope in the mercy of God to men in Christ." (LaL 220)

Responding to Green's letter of September 1966, Merton strikes the balance he is trying to attain by pointing to Augustine (CoT 273 [9/22/66]). Although looking at Merton's letter alone does not provide knowledge of the entire conversation, Merton notes that Augustine's perspective on sin is "not only impressive, but important to remember at this moment when there is in Christian circles a sort of casual naturalism and naïve optimism accepted rather generally." Merton's own understanding of original sin is fundamentally optimistic; and yet, it is not dismissive of evil.[25] In this light Merton

[25] CGB 72. Merton writes: "the doctrine of original sin, properly understood, is *optimistic*. It does not teach that man is by nature evil, but that evil in him is unnatural, a disorder, a sin. If evil, lying, and hatred were natural to man, all men would be perfectly at home, perfectly happy in evil." - There is much more to cover on this topic for a full picture of Merton's understanding of sin. One more note will have to suffice here. In his journal Merton responds to a critique by Czeslaw Milosz that "challenges me on my love of nature, my optimistic attitude toward it, my not reflecting how cruel nature is, and so on. In other words, he thinks I am not Manichaean enough: do I have a right to be, (or imagine myself), immune to certain poisons? (Others are convinced that I am too Manichaean, but I have never taken them seriously)" (CGB 114). Here, it is important to note that Merton is more concerned with being "not Manichaean enough" than he is with being "too Manichaean." This is probably because of his natural tendency toward optimism. This is evident in his response to Milosz, when he asks: "Should I really experience nature as *alien* and *heartless?* Should I be prepared to imagine that this alienation from nature is real, and that an attitude of sympathy, of oneness with it, is only imaginary? On the contrary – we have a choice of projections. Our attitude toward nature is simply an extension of our attitude toward ourselves, and toward one another. We are free to be at peace with ourselves and others, and also with nature" (CGB 114). Merton's use of the term 'projections' confirms that Milosz is right about Merton. However, again we note that Merton does not want what he calls a "false naturalism" (CGB 114). He tends to think about evil as part of a false self rather than as apart from the self.

informs Green that, "I do not have as much of a taste for Calvin as you do" (CoT 273), instead he points Green to his own Protestant interests, "especially Karl Barth" (CoT 274). If the balance seems tenuous and unclear, Merton affirms just this by suggesting to Green that the question of seriousness must remain "ambiguous."

Merton eagerly applies Barth to oppose a deterministic pessimism in Julien Green, but he is just as committed to opposing a 'casual naturalism' and a 'naïve optimism.' These charges – or praises – are sometimes laid against Merton himself as a man closely connected to nature and art, and a forerunner of interreligious dialogue. The charges are occasionally warranted, but the praises Merton would have regretted. The other side of this seriousness is rooted in God's justice and even wrath. On this side Merton again quotes Barth's words: "To be a man means to be situated in God's presence as Jesus is, that is, to be a bearer of the wrath of God."[26] In *Conjectures* he cautions: "I do not want an 'optimism' that shrinks from this truth," though both he and Barth immediately qualify this statement by reminding us that it is Jesus who "bears the wrath, and He lives." (CGB 317)

Merton applies this other pole of Barth's seriousness to correct those "who are preaching a 'religionless religion' and a frank admission of the 'secular' and the 'profane' in Christianity" (CGB 292). He refers to Bonhoeffer's *followers* who have distorted his teaching, "ending up with a superficial and naïve fad, rather than a serious faith" (CGB 292). In Merton's mind, Bonhoeffer remains serious by holding to costly discipleship and rejecting "cheap grace." However, Merton does not reject everything to

[26] DO 107. - See DWL 26 (10/24/63); CGB 317.

do with John A.T. Robinson;[27] he finds especially compelling the intuition that there may be an "anonymous and unknown Christ" who is present even to the unbeliever (CGB 298). What this means is for Merton a matter more of experience than of theology, and he describes it as "*perhaps the deepest most cogent mystery of our time*" (CGB 298). In the following chapters we will unravel how Merton reconciles this "mystery" with Barth's 'faith seeking understanding.' For Merton the question is not a matter of choosing between Barth and anonymous Christianity; rather, he finds both perspectives compelling and seeks to bridge the divide in his expansive catholic vision.

For Barth, this seriousness is always focused on the cross of Jesus, on the paradox of justice and mercy, wrath and reconciliation. No doubt Merton was drawn to Barth's theology in part for the *implicit* universalism Barth continually denied; and yet he did not want to neglect either side of Barth's position: "Without the awareness of God's wrath and of His mercy, the modern world makes no more sense (religiously) than a drunken hallucination." (CGB 294)

1.4 Christian Humanism

Merton consistently defends the notion of Christian humanism as the foundation for a Christian culture.[28] In this light Merton attempts one of the most significant and revealing theological juxtapositions by placing Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955)

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[27] Though he has less time for Harvey Cox. – See "An Interview with Thomas Merton" (1967 – see bibliography # 1.3), 34.

[28] For an example of what Merton means by this, see "To a Professor of Humanities" in *SeD*, 172-75. Merton notes that all Christian humanism is rooted in the doctrine of the Incarnation, and he argues: "For it is the survival of religion as an abstract formality without a humanist matrix, religion apart from man and almost in some sense apart from God Himself (God figuring only as a Lawgiver and not as a Savior) religion without any human epiphany in art, in work, in social forms: this is what is killing religion in our midst today, not the atheists. So that one who seeks God without culture and without humanism tends inevitably to promote a religion that is irreligious and even unconsciously atheistic, because it is first of all abstract and anti-human" (173).

and his program of hominization against Barth's 'wholly other' God. This comparison is especially poignant given the fact that Merton was also attracted to the theology of Teilhard. Kilcourse provides a helpful analysis of Merton's interest in the Jesuit palaeontologist in *Ace of Freedoms*.[29] However, at times Kilcourse overstates his case by arguing that this particular interest "warrants special attention" in a chapter that also discusses Merton's discovery of Barth, Bonhoeffer, and Eastern Orthodoxy.[30] While he recognizes that there are only four references to Teilhard in *Conjecture of a Guilty Bystander*, he cites Merton's enthusiasm for the priest as the basis for this special attention. The reality, though, is that Merton's criticisms of Teilhard are far more significant than are his sympathies. Drawing on the same journal entry (TTW 9/16/60 – see # 1.2) Merton goes so far as to specifically choose Barth over Teilhard on the unsystematic nature of revelation. He says: "The Incarnation is not something that can be fitted into a system, and though I know Barth draws from this many conclusions with which I would not agree, yet I think what he says must be remembered, and in this I would lean toward Barth much more readily than toward Teilhard de Chardin, for example."[31] Immediately following he quotes Barth who writes: "Divine revelation

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[29] AcF 116-18. – See also R. W. Kropf, "Crying with a Live Grief: The Mysticism of Merton and Teilhard Compared" (1992 – see bibliography # 2), 227-45.

[30] Kilcourse is helpful concerning Merton's appreciation for, and reservation toward, Teilhard. He notes "Merton characterizing the scientist-priest's vision in terms of grace building on nature and congruent with the Greek Fathers' concept of divinisation," as well as "Teilhard's cosmic and incarnational mystique, and the radical anthropocentrism he has restored to theology" (AcF 116-17). He also explains Merton's primary objection regarding Teilhard's optimism and the cult of evolutionary progress whereby God becomes being-in-process. For Merton's interest in Teilhard, see for instance "The Universe as Epiphany" (LaL 153-65), "Teilhard's Gamble" (LaL 166-72), "To a Priest" (SeD 218-23), "The Plague of Camus" (LiE 214-17), and "Camus and the Church" (LiE 265-66).

[31] CGB 9. - Seven years later, and only a year before his death, Merton holds the same perspective. After expressing sympathy for Teilhard as a person and especially for his situation under his superiors, Merton again exhibits his preference for Barth as against Teilhard: "Are the neologisms of Teilhard much better [than the 'illegible dullness' that passed through Church censors without difficulty]? Good intentions, heart in the right place, wanting the right thing, but did he really have the necessary gifts? If it comes to science I would gladly read later and better scientists. If it comes to poets… he does not even begin to be one. As for

cannot be discovered in the same way as the beauty of a work of art or the genius of a man is discovered.[…] It is the opening of a door that can only be unlocked from the inside." In his journal he adds: "I like Barth." This is a significant statement for Merton who not only was an artist, but also had wrestled with his gift as a writer, painter, and photographer only to finally begin to reconcile these 'worldly' talents with his monastic vocation at this late time in his life.[32] One would expect quite the opposite from Merton on such a topic; and yet, Merton leans toward Barth.

In a 1964 lecture to young novices on an aspect of Rudolf Bultmann's thought,[33] Merton spends half an hour contrasting Christian revelation and humanism. Humanism, Merton defines here as "the world in the best sense, the highest sense." Calling Bultmann a "very advanced Protestant thinker," he reminds his students that what Bultmann denies at first will eventually be taken back and restored in the end. Bultmann, Merton claims, fights against the notion that human beings can, by developing their minds, "understand the laws of the universe, the order of the cosmos, and then in the order of the cosmos […] see a revelation of God's mind." Instead, Bultmann puts forward "Christian revelation and pure faith." Merton associates this cosmological perspective with Teilhard de

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theology, I must admit that I become more and more suspicious of it in its contemporary form. After Barth" (LeL 247-48 [6/10/67]). Not only does Merton prefer Barth, but it is precisely Barth's evangelical theology that makes Merton wary of Teilhard.

[32] Merton's article, "Poetry and Contemplation: A Reappraisal" (LiE 338-54), is the best example of this. Here, Merton seeks to revise his earlier stance that the contemplative life is something set apart from the rest of human existence; he calls it a "rather naïve presupposition that 'contemplation' is a kind of objectivized entity which gets 'interfered with' by such things as aesthetic reflection" (LiE 338). To avoid this sort of dualistic thinking Merton proposes a way of being in the world whereby who we *are* relates analogically to He who *Is* (Ex 3:14). Moreover, Merton rejects the division of contemplation and action, now regarding contemplation as the action of life – be it "art, love, or worship" – raised and transfigured by the Spirit of God. "In the true Christian poet," he says, "– in Dante, St. John of the Cross, St. Francis, Jacopone da Todi, Hopkins, Paul Claudel – we find it hard to distinguish between the inspiration of the prophet and mystic and the purely poetic enthusiasm of great artistic genius" (LiE 344).

[33] "Bultmann: His Essays on Christianity and Humanism," *Recorded Conference*, CD 99.2 (1/12/64). - The talk is pertinent here given some of the similarities between Barth and Bultmann's thought; Merton recognizes this briefly in his lecture.

Chardin, joking with his students about this "wicked man" that they are not allowed to read, but ultimately siding with Bultmann against Teilhard: "Personally, I prefer Bultmann." The concern with humanism, says Bultmann, is that it makes humanity at home in the world. "Bultmann doesn't go for this 'let's build a Christian world'; Bultmann and people like Barth[34][…] will say, 'you're wasting your time building a Christian world.'" Instead, what is important for Bultmann is not fitting God into a system of Christian culture, but rather standing in the judgement (and mercy) of God *now*. In understanding God's will the moral imperative is not primary, rather freedom to obey God in every given situation is paramount.[35] In the end Bultmann "saves" humanism by trusting in God for the result of our obedience; "because what we are building," Merton says, "is not just a well-ordered cosmos or a well-ordered civilization, it's the city of God, the kingdom of God. And what our job in it is, is to do the part that is manifested to us here and now by the will of God without seeing the rest of the plan. […] If we don't take this view of the thing we are not going to be fully Christian." For Bultmann and for Merton this is not a choice of either-or; humanism and Christianity must work together. However – and this point is central to understanding the purpose and the limits of Merton's Christian humanism – it is perhaps not the Christian faith that

[34] Merton briefly quotes some of Barth's own thoughts on Christian humanism in his journal. "And fine lines on Xtian humanism. Not something back into oneself and spinning out [now quoting Barth] 'the dream of his Ego in unfathomed, even though perhaps Christian profundity.' But 'The ideal humanity lies outside of us, and is represented by our fellow man *whom we can never see through the dark glasses of principles*…'" Merton continues on to argue that "love is not a principle" but an interest in "actual fellow man" rooted in the fact that the "eternal light which entered the world was man" (TTW 48 [9/16/60]). Merton also quotes Barth (DO 147), without responding, on the missionary nature of the Church: "The Church runs like a herald to deliver the message. It's not a snail with a little house on its back and is so well off in it, that only now and then it sticks out its feelers and then thinks that 'the claim of publicity' has been satisfied…" (DWL 29 [10/29/63]; CGB 311). Finally, he quotes Barth on the "*coming*" of the kingdom (DO 148) and therefore on the balance to be maintained between being both a conservative (by waiting) and a revolutionary (by acting): "We wait for the Kingdom [now Barth's words] 'recognizing each other in longing and humility in the light of the divine humor." Merton recognizes in Barth many of the same theological qualities that he here points to in Bultmann.

[35] On Merton's appreciation for Bonhoeffer's similarly constructed ethic, see CGB 288-89.

needs humanism so much as the Christian individual. This Merton enthusiastically agrees with, labelling Bultmann's perspective basically Pauline. He concludes by likening Bultmann's perspective to Jesus' words: "Seek first the kingdom of God and all these things are added to you" (Mt 6:33; Merton's paraphrase). "Humanism," Merton says, "has a very great part to play in our lives, but it is a secondary part."

By no means does Merton accept all that Bultmann has to say. Yet, Bultmann's primacy of Christian revelation, along with faith, must be noted. Especially interesting is that in the discussion immediately following Merton's lecture, one of the novices questions the seeming opposition that this argument creates between Christianity and humanism when Paul said that "all things are created for Christ and in Christ" (Col 1:16). Merton responds by pointing to 1 Corinthians and Paul's "superficial" opposition between the wisdom of God and human wisdom. The point, again, is not one of either-or but of priority. In the notion of wisdom (more on this # 3), we can expect to find in Merton a theological movement from revelation of God in Jesus to the understanding of this revelation through wisdom. Many quotes may summarize Merton's understanding of Christian humanism, but the following is sufficient: "The heart of true Christian humanism, in its full theological dimension, is to be sought in the revealed doctrine of the Incarnation, man's sonship of God in Christ, and the gift of the Holy Spirit as a principle of divine life and love in man" (LaL 129). For Merton, humanism is absolutely necessary, and yet necessarily second to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. It presupposes an Incarnational approach to theology that envisages the created order resting upon and fulfilled by the *Logos* made flesh. This does not entail a theological

dualism of nature and grace, but the conviction that, as Thomas Aquinas puts it, "In order to achieve beatitude two things are required: nature and grace."[36]

1.5 Christian Culture

Much of Merton's writing is spent working out the place of humanism as the outworking of God's revelation in Jesus Christ. Although he has specific reservations toward Teilhard and especially toward any notion of God as Being-in-process (LiE 9), he also recognizes, through reading Christopher Dawson's *Understanding Europe* (1952), that there is a significant problem with Barth's radical transcendence. Radical transcendence is for Merton the beginning of absence: the two share many of the same theological consequences. Barth's 'wholly other' God has, in part, become complicit in the transition to a wholly absent God in Bonhoeffer's 'secular' followers. In Barth's early theology, God became so transcendent and therefore so distant and remote that he disappeared altogether for some of those who would follow. Therefore, Merton contends with Dawson, secularism has become the rightful heir to Barth's evangelical theology:

> As against Barth, [Dawson] contends that, if you simply discard or ignore the value of Christian culture, you do nothing but hasten the total secularization of the society that *needs* whatever it can still keep of its Christian heritage. It is certainly true that few people can maintain themselves in a world like ours with the austere faith of a Barth, and not simply submit in complete unreason to the forces of destruction. (CGB 176)

Here, Merton's misunderstanding of Barth is obvious: Barth's notion of secularism is not by definition the absence of God or religion, despite Barth's great rant against religion as 'unbelief;' rather, it is the sublimation, and therefore relativization, of the temporal realm to the eternal realm. Secularization, defined as society without God or religion, is the

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[36] "Ad beatitudinem autem consequendam duo requiruntur, natura et gratia" (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae,* Ia pars, quaestio 73, art. 1, ad primum).

result of a misunderstanding of Barth's theology (see WCSS). The limit of Merton's appreciation for Barth becomes most apparent in his comparison with Bonhoeffer: in opposition to Barth's "austere faith" that is capable of maintaining him against the world, Merton sees in Bonhoeffer a deep understanding that civilization – "reason, culture, humanity, tolerance and self-determination" – originates in the Church (CGB 176). That is to say that the Church does not only lay claim to a redeemed world, but it establishes, maintains, and upholds culture as part of the created world with all of the goodness that God has imbued in it. Merton believed this was his own task too: to keep alive the valid traditions of the past, whether they were Western or Eastern, and he believed that "Man's sanity and balance and peace" depended on their continuity. "What is needed," Merton argues, "is the recapitulation of culture and civilization in Christ. And this means also the renewal of Christian culture" (CGB 177). This is in line with the "ἀνακεφαλαιώσις" referred to in Eph 1:10.

In the same vein, and against what he calls "Barthian radicalism," Merton recognizes in Bonhoeffer an emphasis on "the rights and dignity of nature in a very Catholic, humanistic way" (CGB 182). He quotes Bonhoeffer's *Ethics* describing the "natural joys" of life: a home that is more than mere shelter but is an abode for intimacy and security; food and drink for more than health but for "natural joy in bodily living"; clothing as more than a covering "but also as an adornment for the body"; recreation, play, and sex, all possessing more than mere function. And so, Merton concludes, "From all this it emerges that the meaning of bodily life never lies solely in its subordination to its final purpose. *The life of the body assumes its full significance only with the fulfillment of its inherent claim to joy*" (CGB 182). Bonhoeffer's 'worldliness' was precisely the

worldliness Merton was looking for: Merton calls it a worldliness that "sees the world redeemed in Christ."[37] All of these differences between Bonhoeffer and Barth were for Merton evidence of "how close Bonhoeffer is to the theology of St. Irenaeus, and this gives him a great advantage over Barth." (CGB 176)

1.6 Natural Theology

In his fifth posthumously published journal Merton says outright that the point on which he "disagrees most profoundly with the Barthians is that of 'natural theology'" (DWL 279 [8/12/65]). Merton's implicit contrasting of Barth and 'the Barthians' is here paramount.[38] Merton espouses the traditional Catholic position that even creation itself is a beginning of revelation; in so doing, he apparently sides with Barth against the sort of natural theology that is not rooted in God's gracious calling.

> Our very creation itself is a beginning of revelation. Making us in His image, God reveals Himself to us, we are already His words to ourselves! Our very creation itself is a vocation to union with Him and our life, and in the world around us, if we persist in honesty and simplicity, we cannot help speaking of Him and of our calling. But the trouble is that there are no "pure" natural traditions and everything gets overlaid with error. Still, there is truth there for those who are still able to seek it, even if they are few. Ought it to be called "theology"? That is a technical question. Certainly it implies – and can develop – a definite personal relationship to God in faith (cf. the *Proslogion*). Barth's interest in Anselm is very revealing.[39]

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[37] CGB 289. – See also Merton's notes on Bonhoeffer in his *Reading Notebooks* held at the Merton Center at Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY.

[38] Rowan Williams keenly notes this in "Not Being Serious: Thomas Merton and Karl Barth," http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/2070, calling 'the Barthians' "Barth's rather less gifted interpreters." It supports my contention that Merton is much closer to Barth than most would expect. In light of Williams' statement, I must reverse the interpretation of this passage I offered in "Encountering the Word: A Dialogue between Merton and Barth on the Bible" (2008 – see bibliography # 2), 25-26.

[39] DWL 279 (8/12/65). - Williams comments: "Our very creation is a vocation. Once again the centrality in Barth's theology of the calling of God as the essence of the creative act is used by Merton to establish what he thinks is a kind of natural theology that avoids the reproach of simply trying to climb from the world to God by a ladder of analogy. Existence itself is a *word*, my being is God's *word* to me. And in that entry, Merton sees this as something quite in tune, not only with Barth, but with Anselm." The expression 'natural theology' here then becomes rather paradoxical: beginning with God's word there is nothing really 'natural' about this theology; though it begins with the created world, it is always and everywhere a response to God's gracious action.

While Barth never rejected the notion that creation is part of revelation, in his study on Anselm (1931) he argues that created truth can never be equated with divine truth, and that divine truth is only available by way of God's self-revelation and by humanity's response in faith (TKB 143). By suggesting that "we are already His words to ourselves," Merton comes to the same conclusion that von Balthasar did in his study on Barth:

> [Barth] only denied that this revelation of God in nature is, ontically and well as noetically, a "natural" revelation, that is, one inhering in nature herself as one of her qualities. For Barth, this revelation in nature is rather "*super*-natural", because it comes directly from God. God is never an a priori of nature, already embedded in it ontically as well as noetically.[40]

Although Merton is not willing to address the "technical question" (DWL 279 [8/12/65]), it is clear that he does *not* think the unbeliever may come to knowledge of God apart from God's self-revelation. However, the extent of that knowledge – i.e. whether it may be called theology – still remains unclear. Moving beyond neo-scholasticism Merton is careful to say that there are no "pure" natural traditions, and by this he means that even life as created is a matter of grace and therefore "a vocation to union" with God.[41] His allegiance here is with Barth who consistently argues that God's being is never accessible except as a response to God's action. There are without doubt analogies to be found

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[40] TKB 143. - See also Roland Chia, *Revelation and Theology: The Knowledge of God in Balthasar and Barth* (Berne: Peter Lang, 1999), pp. 241-42: "Barth could not (perhaps he would not) envisage a common, universal grace which makes the knowledge of God both a possibility and an actuality, even if this knowledge has only resulted in idolatry and superstition. For him there can be only one grace of God which, through the aid of the Holy Spirit, enables man to apprehend God's revelation in Christ by faith. And yet, on the other hand, Barth could say that Jesus Christ is the one grace of God through whom God's eternal gracious plan for mankind, *both* in creation and redemption, is effected and accomplished. God's grace therefore encompasses creation and providence, man's reconciliation and redemption, human faith and love."

[41] There is some confusion here in Merton's perspective. The reason for this is that Merton sometimes clings to the neo-scholastic division between nature and grace (no doubt due to the massive influence of Jacques Maritain in his early theological development), and other times he appears ready to move beyond it, to be influenced more by Karl Rahner and his interpretation of Thomas Aquinas. Both perspectives are evident in Merton's refutation of Barth. By using the terminology of natural theology he holds to neo-scholasticism; yet by talking about creation itself as a vocation to union of God he moves beyond the strict division between nature and grace already rejected by Thomas Aquinas (see # 1.4).

between the created world and the Creator, but they are always and everywhere couched within God's gracious initiation.

Yet there remains in Merton a general wariness toward Barth's evangelical outlook. In *Conjectures* he argues that Barth has neglected the goodness of God's creation.

> I suppose this is a platitude by now, and one that would irritate many: but it represents the area where I disagree with Barth, for instance. I am aware that the Easter Vigil retains many vestiges of primitive nature rites, and I am glad of it. I think this is perfectly proper and Christian. The mystery of fire, the mystery of water. The mystery of spring – *Ver sacrum*. Fire, water, spring, made sacred and explicit by the Resurrection, which finds in them symbols that point to itself. The old creation is made solely for the new creation. The new creation (of life out of death) springs from the old, even though the pattern of the old is the falling away of life in death.
>
> Instead of stamping down the force of the new life rising in us by our very nature (and so turning it into Leviathan, the dragon in the unsanctified waters), let the new life be sweetened, sanctified by the bitterness of the Cross, which destroys death in the waters and makes the waters the laver of life. Water then becomes the dwelling not of Leviathan but of the spirit of life. We are no longer marked like Cain, but signed with the Blood of the Paschal Lamb. (CGB 144)

Here Merton does not represent Barth very well. There is nothing in this statement that the mature Barth would have rejected.[42] However, once again one must acknowledge that Merton's reading of Barth was indeed limited, and, of course, that Barth's early dialectical theology misrepresented the goodness of God's creation. In the task of structuring an analysis of Merton's interest in Barth, Merton himself leaves significant

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[42] Perhaps the best example of creation/new creation in Barth's writing that I know of is highlighted by von Balthasar in his book on Barth. Barth writes: "A certain agitation among theologians in the past few decades against Greek culture has not been a good thing. With their emphasis on *eros*, the Greeks understood that man is a free, open-hearted, willing, spontaneous, cheerful, bright and social being…. No other nation of antiquity, not even the chosen people of Israel, was granted the privilege of displaying so fully what humanity as an unbroken continuum means… Much of the theology of the New Covenant is painted, not in Israelite, but in what are doubtless Greek shades of color, redeemed in the light of true love but fundamentally undisturbed… The *agape* of the Christian would not be what it claims to be if it remained hidden to the transparency of Greek *eros*; when a person schooled in Hellenic culture encounters the Christian, he should feel a sense of solidarity to the very roots of his erotic being [6, 340-43]" (TKB 117-18).

clues as to the most profitable route. Our focus should remain rather on what Merton did see rightly; and in this category there is much to be discussed. In the end, Merton was able to glimpse into a more balanced view of Barth's theology, a theology that was more than simply of interest to a Trappist monk and could even serve him as a guide for ecumenical and even interreligious dialogue.

> Two minds more different that those of Karl Barth and Frithjof Schuon would be hard to imagine, yet I am reading them both. Barth with his insistence on "God in the highest": completely unattainable by any human tradition and Schuon with his *philosophia humanis* [humanistic philosophy] reading his excellent book on Islam [*Comprendre l'Islam*, 1961]. True, Barth is a greater mind and there is an austere beauty in his Evangelical absolutism (closer to Islam than one would think!!) but there is another side to him – his love of St. Anselm and of Mozart. (DWL 22 [10/4/63])

The humanity of God that seemed so utterly neglected in Barth's early theology, Merton located in Barth's writing on both Anselm and Mozart. Although Merton's reading of Barth was limited, it is significant that he picked up on these two central figures in Barth's theology.[43] Merton rightly focused his interest in Barth on these two figures, locating precisely the aspects of Barth's theology that were most compatible with a Catholic doctrine of God's good creation.

[43] In the preface to the second edition of *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum* (1958) Barth writes: "Only a comparatively few commentators, for example Hans Urs von Balthasar, have realized that my interest in Anselm was never a side-issue for me or – assuming I am more or less correct in my historical interpretation of St Anselm – realized how much it has influenced me or been absorbed into my own line of thinking. Most of them have completely failed to see that in this book on Anselm I am working with a vital key, if not the key, to an understanding of that whole process of thought that has impressed me more and more in my *Church Dogmatics* as the only one proper to theology" (FQI 11).

C H A P T E R T W O

CHRIST AS *LOGOS*

> A book about Egypt (read in the refectory) spoke convincingly of the serenity and sanity of Egyptian life under the Pharaohs as shown in the tomb paintings of early centuries. Yet this serenity was not enough. The People of God had to be chosen out of it and flung into hunger, homelessness, anguish, and trouble. They had to leave this placid, well-organized, pleasant life and go into the desert. Can we believe that the civilization of Egypt was the epitome of all that was wicked? We do not have to. The People of God were – and are – called out of Egypt not because it was wicked, but because they had a more bitter and more promising destiny willed for them by God. If we could only have the life of Egypt rather than that of the desert, if we could have it with God's blessing, how happy we could be. There are various historic ways of trying. The serene, joyful, productive, expansive life: and then off into the complex mythical world of death. Is this so different from life in America today? The difference is probably that Egypt was peaceful for centuries. The desert Fathers, too, rejected all this peace. Why? Why not just enjoy it and praise God? That was not possible. And Barth (who is certainly not the most temperate authority on this particular subject) said that if you try to steal the gold of Egypt you simply end up with the idols. Whatever may be the explanation, I am struck and troubled by the fact that if the Jews were called out of Egypt, out of peace and into anguish, it was because God did not will that His People should merely live productive, quiet, joyous, and expansive lives. (CGB 284)

Rooted in the metaphor of the Israelites stealing Egyptian gold, Augustine's suggestion in *De Doctrina Christiana*,[1] that Christians co-opt or "convert" the philosophy of the Platonists for the "just use of teaching the gospel" is at the heart of a long tradition of philosophical theology. Augustine carefully distinguishes between "idols and grave burdens," which were to be left behind, and "vases and ornaments of gold and silver and clothing," which might be put to good use by the Israelites. His suggestion is not an unqualified approval of all things attractive to the eye, but a distinction between, on the one hand, the right use of God's good creation "dug up from certain mines of divine Providence" and, on the other, a perverse application of the same for the use of demoniac

[1] Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* (1997 – see bibliography # 3), 75.

idolatry. Augustine's theology of using (*uti*) and enjoying (*frui*) is here central: everything is good insofar as it is used for the sake of God, and insofar as it is loved not for its own sake, but for the sake of the divine Trinity who alone may be enjoyed.[2]

Merton agrees with the thrust of Barth's statement: the gold of Egypt represents its idols. And yet he transfers the metaphor from philosophical Platonism to an American culture of wealth and comfort. He accepts the 'love of wisdom' from other cultures, but he rejects the love of money. Standing in the Catholic tradition Merton did not have the same difficulties with philosophy as Barth. Where he uses Barth to show the limits of his own Christian humanism ("expansive life"), he and Barth are furthest apart on the original meaning of Barth's statement.[3] Barth's utter rejection of Augustine's suggestion does make him, along with Tertullian, "not the most temperate authority on this particular subject." However, his mature thought is not as radical as the above quote would have us believe. Despite his seeming equation of philosophy with idolatry, when asked about the significance of reason in his theology Barth said: "I use it."[4] And although he developed a significant emphasis on the otherness of God and a position on revelation that refused to allow philosophy to control the freedom of God's grace, Barth knew that remaining Christian means affirming God's good creation; and this in turn means affirming reason.

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[2] See especially *On Christian Doctrine*, Book One. - A succinct explanation of using and enjoying is also given by Edmund Hill in his note 24, Book 9 of *De Trinitate* (2005 – see bibliography # 3): "What he means by [enjoying] is something much more precise, deliberate, intellectual and spiritual than what we ordinarily mean by enjoying. So he is not in fact forbidding us to enjoy our food, our sleep, our work, our play, good weather, good company, good entertainment, and so forth. What he is telling us to do is to *use* the pleasure we take in such things by referring it, in one way or another, to the only wholly satisfying object of enjoyment, namely God; and to avoid making these things ends in themselves. The same is true for the idea of using; he is not telling us to take a purely exploitative utilitarian attitude to the created world, because he had never heard of Jeremy Bentham; he is merely warning us against idolizing the world."

[3] Merton makes these limits very apparent in a letter to Rosemary Radford Ruether. Rejecting the accusation that "monasticism is simply a repudiation of the world in the sense of God's good creation," Merton suggests that it is more often a repudiation "of the world in the sense of a decadent, imperial society in which the Church has become acclimatized to an atmosphere that is basically idolatrous" (HW 37).

[4] Quoted in E. Busch, *The Great Passion: An Introduction to Karl Barth's Theology* (2004 – see bibliography # 3), 13.

Reason is always affirmed because, as von Balthasar explains Barth's position, "it derives from the openness of the Logos, who possesses every *ratio* in himself" (TKB 139). That "Barth's interest in Anselm is very revealing" (DWL 279 [8/12/65]) has to do with the question of the place of reason within theology. For Barth, and for Merton also, creation itself always rests on the gratuitous event of the Incarnation. Therefore, a foundational principle of theological methodology is to begin with the particular and move to the general or abstract.

2.1 Anselm and Reason

An analysis of Merton's thoughts on Anselm must look at several sources. While two published articles represent the polished presentation of Merton's research, earlier glimpses are made possible through various entries in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander,* and also back into his published journals. Merton's unpublished *Reading Booknotes* also, in addition to one talk on Anselm from July 16, 1963 and one talk on Anselm's 'argument' from June 24, 1963 that he gave to the novices,[5] provide some of Merton's early reflections on Anselm. While focusing on the two published articles, references to these other sources allow for a fuller picture of Merton's appreciation for Anselm.

In "Reflections on Some Recent Studies of St. Anselm" (1965), Merton discusses various emerging scholarly perspectives mostly pertaining to Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo*. His primary concern is to rescue Anselm's soteriology from a purely juridical interpretation – he is adamant that it cannot be reduced to "tenth-century Lombardic law" (MonS 226). This in turn means that "the death of Christ on the Cross was not intended to assuage a supposed divine thirst for vengeance, nor was it simply an expression of the

[5] "St. Anselm and the Ontological Argument for God" (CD 58.4 [6/24/63]); "St. Anselm" (CD 65.2 [7/16/63]).

infinite power of God venting itself on the evil of sin in the form of an infinitely virulent punishment" (MonS 228). Rather, it is accomplished by the utter liberty and spontaneity of the Son's sacrifice for the Father (MonS 229). Anselm, Merton claims, "makes it quite clear that the satisfaction given to God for man's sin was not something that God required for Himself alone but rather for mankind and for the beauty of His cosmos" (MonS 230). Here, Merton takes a decisive stand in a lively debate in medieval theology since Anselm and up until today: was divine incarnation made necessary because of Adam's sin, so that without it both Incarnation and Redemption through Christ would not have been necessary? Or was it necessary for other reasons – for instance because divine incarnation is to be viewed first and foremost as the complete and final achievement of God's creation and its "beauty," so that it would have been necessary even if Adam had not sinned? This latter option is akin to Merton, and it has been chosen by Albert the Great, Alexander of Hales, Rupertus, Honorius Augustodunensis, but also by Duns Scotus and later the Scotists, by Francis of Sales and by Suarez, up to Scheeben and Hermann Schell, to name but a few. Thomas Aquinas is in favour of the first option because Scripture, he says, does not speculate about the necessity of God's incarnation apart from the existence of sin, so that without the latter the former would not have obtained. Yet he does not take a definite stand in terms of an either-or on the issue, because he does not want to limit God's power.[6]

[6] See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae,* 3rd part, question 1, art. 3, whose 'response' ("respondeo") ends thus: "Unde cum Sacra Scriptura ubique incarnationis ratio ex peccato primi hominis assignetur, convenientius dicitur incarnationis opus ordinatum esse a Deo in remedium contra peccatum, ita quod peccato non existente, incarnatio non fuisset. Quamvis potentia Dei ad hoc non limitetur; potuisset enim, etiam peccato non existente, Deus incarnari." - For a summary of the various positions in this debate up to Scheeben and Hermann Schell see M. Boutin, *Relationalität als Verstehensprinzip bei Rudolf Bultmann* ([series "Beiträge zur evangelischen Theologie," 67]. Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1974), 355-57.

Throughout Merton's article of 1965, an underlying theme is more pressing to him than Anselm's soteriology: he consistently works to show that Anselm's perspective is not that of an apologete (or in more contemporary language, an 'apologist'). Despite the fact that many would call Anselm a rationalist, that is, one who argues on the basis of reason only, Merton strongly rejects this label. His concern resonates with that of Karl Barth who, in his interpretation of Anselm, argues that there is a distinction to be made between one who argues according to reason alone ("*sola ratione*") as opposed to reason only ("*solitaria ratione*") (FQI 43-44). This article entails the primary material relating to Merton's perspective on interreligious dialogue: in the opening pages he seeks to understand exactly who Anselm had in mind in building his argument to prove the necessity of the Incarnation and Redemption. It also serves as the overarching context for Merton's article "St. Anselm and His Argument" (1966), in which the Cistercian monk attempts to show that while Anselm's "argument" is rational, it is at its very core "theological" because it proceeds from faith to reason, and "spiritual" because it springs from the author's contemplative awareness.

The reconciliation of the rift in Western Christianity between theology and spirituality is Merton's conscious objective in his second essay on Anselm. Here, he delves into Anselm's theological method of 'faith seeking understanding' evident especially in the opening lines of Anselm's *Proslogion*[7] and the foundation of all of his theological works.[8] Here again, rather than an apology against the unbeliever, Merton

[7] Anselm's argument begins with this prayer: "I do not try, Lord, to attain Your lofty heights, because my understanding is in no way equal to it. But I do desire to understand Your truth a little, that truth that my heart believes and loves. For I do not seek to understand so that I may believe; but I believe so that I may understand. For I believe this also, that 'unless I believe, I shall not understand' [Isa 7:9]" (*Proslogion*, Chapter 1).

[8] See also Anselm's "Commendation" of *Cur Deus Homo* to Pope Urban II.

sees Anselm's argument for the existence of God as an opportunity for reasonable dialogue with the religious or the agnostic other. Both of these articles offer significant material for Merton's views on interreligious dialogue. (more on this # 2.3)

Merton's two articles on Anselm cover a broad range of material. Focusing primarily on Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo* and his *Proslogion* Merton discusses everything from his theological methodology and hermeneutical approach all the way to his soteriology and approach to interreligious dialogue.[9] Although Merton writes at the onset of two new comprehensive studies on Anselm, Karl Barth is always present in his thought.[10] In fact, it would not be a stretch to suggest that Barth is Merton's primary influence in his study of Anselm. Writing on Anselm's *Proslogion* Merton states: "In the twentieth century, when Anselm has been to a great extent taken for granted by Catholics, a powerful stimulus to the study of his thought was given by Karl Barth in a book on 'the Argument' which continues to be much discussed and which amounts to a real rediscovery of the profound religious dimensions of Anselm's thought" (AmBR 239). Writing to Hans Urs von Balthasar in December 9, 1966, Merton makes the claim that "of all those who have been discussing Anselm these past few years, Barth and the Orthodox P[aul] Evdokimov have appreciated him the best" (ScCh 312), and he describes Barth's book on Anselm as "wonderful." (ScCh 219 [6/3/64])

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[9] Over the last thirty years in particular, tendencies at work in theological reflection do pertain to issues related to the object, the methods, and the approach (see M. Boutin, "L'approche théologique dans la compréhension de la religion" [1985 – see bibliography # 3], p. 5). Although these issues cannot be isolated from one another, the emphasis on 'approach' is more pressing as religious diversity is taking precedence over the attempt to overcome the subject-object relationship, which was the central concern in the development of methods. A growing attention to the theological approach makes it increasingly difficult to set religions side by side in order to compare them (more on this # 3.3.4), and it makes 'comparativism' appear like an empty shell. Merton's 'Incarnational approach' is constant in the understanding of both the object and the methods in theology. Apart from # 3.3.4, see for instance also # 1.2, # 1.4, # 2.2.2, # 2.2.4, # 2.3, # 2.3.1, # 2.3.2, and # 2.3.3.

[10] The first footnote in AmBR 238 directs the reader's attention to his two main sources: Dom David Knowles, *The Evolution of Medieval Thought* (Baltimore, 1962), and R.W. Southern, *St. Anselm and His Biographer* (Cambridge, 1963), and it also makes special reference to Barth's, *Fides Quaerens Intellectum.*

Moreover, while the two articles focus on different aspects of Anselm's thought there is continuity with regard to Anselm's theological *approach*, which is the focus of our study. Therefore, by abstracting the key underlying themes of Merton's thought as they relate to his use of Karl Barth, it is possible to understand better his appreciation for the evangelical theologian. This approach inevitably means that aspects of Merton's study on Anselm will be neglected, but this must remain the subject of further studies. While he overtly praises Barth and his study on Anselm, it will become apparent that he makes important adjustments to Barth's treatment of Anselm, which in turn offers great insight into Merton's own theology.

The most important thing to remember in the analysis of Merton's use of Barth in his study on Anselm is that Merton's greatest appreciation is reserved for Anselm himself.[11] Merton calls Anselm the monk a "true philosopher" and affords him high praise for his ability to unite both East and West through his contemplative theology:

> In St. Anselm we must above all recognize the extraordinary *unity* that raises his thought and experience above the conventional divisions between "mystical and dogmatic," "philosophical and theological," or "active and contemplative." Indeed, we will find Anselm's peculiarly Catholic genius for unity endowed him with a spirit that in our times, would be called in the highest degree "ecumenical." (AmBr 241)

The rapprochement of Merton as 'mystic' and Barth as 'dogmatician' is difficult to avoid. In Anselm Merton sees not a critique of Barthian radicalism (anachronistic as that may

[11] "St. Anselm, Doctor of the Church, is also one of the great thinkers of all time, certainly equal to St. Bernard, St. Bonaventure, and St. Thomas, in the Middle Ages. Indeed, as an influential force in medieval thought he is probably second only to St. Thomas himself, when we consider that Duns Scotus is in many ways a disciple and interpreter of Anselm" (AmBR 261). - It will also become apparent through the course of this chapter how Merton wants to see "to what extent [Anselm] transcends his age and speaks to our own" (AmBR 239). In his talk on "St. Anselm" given to the novices, Merton claims that if he had to choose between Bernard of Clairvaux and Anselm of Canterbury for his own Abbot, "I wouldn't have much doubt, I would have much preferred St. Anselm" (*Recorded Conference*, CD 65.2 [7/16/63]).

sound), but a catholicity capable of encompassing both his own mystical and Barth's dogmatic approach to God.

Anselm's argument, comprised of chapters two to four of his *Proslogion,* has been under attack since the time he first penned it through to the present day.[12] Subject immediately to the criticism of Gaunilo (the monk of Marmoutiers), his 'proof' also underwent the devastating criticism of such giants as Thomas Aquinas and Immanuel Kant. When Barth set out in 1931 to defend the medieval monk he boldly declared that, "Thomas Aquinas and Kant were at one in their misunderstanding and denial of that very aspect of Anselm's theology which is to be our special concern" (FQI 8). Barth's 'special concern' is to show that Anselm's argument is couched in the theological scheme of 'faith seeking understanding,' making it specifically theological in nature. He argues that Anselm's theological scheme is consistent throughout his many works and thus it is absolutely necessary to conceive the argument within the context of his larger theological framework. Although Anselm proceeds by way of reason alone, the fact that he begins in prayer, is moved by adoration, and is obedient to the specifically stated Augustinian axiom, 'faith seeking understanding,' provide evidence that his argument is no proof at all; rather, Anselm's primary concern is "understanding." Barth does not completely deny a will to prove in Anselm, but he defines proof as "the polemical-apologetic result of *intelligere*" (*FQI* 14). For Barth, proof is a by-product or, at best, the fruit of faith understood. Faith and reason are not merely 'joined' in the *ratio fidei*; they are ordered and prioritized. Faith opens the way for a reasoned understanding; it gives to reason the object of contemplation or theological inquiry, i.e. the *Logos*, and therefore, also, its *raison d'être*. As Étienne Gilson (1884-1978) said, "It was the very depth of his faith that

[12] See for instance Marco M. Olivetti, ed. *L'argomento ontologico*. Padua (Italy): CEDAM, 1990, 762 p.

gave Anselm a practically unlimited confidence in the power of reason. Whatever is revealed has meaning and this meaning is, by God's grace, accessible to the understanding of the believer who seeks light." (quoted in AmBR 247)

2.2 The Word of Revelation

2.2.1 *Faith Seeking Understanding*

Merton wholeheartedly agrees with Karl Barth: over and over again, he affirms the theological scheme Barth develops: 'faith seeking understanding.' However, there is a significant disparity between the *authoritative* perspective that Barth aligns with revelation and the *intuitive* perspective that Merton proposes. From Merton's perspective this discrepancy should not be seen as opposition; it is more a matter of emphasis. Merton's modification of Barth's scheme is the subject of this section on "The Word of Revelation."

Two key terms modify Barth's stance: *religious experience*. For Barth 'faith seeking understanding' is the reasoned response to a confrontation with the revealed *Logos* soaked in the ardour of prayer; for Merton, 'faith seeking understanding' is this same theological faith linked to an ontological experience Merton calls an "*intuition of being*" (AmBR 254 – more on this # 2.2.2). The revelation that faith adheres to is to be found both in the Word made flesh and in an inner experience of the ground of Being. Thus, it is a matter not of either-or, but of both-and. This 'both-and' approach is central to Merton's thought; it is most clearly expressed in the following words from his *Lectures*

on Ascetical and Mystical Theology[13] given to the monks in 1961: "Without mysticism there is no real theology, and without theology there is no real mysticism" (InCM 16). Moreover,

> By 'mysticism' we can mean the personal experience of what is revealed to all and realized in all in the mystery of Christ. And by 'theology' we mean the common revelation of the mystery which is to be lived by all. The two belong together. There is no theology without mysticism (for it would have no relation to the real life of God in us) and there is no mysticism without theology (because it would be at the mercy of individual and subjective fantasy). (InCM 65)

Merton's agreement with Barth's analysis of Anselm's theological method can easily be seen from statements such as these: "The *Cur Deus Homo* […] is a tract on the mystery of the Redemption, and though it explicitly procedes by 'reason alone' (*ratione sola*), it is certainly not an attempt to establish a proof of the central mystery of Christianity that would enable us to get along without faith" (MonS 224). Likewise, "It is quite true that Anselm proceeds *sola ratione* as if there were no revealed explanations. But he never proceeds as if revelation as such were to be temporarily set aside as irrelevant" (AmBR 250). Here Merton is objecting to the assumption that Anselm may be considered a 'rationalist.' If Anselm begins with faith, in no way can he be called a rationalist, even a 'Christian rationalist,' "unless the word 'rationalist' is used in a very specialized and qualified sense which it lost in the eighteenth century 'enlightenment'" (MonS 224). This is the exact understanding of Anselm that Barth proposed.

2.2.2 An Intuition of Being

[13] These lectures have been recently published as *An Introduction to Christian Mysticism* (2008 – see bibliography # 1.3).

It does not take long to encounter in Merton a deviation from Barth's approach to theology. Early on in his first article (1965) Merton, using the expression 'religious experience,' claims that

> Anselm's *ratio* always begins and ends with a religious experience of the truth of faith concerning which his reason meditates and inquires. He seeks to "convince," perhaps better to "satisfy," the unbeliever, but he does so in two ways. First of all, by implicitly declaring the intense fervor of his own faith, and then by showing that this faith is in no way irrational but is, on the contrary, perfectly consonant with reason, and more, that it fulfills all the inmost aspirations of reason itself. (MonS 225)

Similarly, in the second article (1966) Merton explicitly praises Barth's *Fides Quaerens Intellectum* and at the same time tweaks his perspective by use of the term 'religious':

> In the twentieth century, when Anselm has been to a great extent taken for granted by Catholics, a powerful stimulus to the study of his thought was given by Karl Barth in a book on "the Argument" which continues to be much discussed and which amounts to a real rediscovery of the profound religious dimensions of Anselm's thought. (AmBR 239)

Everything in these two statements is consonant with Barth's interpretation of Anselm, except the term 'religious,' which does not enter Barth's discussion on Anselm, and the term 'experience,' which Barth explicitly rejects by proposing that all knowledge of God is necessarily "indirect."[14] Yet Merton is unwilling to speak of 'religious experience'

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[14] FQI 57. – For Barth, the revelation of God in Jesus Christ means the "abolition" of religion (K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics I.2: The Doctrine of the Word of God* [1939] [1980 – see bibliography # 3], 280ff.). In his translation of this section from *Church Dogmatics*, entitled, *On Religion: The Revelation of God as the Sublimation of Religion* (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), Garrett Green argues that the German word '*Aufhebung,*' previously translated "abolition," is more correctly translated "sublimation," which implies that the revelation of God in Jesus Christ means also "sublimation" and is therefore both the "abolition" and the "elevation" of religion. Thus, Barth's *Aufhebung* of religion means that religion is not destroyed but transformed by the Gospel. In addition to Green's remark, one should recall that *Aufhebung* has a third dimension as well: it is not only abolition and sublimation, it is also preservation. Be it as it may, for Barth – as for Rudolf Bultmann – God's revelation in Jesus Christ is and remains first of all the abolition of religion, and the moments of sublimation and preservation remain within the philosophical realm openly rejected by Barth's – and Bultmann's – understanding of revelation.
On the notion of 'experience,' Barth demotes subjective experience (*Erlebnis)* in his rejection of mysticism (CD II.1 8-10). For him, human knowledge of God is always mediate: "Every theological statement is an inadequate expression of its object. The actual Word of Christ spoken to us is not an inadequate expression of its object, though of course every attempt on our part, even the highest and the best, to reproduce that

apart from the 'truth of faith;' and despite the fact that he uses the term 'religious' in the second quote, he is in agreement with Barth's thesis. Without specifically stating that he is deviating from Barth's position Merton clearly has an agenda. What exactly is for him a religious experience of the truth of faith?[15]

In Merton's term 'religious' there is continuity and discontinuity with regard to Barth's thought. The continuity lies in Merton's agreement with Barth's epistemology: faith is the foundation of a reason that searches for understanding. Merton wholeheartedly agrees that faith cannot be reduced to mere rationalism (see # 2.1). Anselm is 'religious,' then, according to Merton, insofar as he is more than a philosopher; for him, "it is the *ontology* and the *theology* of Anselm's thought that is important, and not its dialectic." (AmBR 242)

> In raising the question of God's being and existence, Anselm is raising the question of *existence itself* in order to find it saturated with religious and spiritual meaning. The "intelligibility" which Anselm seeks in his meditation on being is by no means merely logical. On the contrary, the domain of mere logic, of pure reason, is the domain of the "*insipiens*" who says that God is not. The light of understanding which shines through being is an epiphany of the God who reveals Himself as the Source of all the intelligibility in all the being created by Him. (AmBR 242)

That Merton finds "*existence itself*" to be "saturated with religious and spiritual meaning" suggests the *analogia entis* Barth so railed against.[16] Likewise, Merton's ontological

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Word in thought or in speech is inadequate. Strictly speaking, it is only God himself who has a conception of God. All that we have are conceptions of objects, none of which is identical with God." (FQI 29)

[15] Note the contrast between Merton's "experience" of faith and Barth's "faith [as] obedience to authority which must be prior to knowledge" (*FQI* 64). - For an extensive treatment on Merton's notion of faith see Christine M. Bochen, "With the Eye of the Heart: Thomas Merton on Faith," in *The Vision of Thomas Merton*, ed. Patrick F. O'Connell (2003 – see bibliography # 2), 43-64.

[16] Barth rejects the *analogia entis* (analogy of being) because it posits a similarity between the Creator and the created on the basis of the abstract category of being. Instead, Barth forwards the *analogia fidei* (analogy of faith) as a similarity between the Creator and the created on the basis of God's grace. Barth's very definition of God as "Being in Act" refuses to divide God's essence from his action. His concern is twofold: first, to maintain the unity of God as both Creator and Reconciler; and second, to ensure that participation in God is rooted in God's grace and not in any natural human capacity. However, insofar as the *analogia entis* is subordinate to - more correctly, enfolded within - the *analogia fidei*, it is acceptable to

outlook is linked – indeed it is central – to his understanding of religiosity and spirituality,[17] but he is not attempting to construct an abstract metaphysics on its own terms and hence apart from any theological grounds. Rather, he goes beyond theological analogy – and thereby 'natural theology' – to an understanding of nature that includes a free and dynamic ("epiphany") notion of grace.[18] That God is the "Source" means that intelligibility in the created order is a gratuitous event. As in Barth's theology, God's self-revealing is still the basis for all knowledge; and yet Merton – far more likely than Barth – finds God's grace already at work in the world. Intelligibility is not necessarily given in nature itself, but is certainly accessible through the intervention of God in nature. In light of this Merton is careful not to suggest that God may be known on the basis of 'pure reason,' which really is the domain of the '*insipiens*,' in spite of the fact that he maintains the relevance of natural theology in opposition to Barth.

Barth (see CD II.1 79ff.). For Barth's theological analysis of religion see *Church Dogmatics I.2: The Doctrine of the Word of God* (1939) (1980 – see bibliography # 3), 280-361. After II.1 or II.2 Barth replaces his invective against 'religion' with the broader theme of 'natural theology.'

[17] William H. Shannon most consistently points to this ontological emphasis in Merton: "This perception that God and the world, though distinct, are yet not separate (how could a being be separate from its ground?) is central to Merton's thought. […] For example, on April 13, 1967, addressing Amiya Chakravarty and the students at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts, on the occasion of their celebrating a 'Merton Day,' he writes of 'the happiness of being one with everything in that *hidden ground of love* for which there can be no explanation.' These words […] see God not as a being among other beings but as the ground of all beings, and even more precisely the ground of love in which all beings find their identity and uniqueness." (HGL ix)

[18] This intuition is expressed in many works by Merton, for example in *The New Man* (1961) (1995 – see bibliography # 1.3). In the following passages Merton is moving beyond theological analogy, not toward identity, but toward recognizing the triune God's ever-present and fundamental role in the creating and sustaining of the world. Christologically speaking, Merton recognizes that "The cosmic mediation of Christ is brought out clearly in St. Paul's Captivity Epistles, especially in the one to the Colossians. Here he says: '(Christ) is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature. For in Him were created all things in the heavens and on the earth…. All things have been created through and unto Him, and in Him all things hold together.' [Col 1:15-17]. In reading words like these, one is astounded that they receive so little attention from Christians today. It is the Man-God, the Redeemer, Who is the 'firstborn of every creature' and who is consequently 'born' before Adam. [… In] Him Adam is created, like everything else in Heaven and on earth. […] In Him they 'hold together.' Without Him they would fall apart" (NM 136-37). Pneumatologically, Merton argues that the very "life of Adam, that is to say the 'breath' which was to give actuality and existence and movement to the whole person of man, had mysteriously proceeded from the intimate depths of God's own life. […] He was created as a 'son' of God because his life shared something of the reality of God's own breath or Spirit." (NM 52)

Merton's ontological emphasis marks a sharp distinction between his own and Barth's view; but in no way does he want to discredit Barth's perspective. On the contrary, he is complimentary of it, and his intention is to reconcile Barth's view with his own metaphysical and mystical perspective. Instead of using the expression 'religious experience' Merton concludes by adding "metaphysical intuition" and "spiritual (mystical) contemplation" to the general construction of Barth's perspective:

> In the *Monologion* (Chapter 1) Anselm clearly says that one who does not know God by faith can arrive at the knowledge of His existence by reason, at least *ex magna parte* if he has a moderate intelligence (*sive mediocris ingenii est*). In other words, for one who is well-disposed, reason alone can be an apt instrument for arriving at a knowledge of God. However Anselm himself never starts from "reason alone" in order to arrive at faith. It is with faith as his starting point that he embarks on his dialectical and metaphysical meditations upon the content of revealed truth. He does not reason in order to believe. He believes in order to understand. And the understanding at which he aims is not a mere matter of logical conclusions. He seeks the light of metaphysical intuition and, beyond that, of spiritual (mystical) contemplation. (AmBR 247)

Barth does not speak of metaphysics apart from the revelation of God's Being,[19] and he does not refer to 'intuition' either. Yet here too Merton is linking "metaphysics" with the "content of revealed truth." Certainly Barth does not mention "spiritual (mystical) contemplation." What then are we to make of Merton's "metaphysical intuition"?

Merton agrees with R.W. Southern that there are "previous philosophical principles" implied in Anselm's argument that serve as the basis for the argument itself.

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[19] Barth is never quite comfortable with the ontological language of Anselm. In discussing Anselm's method as consistently proceeding from revelation to reason, beginning with the Creed and not with "general truths," Barth comments that "Anselm deals with – admittedly a particularly awkward theme – the Being of God" (FQI 56). He accepts this language only in so far as Anselm always has the dogmas of the Church in the background. However, Barth does speak of a "participation (albeit in a manner limited by creatureliness) in God's mode of Being and so a similar participation in God's aseity, in the matchless glory of his very Self, and therefore also in God's utter absence of necessity" (FQI 17). This language, resembling though stopping short of *theosis*, is for Barth a guard against the idea of faith as "a striving of the human will towards God," instead of "a striving of the human will into God" (FQI 17). Thus, in Barth's notion of faith it is possible to see something analogous to Merton's knowing by connaturality. That Barth's theology is 'scientific' does not mean it is necessarily detached; by 'scientific,' Barth wants to show that his theological investigation is proper to his object of inquiry.

But he rejects the statement that these philosophical principles are "addressed, with polemical intent, to a hypothetical antagonist who cannot accept them" (AmBR 250). In his *Reading Notebooks*, after summarizing Anselm's argument, Merton outlines what he believes are the necessary ontological presuppositions underlying the argument:

> To understand [the argument] we must –
>
> 1) Accept the primacy of being.
> 2) Recognize that we have a natural intuition of being & are thereby naturally disposed to recognize the existence of God.
> 3) We see that A.[nselm] is linking up his *theological faith* with his *natural intuition of being*. This is the basis of his *ratio fidei*. (RNPT 56 transcribed)

The "primacy of being" means for Merton a rejection of Cartesian consciousness that proposes subjectivity over against objectivity, and the return to a metaphysical consciousness that intuits Being and is "ontologically seen to be beyond and prior to the subject-object division. Underlying the subjective experience of the individual self there is an immediate experience of Being."[20] Given these philosophical presuppositions, the argument may be seen as circular: to prove God one must already have an awareness of divine Being. This is why only the fool can say in his heart, "there is no God" (Ps 14:1), for such a statement is an impossibility for those capable of recognizing that which is most immediate to their very selves: the fact that God is the ground of all beings. These

[20] MZM 23. - Merton habitually uses Descartes as a foil in his call for a new (indeed old Augustinian) consciousness that is capable of intuiting being through immediate experience. In *New Seeds of Contemplation* he summarizes this perspective by stating: "For the contemplative there is no *cogito* ("I think") and no *ergo* ("therefore") but only *SUM*, I AM" (NSC 9). Although Descartes accepts Anselm's argument for the very reason of immediacy – arguing that the idea of God is innate to the finite mind (*Meditation V*) – the difference, for Merton, would seem to lie in the distinction between a notional immediacy described by Descartes and an experiential immediacy espoused by Anselm. God is not simply an idea in the mind; he is present at the center of our very being. Quoting Sartre about Descartes, he writes: "Il y a un 'premier ontologique' à tirer non du *cogito* réflexif mais de l'être préréflexif […]" (PT56 p. 40 [transcribed]). Although incomplete, this statement shows that Merton continues to see in Descartes the lack of ontological immediacy – or prereflexivity – he finds essential in Anselm, and also in Zen.

"previous philosophical principles" – namely Anselm's "religious experience of the truth of faith" – are not explicit in the argument. Merton suggests that

> We may perhaps complain that [Anselm] does not clearly distinguish the light of supernatural or infused understanding, or indeed the light of mystical wisdom, from the ordinary light of the human intelligence fortified by the habit of theological science. This is why the apparent conclusiveness of his dialectic sometimes leaves us hanging in the air, as if we felt that he had left the most important point unsaid. And often he has done just this; he has expressed everything but his ontological and spiritual *experience* of a truth that dialectic is not really capable of grasping. His evidence is therefore in some sense "loaded" by the unformulated implications of a religious experience which guides and enlightens the dialectical progress of his thought. *(*AmBR 248-49)

Merton highlights these "previous philosophical principles" also in "St. Anselm and His Argument": "Clearly, the underlying principle upon which his [Anselm's] thinking depends is an *intuition of being*" (AmBR 254). This "intuition of being" is Merton's answer to our previous question: What is a "religious experience of the truth of faith"? Thus, by linking his "theological faith" with his "natural intuition of being" (RNPT 56), Merton arrives at the core of both Anselm's thinking and his own.

As a brief aside, it may be helpful to note the significance of metaphysical experience in Merton's own religious conversion. In *The Seven Storey Mountain* (1948), Merton's autobiography published when he was only thirty-three years old, he describes his own profound discovery of a Catholic understanding of God while reading Étienne Gilson's Gifford Lectures at the University of Aberdeen (Scotland) in 1932 and published as *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*. "In this one word [*aseitas*] which can be applied to God alone, and which expresses His most characteristic attribute, I discovered an entirely new concept of God. […] God is Being Itself" (SSM 189). Another thing that caught Merton's attention was Gilson's distinction between "the concepts of *ens in genere* – the abstract notion of being in general – and *ens infinitum*, the concrete and real Infinite

Being, Who, Himself, transcends all our conceptions" (SSM 190). Merton responded to this "concept" of God that resonated from the very depths of his own being:

> I think one cause of my profound satisfaction with what I now read was that God had been vindicated in my own mind. There is in every intellect a natural exigency for a true concept of God: we are born with the thirst to know and to see Him, and therefore it cannot be otherwise. […] The result was that I at once acquired an immense respect for Catholic philosophy and for the Catholic faith. And that last thing was the most important of all. I now at least recognized that faith was something that had a very definite meaning and a most cogent necessity. (SSM 191)

What is most surprising is that Merton does not avoid Barth's thought (though he does modify Barth's language) in building his argument. Merton sees in Barth the very argument he wants to make. In the terminology of George Lindbeck,[21] for Merton faith is not merely an intellectual assent to absolute truth (*cognitivist*) or to particular doctrines for that matter (*propositionalist*), though these can in no way be sacrificed; for Merton faith is also a metaphysical intuition of the ground of all Being (*experiential-expressivist*); thus, it may be described as "religious experience." Neither Merton's revealed faith nor his ontological experience of the truth of that faith may be sacrificed for the sake of the other.

2.2.3 Intuition as Prayer

In order to better understand Merton's philosophical stance it is helpful to look at Paul Tillich's analysis of Anselm's argument, for Merton himself found many similarities between his own and Tillich's perspective. In a letter to Paul Tillich in 1959 he writes:

> I want to tell you how happy I am with the earlier chapters of *The Theology of Culture*, in which I find all my Augustinian and Franciscan instincts vindicated. True, I have been subjected to the Thomist formation, which is de rigueur for every priest, and it has made me a little suspicious of technical ontologism, but

[21] G. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (1984 – see bibliography # 3).

> what you are after is the Franciscan instinct for immediacy which is to me the supremely important thing in religious thought – and experience. (HGL 577)

In his *Theology of Culture* Tillich draws a direct connection between *Deus* and *esse* on the basis of the simple formula: "God *is*" (ThC 12). He champions the Augustinian – what he calls the ontological – approach to philosophy of religion as the "solution" to the reconciliation of philosophy and religion. In Augustine's theological footsteps followed the "Franciscan school of 13th-century scholasticism" whose "whole emphasis was on the immediacy of the knowledge of God" (ThC 13). "According to Bonaventura, 'God is most truly present to the very soul and immediately knowable'; He is knowable in Himself without media as the one which is common to all" (ThC 13). Thus, in relation to knowledge of God's very existence Tillich argues that "*God is the presupposition of the question of God*. […] God can never be reached if he is the *object* of a question, and not its *basis.*"[22] Moreover, in his *History of Christian Thought* and in specific reference to Anselm's argument, he notes that this sort of philosophical thinking is a form of circular reasoning: it "proves" God because it presupposes God. And yet, "where God is not the *prius* of everything, he can never be reached. If one does not start with him, one cannot reach him" (HCT 165). This is also Merton's own "intuition of being:" it is immediate (not in time but in space) knowledge of God whose presence is the very ground of human existence. Of great import to our argument is that Tillich calls this approach to God "mystical" and – following Matthew of Aquasparta – the "way of wisdom." Wisdom, *sapientia*, is the knowledge of the principles, of truth itself. And this knowledge is either immediate or it is non-existent." (ThC 14)

[22] ThC 13. – This has affinities with Bultmann's position. See ArAn.

Barth too is quite comfortable with this sort of circular reasoning. He quotes Kierkegaard who, without the notion of "intuiting being," suggests the genius of the argument lies in the very fact that to find God one must presuppose God. "Anselm says: 'I want to prove the existence of God. To that end I ask God to strengthen and help me' – but that is surely a much better proof of the existence of God, namely, the certainty that to prove it we need God's help. If we were able to prove the existence of God without his help, that would be as if it were less certain that he is there. […]" (*FQI* 39, note 2). What Merton and Tillich call an "awareness" or "intuition" of being, Barth and Kierkegaard simply call "prayer."[23] For Barth the place of prayer in Anselm's theology is not peripheral:

> When we consider the connection which Anselm held to be necessary between theology and prayer we put our finger on the condition of *intelligere* which, unless we are completely mistaken, emerges at this point as *sui generis* from all the others and which conditions all these others and makes them relative [FQI 35]. What is at stake here is not just the right way to seek God, but in addition God's presence, on which the whole grace of Christian knowledge primarily depends, the encounter with him which can never be brought about by all our searching for God however thorough it may be, although it is only to the man who seeks God with a pure heart that this encounter comes [FQI 38]. The author of the *Proslogion* keeps up the address to God on which he has embarked, not in order

[23] It is not overstating the case to draw a direct connection between intuition and prayer from Merton's perspective. In his lecture to the novices on Anselm's argument (6/24/63), Merton says: "[Anselm's] philosophy is right in the heart of his life of prayer – so much so that this argument that we are going to talk about was something that he was worrying about in the Office, and he gets the illumination of the thing at Matins one day. [… Anselm] had a philosophical way of thinking about God, and at the same time it was not only philosophical it was deeply religious and also mystical. And this fact is the one reason for the confusion about the quality of his philosophical thought. […] If you've got a philosophical experience […] which is based on a spiritual experience which you don't declare [… academic philosophers] don't know what the dickens [you are] talking about […] because they have no contact with the deeper presuppositions" ("St. Anselm and the Ontological Argument for God," *Recorded Conference* CD 58.4). Jean Leclercq notes these same mystical tones in Anselm: "This [search for God] is the source of the fervent tone, the mystical vocabulary, the urgings to transcend the self that are found even in the most speculative writings of St. Anselm" (LLD 243). Although the early Barth would have railed against the notion of a capacity within the human for "*sensing*" God, his later theological anthropology is open to this very possibility (TKB 152). Specifically following Barth, though very much in line with Merton, von Balthasar suggests that "Vanity means to want to withdraw from sensing God in order to live off one's own reasonable nature" (TKB 153). Even more significant is von Balthasar's suggestion that this very "'perception' that grounds theological anthropology" is one and the same with Barth's faith (TKB 155).

> to extort this fullness of grace, but because he knows this fullness of grace to be essential. In this attitude he stands in encounter with God for he knows that God must stand in encounter with him if his *intelligere* is not to be delusion and if he himself is not to be a mere *insipiens* [FQI 39]. In the end, the fact that [*intellectus fidei*] reaches its goal is grace, both with regard to the perception of the goal and the human effort to reach it; and therefore in the last analysis it is a question of prayer and the answer to prayer. (FQI 40)

From these lines it is not difficult to see how Merton saw in Barth "a real rediscovery of the profound religious dimensions of Anselm's thought."[24] At stake for Barth and for Merton is knowledge of God that includes God's very presence. Without the presence of God theology is reduced to conceptual and philosophical titillation. Christian knowledge of God confronts the whole person,[25] not only the mind, with the very presence of God. Theology as reasoned reflection on the object of faith, soaked in the ardour of prayer, is a cry *far* from philosophical rationalism and theological apologetics.

2.2.4 The Faith from both Authority and Experience

The primary difference between Barth and Tillich lies in the latter's softening of authority for the sake of what he calls a "theonomous" approach. For Tillich, Anselm's way of thinking is "theonomous" because it consists in "an awareness of the unconditional" (HCT 165). Theonomous thinking rejects "autonomous" reason and "heteronomous" authority; it is neither rationalism, nor fideism. Tillich has Barth's heteronomous authority in mind when he describes theonomous thinking as follows:

> This theonomous way means acknowledging the mystery of being, but not believing that this mystery is an authoritarian transcendent element which is imposed upon us and against us, which breaks our reason to pieces. For this would mean that God would be breaking his Logos to pieces, which is the depth of all reason. Reason and mystery belong together, like substance and form. […] It is a matter of serious concern that we do not create a gap between the divine

[24] AmBR 239. – J. Leclercq makes this precise connection between prayer and "religious knowledge" in (LLD 271).
[25] For Bultmann see ArAn.

> mystery and the divine Logos. […] If one denies that the structure of reason is adequate to the divine mystery, he is completely dualistic in his thinking; then God would be split in himself. (HCT 160-61)

Merton agrees with Tillich that an "overemphasis on the authoritarian aspect of faith" is partly a result of the Reformation (HGL 577); however, it would be going too far to say that Merton rejects the notion of authority outright.[26] Moreover, it is overly simplistic to label Barth a 'fideist' because of his emphasis on Anselm's *ratio fidei*.[27] For Merton it is not a question of 'either-or.' And yet, instead of describing a third way like Tillich, Merton takes a 'both-and' approach: he accepts both the authority of revelation and the immediacy of experience. In this respect he may have found himself closer to Barth than to Tillich, even though Barth would likely have balked at Merton's contemplative interpretation of his objective theology.

On the topic of authority, Merton turns toward Anselm's biblical hermeneutics to show that while Anselm focuses on reason, his "thought is steeped in faith, and that his thought, even when he is most absorbed in dialectic, is profoundly biblical and patristic."[28] He rhetorically asks, "What is the 'ontological argument' of the *Proslogion* if not a meditation on the 'I am who I am' of Exodus 3:14?" For Merton, Exodus 3:14 is "the starting point of Scholastic metaphysics."[29] Following Barth's lead, he affirms the

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[26] It is not difficult to find in Merton's writing an appeal to authority, even in many of his later writings. See for instance the chapter on "Tradition and Revolution" (NSC 142-49).

[27] Hans Urs von Balthasar defends Barth on this count: it is "absurd to speak of irrationalism here, for [Barth's position] derives from the openness of the Logos, who possesses every *ratio* in himself" (TKB 139).

[28] AmBR 244. - Barth clarifies a possible misunderstanding of *sola ratione* by writing: "It cannot be understood as if Anselm had written *solitaria ratione*. Authority is the necessary presupposition of Anselm's *ratio*, just as works are the necessary consequence of Luther's *fides*" (FQI 43-44).

[29] AmBR 244. – Here, Merton is directly inspired by Gilson who was the first in the 20th century to talk of a "metaphysics of Exodus" based on Ex 3:14 in his Gifford Lectures of 1932 (see # 2.2.2). Gilson's suggestion gave rise to a vigorous debate (for instance Father Lachance, a Montreal philosopher, was an active partner in that debate in the 1950s), and his position has been supported by the French philosopher Claude Tresmontant in *La métaphysique du christianisme et la naissance de la philosophie chrétienne*

explicitly biblical, and therefore entirely theological, aim of Anselm's argument, which requires neither a 'spiritual' reading in the tradition of *lectio*, nor biblicism in the sense of an extreme literalism. Following Anselm, Barth says that "the task of theology, the quest for *intelligere* in the narrower sense, begins at the very place where biblical quotation stops" (FQI 31). Therefore,

> If anyone would be expected to protest against a supposed "rationalism" in Anselm, it would be Karl Barth. And yet it is precisely Barth who has most forcefully insisted that Anselm's "*intellectus*" is a spiritual understanding of the "inner Text" of the Bible, and indeed *a more validly theological penetration* of Biblical revelation than that of the typologists and the allegorists who had so far arrogated to themselves a kind of religious and mystical monopoly on theological investigation. Anselm's thought is not a mere *lectio* of the biblical text, but an *intellectus* (*intus legere*) of the inner theological content of revelation or in Barth's words, the apprehension "of sanctifying truth in all its fullness." Anselm is not content to "recite articles of faith" with a quotation of chapter and verse, he seeks to understand the *ratio fidei*, and this ratio is not mere logical reasoning but theological and ontological truth, it is the *ratio veritatis* revealed in the Incarnate Word.[30]

True reason revealed in the Incarnate Word! This is not "mere" reason or "pure" reason, but "true" reason because God has revealed it, "theologically and ontologically," in his *Logos*. This is not the "autonomous reason" rejected by Tillich; nor is it, in Merton's mind, the "heteronomous authority" Tillich so readily rejects.[31] Merton sees in Barth a spiritual theology compatible with his own: an approach faithful to the authority of God's

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(Paris: Seuil, 1962) and in *Introduction à la théologie chrétienne* (Paris: Seuil, 1974), for instance pp. 32-37.

[30]AmBR 244. - Specifically, Barth says: "Strictly understood the *ratio veritatis* is identical with the *ratio summae naturae*, that is with the divine Word consubstantial with the Father. It is the *ratio* of God. It is not because it is *ratio* that it has truth but because God, Truth, has it. This Word is not divine as word, but because it is begotten of the Father – spoken by him" (FQI 45-46).

[31] Barth rejects the notion that faith under authority is necessarily irrational. "[In] obeying the authority [Anselm] is assuredly asserting the hidden *ratio* of the object of faith in order thereby to face and take up a problem presented to the human *ratio*" (FQI 48). In actual fact faith *is* rational because its object is the source of all reason.

revealed Word and wrapped in the experience of God through prayer.[32] Different terminology, absolutely, but Merton recognizes in Barth an approach compatible with his own understanding of God.

Using Barth extensively, Merton lays out his way of reconciling revelation and religious experience as follows:

> Anselm's argument is situated in a very special context – that of man's quest for beatitude in the Vision of God the Supreme Truth. His investigation is not that of dispassionate and scientific detachment, but of total spiritual commitment. It is the quest of one "striving to raise his mind to the contemplation of God and seeking to understand what he believes." As Barth says: "Anselm thinks and proves in prayer and therefore not on logical presuppositions, but by acceptance in practice of the One whose existence he undertakes to think out and prove. The point of the proof […] would be missed […] were the fact to be ignored that Anselm speaks *about* God's whole speaking *to* Him" (English Translation, p. 101). Hence there is no question that a "proof" for the existence of God is, for Anselm, simply the affirmation of "necessary reasons" for what he already accepts and "knows" in so far as it is revealed by God to the Church.
>
> The "Anselmian experience" in the *Proslogion* is, then, not a logical maneuver which starts with an essential definition of God and proceeds to "deduce" God's existence from His essence. On the contrary, this is where those who fail to understand his argument usually go wrong. Barth says that the Anselmian experience has a "prophetic"[33] character. The designation of God as "that than which no greater can be conceived" is not a definition [34] but a "Name" in the Old Testament sense of a presence and epiphany of God Revealed and Revealing. It designates Him as a hidden and transcendent One who is beyond all concepts. Yet He can nevertheless be "reached" by a necessary conclusion of reason, which confirms and expresses the certitude contained in the "Name" that reveals Him. It is true that our mind's eye cannot gaze directly on the sun, but it can view the light which comes from the sun, and in that light the sun can be said to be "visible." So too with the intelligible light diffused by this infinite Being of God.

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[32] Recognizing this both-and in Merton, A. M. Allchin suggests that "For Merton, then, the heart of the matter lies in an appropriation of the tradition which is at once mystical and theological, subjective and objective, experiential and yet more than experiential" ("The Worship of the Whole Creation: Merton and the Eastern Fathers"[2003 - MerH 106).

[33] Merton attempts to reconcile the Protestant "prophetic" view with the Catholic "contemplative" view under the umbrella of "religious experience" in MZM 204-05. He also argues that the "prophetic" and the "metaphysical" should not be set in opposition (ZBA 25).

[34] According to Yves Cattin, *La preuve de Dieu : Introduction à la lecture du Proslogion d'Anselme de Cantorbéry* (1986 – see bibliography # 3), these words do not just refer to an 'idea' of God, nor even less to a 'concept' of God; rather they are a sort of 'rule' pertaining to each and every attempt to think about God (ArAn 473).

> Anselm is therefore never afflicted with uncertainty or doubt. He does not wonder whether or not "God is." The being of God is, for him, no "problem." His quest is for the new and additional light of intelligence, and for the beauty [see # 2.1] and harmony of necessary reasons which supplement and clarify the loving acceptance of faith. He is not using reason to show that the existence of God is credible, but to show how the proposition that "God is" must be necessarily true and evident even to reason alone. (AmBR 247-48)

Merton shies away neither from the authority of God's self-revelation "to the Church" nor from the fact that Anselm "thinks and proves in prayer." He pursues the line of argument proposed by Barth that it is God's *Name* that is revealed in Exodus 3:14 as He-Who-Is. He recognizes that this does not mean "that the essence of God is fully comprehensible, but only that His *Name* designates Him in a relevant and intelligible manner, so that once we recognize His Name we can also recognize His necessary Being" (AmBR 256). If we recall the keen observation by Kilcourse (see # 1.1) that for Barth and for Merton the created order rests on the event of the Incarnation, it is possible to understand that for Merton religious experience is nothing if it is not grounded in, and oriented toward, the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Revelation and religious experience are therefore for Merton compatible; indeed they are inseparable if we are to receive in faith God's revelation given to the *whole* person, directed at the heart, offered to one's very being.

2.2.5 The Revelation of God's Name

In an unpublished essay on "The Name of the Lord,"[35] Merton clarifies the relation between revelation and religious experience by describing the explicitly christological moorings of his ontology. He describes the revelation of God's name as "a revelation of His Being" (252), and he discusses the significance for the nation of Israel

[35] See *Collected Essays*, vol. 23 (1963): 250-64. Unless otherwise noted, parenthetical references in this section are drawn from this essay.

in "remembering the Name of Yahweh" as a means of entering "into His presence in and through the all holy Name as it was invoked by the sacred assembly" (253). Yet, the name is significant beyond communal worship: "It was also and above all an awareness of being in the presence of the *Person* of the Lord, Yahweh" (253). "Thus the reality of Yahweh's presence is perceived not by a metaphysical intuition but by theological faith and hope and therefore it belongs not to the philosophical order, is not an awareness of *nature*, but a *personal relationship* of a supremely religious kind" (259). In this way, Merton brings his "intuition of being" (# 2.2.2) to entirely theological ground. After calling the name "an extremely clear and powerful primitive revelation of God," he takes his argument one step further by showing that in the New Testament God's name is revealed

> at the command of the angel (Matthew 1:21): Ye-shuah, *Yahweh saves*, or, in the form familiar to us: Jesus. Thus the Name which is said, in Hebrews, to be "inherited" by the Incarnate Word is the same 'I am' revealed to Moses, present in the midst of the People of God throughout Salvation history. That is why Jesus said, "Before Abraham was, *I am*" (John 8:58). The Christian faith then sees in the *Person* of Jesus the living, actual presence of the ineffable Name. (264)

This is the christological basis for Merton's expansive religious outlook. By no means does Merton's approach reduce revelation to religious experience. While upholding the relevance of religious experience he is quite clear that it is possible and intelligible only because it is grounded in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.[36] There is no "intuition of being" that is not always and everywhere an apprehension by faith (implicit though it

[36] In *New Seeds of Contemplation* Merton exhibits this unwillingness to separate the divine Word from the person of Christ: "No one can dismiss the Man Christ from his interior life on the pretext that he has now entered by higher contemplation into direct communication with the Word. For the Man Christ *is* the Word of God, even though His human nature is not His divine nature. The two are united in One Person and are One Person, so that the Man Christ is God" (NSC 152). - Likewise, von Balthasar writes that "Barth, strictly following Scripture, saw in Jesus Christ the 'real ground of creation' (6, 580). […] Therefore, "it is exegetically impossible to understand an eternal divine Son or Logos in the abstract but only in his unity with the human being Jesus" (TKB 118).

may be)[37] of God's self-giving in the *Person* of Jesus. While faith by its very nature seeks after theological understanding it is never to be identified with it. Conversely, religious experience is never merely an abstract metaphysical potential inhering in human nature itself; it is always a gift from God, apprehended perhaps in a mysterious way on the level of ontological experience, but always pointing to its fulfillment and completion in the Word of God made flesh. The 'general' metaphysical knowledge of God is given so that one might see beyond it to the 'specific' knowledge in Christ. It would be a mistake to dwell on the soteriological question here; Merton was not exclusively concerned with this. What is important to note is that while hopeful in his religious outlook he remained entirely centered on Christ.

Merton's ontological emphasis is an expression of the spiritual nature of his theology, and he does not think of ontology and theology as separate and unrelated spheres. The historical division between theology and spirituality (a separation of the head and the heart) has necessitated this qualification. Revelation and religious experience are two expressions of the same reality: the Father gives his Son to be shared by the work of the Spirit. In this giving, this revelation, the believer experiences/participates in the person of Jesus. To divide revelation into a cognitive and an experiential aspect would be to divide the very Word of God. They may be

[37] See # 2.2.2. – For Merton, "Our very creation itself is a vocation to union with Him and our life, and in the world around us, if we persist in honesty and simplicity, we cannot help speaking of Him and of our calling. But the trouble is that there are no 'pure' natural traditions and everything gets overlaid with error. Still, there is truth there for those who are still able to seek it, even if they are few. Ought it to be called 'theology'? That is a technical question. Certainly it implies – and can develop – a definite personal relationship to God in faith (cf. the *Proslogion*). Barth's interest in Anselm is very revealing" (DWL 279 [8/12/65]). In a letter to Eric Fromm he responds that he is in perfect agreement with the possibility of "unconscious faith" (HGL 321 [10/08/63]). However, he did not view the implicit faith of religious experience in the same light as the explicit faith in revealed truth. For instance, in distinguishing the *insipiens* and the *infidelis* Merton argues that the latter has come "at least *part of the way* to meet [the believer] on this spiritual ground" (AmBR 249; emphasis mine). This "spiritual ground" Merton also calls a "spiritual *experience*" of truth and a "religious experience" (AmBR 249). While the distinction between believer and unbeliever is not so pronounced as perhaps it was earlier for Merton, it is by no means erased.

distinguished, but never separated. What is revelation if it is not addressed to the whole person? As gift from the Father, Jesus is received by faith in His very person, shared in the announcement of the *kerygma*, in the doctrines of the church, in the body of Christ, and in the spiritual union of wills. The analogy of being for Merton is in no way a static essence open to manipulation and abstraction; rather, it is revealed and available to everyone through the very person of Christ in the event of the Incarnation.

2.2.6 Theology and Spirituality

Given the previous discussion, true theology can never be merely a matter of rearranging concepts. For Merton, "In calling upon the Name of Yahweh, [the people of God] *live* their theology, or rather theology lives and works in them."[38] Explicit in his article on Anselm's argument, and directly related to this notion of experience, is Merton's deep lament over the division of theology and spirituality, a division Merton finds absent in the thought of Anselm.[39]

> It is true that later on, in the decadence of Scholasticism, a dry and cerebral theology was the enemy of mysticism and spiritual elevation. It is equally true that a decadent and sentimental spirituality drove men to technical theology in search of intellectual substance. But in Anselm there is no divorce between intelligence and mysticism. They are one and the same thing. Intelligence springs from the mystical intuition and seeks to deepen its religious meaning in an act of homage to the truth. For Anselm reason serves adoration,[40] and is not mere logic-chopping. The "argument for the existence of God" is itself an act of worship that takes place in the presence of God who reveals Himself to the

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[38] Th. Merton, "The Name of the Lord," in *Collected Essays*, vol. 23 (1963), 260.

[39] Merton takes issue with Henri de Lubac who accuses Anselm of being one of the originators of this separation between theology and spirituality. De Lubac contrasts the "extreme rationality" of Anselm with the "spiritual intelligence" of Origen, and Merton responds: "One may excuse de Lubac as a professional Origenist for this failure to understand the real genius of St. Anselm. Karl Barth has better appreciated the religious and spiritual unity of Anselm's thought" (AmBR 245, note 8).

[40] On the topic of adoration Barth writes: "Finally, we may recall the *credo ut intelligam*, so unambiguous (unlike Augustine's), at the beginning of this very work [the *Proslogion*] and also the remarkable form of adoration with which Anselm embellished his argument just at this point. Strange indeed the contradiction if, against such a background, what he had intended to say about God were something his thinking had created rather than something received" (FQI 58-59).

> contemplative as the One beyond all comparison, whose Being is absolutely necessary. (AmBR 243)

Merton seeks to restore the relevance of dialectical reason by conceiving it in the light of spiritual adoration. It is an ordered restoration, with reason in the service of adoration being the very definition of intelligence. In this way he binds theology and spirituality, not to the exclusion of reason, but as a holistic act of worship.

Religion and spirituality overlap in Merton's description of Anselm's ontology, and Merton's term 'intelligibility' leads to the medieval distinction between reason and intelligibility. This distinction can be confusing because what he calls "reason" in *The Ascent to Truth* is equivalent to what he refers to above as "intelligibility." And what he here calls "reasoning" is equated to what he has called above "pure reason" or the realm of the *insipiens*. He refers the use of "light" to "intelligibility" in his article, and to "reason" in *The Ascent to Truth*. Early on in his writing career Merton distinguished between these two in *The Ascent to Truth*, in a chapter called, "Reason and Reasoning" (AsTr 201-216): "Reason is a light, reasoning a process. […] The process is a means to an end. The true fulfillment of reason as a faculty is found when it can embrace the truth simply and without labor in the light of a single *intuition*" (AsTr 203-04, my italics). For Anne E. Carr, this distinction is fundamental to Merton's theology, and she describes the difference "between *ratio* as discursive reasoning and *intellectus* as a higher understanding by connaturality (participation and experience) […]," the latter being "a language that speaks to the heart as well as the head."[41] "Understanding by connaturality"

[41] SWS 6. - Other Merton scholars make this same distinction. Kilcourse describes the difference this way: "Mystical theology, or contemplation, is the monk's knowledge of God won through […] searing experience. It is helpful to distinguish this from a more analytic, systematic sense of theology. Merton's turn to the experience of mysticism is reflected in a similar distinction between intellect and reason. The highest understanding of God, contemplation, comes by what the scholastics call 'connaturality,'

is contemplation, or theology as experience; the difference is a matter of love. In fact, Merton most succinctly defines these terms as "loving knowledge of God" (AsTr 162). Of course, 'heart' cannot be reduced to mere sentimentality; historically, and for Merton specifically, the heart is "one's deepest identity as grounded in the divine."[42] Merton specifically refers to the "heart" as the "'center' of man's being" (CoT 31). It is "the deepest psychological ground of one's personality, the inner sanctuary where self-awareness goes beyond analytical reflection and opens out into metaphysical and theological confrontation with the Abyss of the unknown yet present – one who is 'more intimate to us than we are to ourselves'" (CoT 33). Therefore, he argues, true understanding is more than a matter of conceptual clarity: "Genuine thought, thought *which understands*, can only exist where the relation of the concept with the being from which it derives its reality, is apprehended." (AmBR 254)

After distinguishing between reason and intelligence in Merton, there is an essential '*but'* one must insert with regard to his study of Anselm. He recognizes the criticism that Anselm's way of theology is not traditionally monastic because he approaches Scripture through speculation rather than by means of allegory or typology.

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contemplating God in creation and God's action of providence in the world. Contemplation happens as the person surrenders to a gift in the realm of experience, as intuitive knowledge and imaginative, recreative understanding" (AcF 93-94). And Kilcourse refers to *The Ascent to Truth* where Merton describes the limits of discursive reasoning (AsTr 274-87). However, Merton is consistently eager to strike a balance between dogmatics and mysticism even in *The Ascent to Truth*, when he suggests that "mystical wisdom remains subject to specification by the definite conceptual propositions of dogmatic theology" (AsTr 276). Higgins also points to this distinction in *Heretic Blood* when he refers to Merton's essay on "Blake and the New Theology" and positions William Blake over against Thomas Altizer by saying, "When Bacon claims to reason in favour of religion, Blake calls him 'An Atheist pretending to talk against Atheism,' and when Bacon praises social rituals Blake comments: 'Bacon supposes that the Dragon Beast & Harlot are worthy of a place in the New Jerusalem. Excellent Traveller, Go on and be damned!' Blake's conclusion is that 'a Lord Chancellor's opinions are as different from those of Christ as those of a Caiaphas or Pilate or Herod.' I think this should be kept in mind by anyone who wants to praise Blake as a 'Christian atheist' or an apostle of purely secular Christianity, in the sense in which this is understood by some popular theologians" (HeBl 72; LiE 8).

[42] Patrick F. O'Connell, art. "Heart", in *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia*, eds. W. H. Shannon, C. Bochen & P. F. O'Connell. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002.

But "we must not on that account exclude the totally new and original contribution made by Anselm to monastic theology by his dialectical quest for objective truth in the *ratio fidei*" (AmBR 245). Reason, even dialectical reasoning or speculation, is essentially monastic and spiritual insofar as it rests on the truth of biblical revelation and proceeds as an act of worship through prayer.[43] Reason in the service of adoration cannot be described merely as 'cerebral' theology; rather, in the same way that love knows the God who is Love by way of connaturality, so reason, contemplating the *Logos*, knows God by way of connaturality. In this way Merton redefines what is 'traditionally monastic,' arguing that Anselm's theology is "at once traditional and original: conservative without being archaic, creative without rash innovation. It was neither his conservatism that made him a monk, nor his originality, but the fusion of both in the ardour of prayer and fidelity to the Holy Spirit in the earnest quest for truth."[44] Merton concludes his study on Anselm by uniting the heart and the mind.[45] He quotes "a few well known lines of Pascal's *Pensées* which explain the Anselmian experience quite perfectly:"

> The heart has reasons which the reason does not know at all; that is evident in a thousand things. I say that the heart loves universal being naturally and itself

[43] Leclercq makes precisely the same point, arguing not for the a distinction between scholastic and monastic theology, because "Once the monks have demonstrated that prayer and humility are necessary conditions for any religious knowledge that purports to be a lived theology, a theology to live by, they can indulge as much as others in speculation" (LLD 278).

[44] AmBR 245-46. - Instructing the novices, Merton affirms Anselm's rational and dialectical approach to theology by suggesting that "what he did was actually a very monastic thing." Although "the monastic party line right now is, 'Scripture and the Fathers', […] there is nothing that is not monastic provided that it fits into a real monastic life." Moreover, "[Anselm says,] 'I'm not going to take the Bible, and I'm not going to take anything from any authority, this is all going to be reason.' But the catch about it is that the way he does it it's absolutely saturated with the Bible and it's absolutely saturated with tradition, and he's using his reason in this super-saturated state. So that actually what you've got is a perfect synthesis of exactly the way a monk should think when he's thinking originally. […] Here was a man who instead of simply tagging along after tradition […] becomes tradition" (Th. Merton, "St. Anselm and the Ontological Argument for God," *Recorded Conference* CD 58.4 [6/24/63]).

[45] One may recall here the significance of the heart in Anselm's prayer: "I do not try, Lord, to attain Your lofty heights, because my understanding is in no way equal to it. But I do desire to understand Your truth a little, *that truth that my heart believes and loves*. For I do not seek to understand so that I may believe; but I believe so that I may understand. For I believe this also, that 'unless I believe, I shall not understand' [Isa. 7:9]" (*Proslogion*, Chapter 1; italics added).

> naturally in the measure that it surrenders itself to it; and it hardens itself against one or the other as it chooses. […] It is the heart that senses God and not the reason. (AmBR 262).

And Merton poses the rhetorical question:

> Did not Anselm know this very well, or better, than Pascal? Yet instead of setting heart and reason in opposition, he united them in his *ratio fidei*, surrendering both to God in an act of understanding in which the 'reasons of the heart' become lucid and beautiful witnesses that convince the mind of God's infinite being.
>
> But the "*insipiens*" is one who has hardened his heart against universal being, and he consequently knows no 'reasons' beyond dialectical and verbal propositions without meaning or message for the whole man. (AmBR 262)

In this redefinition of what is traditionally monastic Merton paves the way for his own attempts at monastic innovation. Confronted by the 'world' around him – war, greed, individualism, poverty, suffering – and torn by calls to abandon the contemplative life in favour of the active life in view of a declining Christendom and the emergence of a secular society, he acutely recognized the need to engage that which only artificially lies outside the monastery walls. When he quotes Gilson, one recognizes the tension and the desire to hold the two worlds together: "The conflict which arose (in the eleventh century) between the defenders of a strictly monastic ideal of Christian life and those of a *wise use of secular culture* found its first satisfactory solution between the walls of the monastery, in the writings of St. Anselm of Canterbury" (AmBR 246, italics added). This too was Merton's aim: to wisely use the culture around him in a way that was both true to monastic tradition and yet responsive to the pressing global issues. The result was, for Merton, a theology that seeks to understand the Sophia of God through the wisdom of the world. (more on this # 3)

2.3 Apologetics and Interreligious Dialogue

To my knowledge Merton wrote two essays devoted solely to interreligious dialogue. The first is compiled in his book *Mystics and Zen Masters* and is titled "Contemplation and Dialogue"; the second is published as "Appendix IV" in *The Asian Journal* and is titled "Monastic Experience and East-West Dialogue." What Merton wrote for popular use was often previously worked out in a more rigorous manner in less accessible works. This has been verified by the recent and most helpful publication of the series *Initiation into the Monastic Tradition* edited by Patrick O'Connell, and this is true of Merton's approach to interreligious dialogue as well. Although there are glimpses of Merton's theological method in these more popular essays on interreligious dialogue, at least part of his theological method for interreligious dialogue has been worked out by reading Anselm, particularly through Karl Barth's groundbreaking study on Anselm's *Proslogion* entitled, *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum*.

That a mystic and broadly thinking forerunner of interreligious dialogue could find any such foundation in a theologian who so famously described all religion as 'unbelief' may sound like the most absurd suggestion. Two caveats attached to this suggestion might perhaps make it more palatable: first, Merton thought Barth's interest in Anselm and his interest in Mozart were compelling exceptions to Barth's overall theological outlook (see e.g. DWL 22 [10/4/63]); second, this present chapter has shown that Merton takes some license by reinterpreting Barth's theological stance in ways Barth would have found unacceptable. Besides, it is not the content of Barth's theology in particular that Merton found helpful, though he did find it interesting; rather it is Barth's very definition of theology as 'faith seeking understanding,' grounded in his study of Anselm and following Augustine. Specifically, Merton applies the theological axiom,

'faith seeking understanding,' to his study and experience of other religions in order to avoid what he saw as the two great sins of interreligious dialogue: apologetics and syncretism. Two principles of interreligious dialogue rooted in Barth's theological methodology are present in Thomas Merton's study of Anselm. These principles are hardly exhaustive; they are merely a sample of the wisdom to be gained from Merton's vast learning and experience. The first is a matter of *position* and pertains to the believer's location in the search for common ground; the second is a matter of *purpose* and pertains to the fundamental telos of interreligious dialogue (on this see ArAn). With respect to one's *position* in dialogue Merton proposes an empathetic search for common ground with the other while unashamedly remaining committed to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. With respect to the *purpose* of dialogue Merton easily rejects the defensiveness of apologetics and the irresponsibility of syncretism; rather, by recognizing the distance between faith and knowledge the believer is free to seek an understanding of the truth of their faith in dialogue with the other, and to rejoice in the transformation that new understanding brings by participating in Truth.

2.3.1 An Obvious Objection

Let us outline the obvious objection to the thesis of this final section of chapter two. There is a glaring letter written by Merton to the Zen scholar Masao Abe on May 12, 1967, in which it would appear that Merton completely rejects Barth's theology as a basis for interreligious dialogue. He writes the following:

> In discussing Christianity you take Barth as more or less normative. That is not unreasonable, since Barth is an uncompromisingly Biblical theologian and certainly takes a characteristically "Christian" stand upon the revealed Christian message of salvation. In other words Barth is clear-cut: indeed uncompromising. But precisely because he is so clear-cut, it seems to me that he makes dialogue

> between Christianity and non-Christian religions very difficult, since he himself is hostile to such dialogue. Or at any rate his teaching sharply divides the Christian revelation against any other form of religion. You are perhaps right in tackling the problem of communication at its difficult point, and not where it is easy. But I feel that at this point there is not much hope of real progress. One remains blocked.[46]

In place of Barth's objective and revealed theology, Merton offers more productive avenues, or as he calls them, 'meeting grounds,' for dialogue between East and West including: 1) Christian mystical experience (he points specifically to Eckhart, the Rhenish and Flemish mystics, and St. John of the Cross); 2) ontology or metaphysical experience; and 3) the Islamic mysticism and metaphysics of the Sufis. So it would seem that Merton has little interest in Barth's theology as the basis for dialogue.

A few remarks can be made that leave the door open. 1) Merton is writing to a Zen scholar; his work on Anselm through Karl Barth focuses entirely on Western religions. We should expect that the particularity of various religious traditions would require unique 'meeting grounds.' In dialogue with Jews and Muslims reason may be a perfectly acceptable common ground, whereas in dialogue with Zen a more *sapiential* or experiential ground is Merton's preference. 2) Merton is guided by a particular agenda in his positive appraisal of Barth's book on Anselm: he seeks to reconcile Barth's dogmatic approach with his own contemplative approach. In many respects Merton does not accept Barth's theology 'as is' but seeks to reinterpret it in favourable light. In other words, Merton's articles on Anselm are influenced heavily by Barth, but they nonetheless take on a strong Mertonian hue in their final form. Certainly he cannot expect everyone who reads Barth to see these same possibilities. 3) He appreciates in Barth's theology a

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[46] WiF 331. - It is interesting to note that some have argued that Barth was very popular in Japan in the 20th century precisely because of the "radical nature of his thought." See Paul Louis Metzger citing Toshio Sato in WCSS xiii.

'method' more than a 'meeting ground.' In this respect what he finds in Barth is explicitly for the Christian. This does not mean that it is necessarily hidden or secret, but it is of little use to anyone except the Christian. 'Faith seeking understanding' is a useful approach for Christians who participate in dialogue with other religious traditions.

2.3.2 Position

Merton begins his analysis of Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo* by reflecting on the historical circumstances of Anselm's writing. For him, this late eleventh-century dialogue is no mere antiquated theological discourse; it is a model for contemporary interreligious dialogue. He writes:

> The thirtieth chapter of Eadmer's *Vita Anselmi* [Life of Anselm] describes how Anselm, in exile in Italy, in 1098, withdrew into solitude to complete the *Cur Deus Homo* on which he had been working intermittently since 1094, that is to say since the year after he became Archbishop of Canterbury.
>
> A few pages later (chapter 33), a very interesting passage of the *Vita Anselmi* [Life of Anselm] shows that at this time Anselm also had contact with the Moslem soldiers in the army of Roger of Sicily, and that he made a deep spiritual impression on them. This is an important fact because it explains who precisely were the "gentiles" that Anselm had in mind in marshalling his arguments from reason to prove the necessity of the Incarnation and Redemption in the *Cur Deus Homo*. (MonS 223)

Audience matters in any sort of serious exchange of ideas. In this case, Anselm is writing not only with his imaginary Christian interlocutor Boso in mind; he is writing with real flesh and blood Muslims in mind. Therefore, we should expect a form of communication that differs from a sermon delivered within the ecclesial community.

A significant question then becomes: on whose ground are we to meet? Where do two disparate religious groups find common ground when faith commitments seem irreconcilable? Of course, in this case the common ground of reason is Anselm's preference and Merton heartily agrees. But the ground itself is insufficient; also important

is one's manner of approach. The difference between an apologist and one who seeks to engage in dialogue is first of all a matter of *position*: the apologete, Merton says, "stands in a position of invincible authority from which he delivers hammer blows to crush all arguments, irrespective of their worth" (MonS 223-24). On the other hand, the one who participates in dialogue with the other begins on the basis of "empathy." Merton carefully and specifically chooses the word 'empathy' over that of 'sympathy' to emphasize the fact that the difficult process of understanding is a universal experience. Too often faith is conflated with theological understanding, and the result is then a disastrous mixture of arrogance and ignorance. No one has full possession of the truth; instead, Merton suggests that Anselm and his disciple Boso "in effect place themselves in the Moslem's position in order to inquire whether they can, by reason alone, discover a clue to the mystery of man's eternal salvation apart from Jesus Christ" (MonS 224). It is not the case that one party fully understands the truth and then, out of pity for the other, shares this truth as a parent does with a child; rather, both parties recognize a shared state of humanity and the fundamental difficulty in intellectually grasping that which they believe.[47] Merton continues on to oppose "such apologetics" which "tend to assume from the start that the opponent is absolutely wrong no matter what he may say, and that therefore there is not much point in trying to understand his argument except in so far as may be necessary for an expeditious refutation" (MonS 224). The position of dialogue is one of search for common ground, always coupled with an attitude of humility and

[47] Merton proposes this sort of empathetic dialogue with the Unbeliever in his essay, "Apologies to an Unbeliever," in *Faith and Violence* (1968 – see bibliography # 1.3): "Without prejudice to the truth of the Gospel and to the Church's authority to teach and interpret the message of Christ, that message still demands to be understood in an authentic human situation. In this situation, men meet one another as men, that is to say as equals, as 'fellow servants.' Equals listen to one another because they have a compassionate respect for one another in their common predicament. […] It is not that some are all right and others are all wrong: *all* are bound to seek in honest perplexity" (FaV213).

shared humanity. Merton calls this outlook "ecumenical"[48] and gives credit to Paul Evdokimov for recognizing it in Anselm.[49]

Merton more thoroughly explicates this notion of *position* in his article on Anselm's *Proslogion*. Although the context is different – Anselm writing with the "unbeliever" in mind rather than Muslims, and to "prove" the existence of God rather than show the necessity for the Incarnation and Redemption – the principles remain. For Merton, Barth, and for Anselm, the notion of "common ground" is never neutral ground and certainly not ground that the Christian cannot rightly call his or her own. "Common ground," Merton here calls, "spiritual ground."[50] "Anselm," he argues, "refuses to speak to those who do not come at least part of the way to meet him on this spiritual ground" (AmBR 249). In this regard he notes that Anselm makes a clear distinction between "the fool" and the "unbeliever:"

> The fool is one who refuses to believe what is not immediately evident to his mind here and now. He is a "fool" precisely because he does not seek any truth beyond what conforms to his present prejudices. He mocks all that he does not understand. The *infidelis* [unbeliever] however is seeking the truth, but by reason alone, without faith. He is not a fool, because he seeks the truth, and it is not his fault that he has not received the gift of faith. Anselm will therefore enter into dialogue with the "unbeliever" who seeks the truth by reason. He will *share* with this unbeliever the understanding of the *ratio fidei* [reasoned faith] which he himself has acquired in theological meditation. Those who are, so to speak, on the same "wave-length" will, without difficulty, admit his reasons as necessary. Those who are not will never be able to see what Anselm is talking about. (AmBR 249)

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[48] Merton uses the term 'ecumenical' with respect to all religious traditions, not merely the 'whole house' of the Christian faith. See MZM 203f.

[49] Merton enthusiastically cites Evdokimov's article, "L'aspect apophatique de l'argument de S. Anselme," *Spicilegium Beccense*, pp. 233 ff.

[50] This "spiritual ground" in AmBR is parallel to the notion of "a religious experience of the truth of faith" in MonS: it can in both cases be described as an "intuition of Being" see #2.2.2). The contextual distinction between dialogue with the unbeliever as agnostic (*Proslogion*) versus dialogue with the unbeliever as religious other (*Cur Deus Homo*) is simply that in the latter case it may be assumed that this "spiritual ground" is "at least part of the way" to the revealed faith Merton describes.

In this distinction between the fool and the unbeliever, Merton argues for a common ground that in no way is torn from the revealed faith or the ontological experience of the believer. Merton, explicitly following Barth, goes so far as to call the "Anselmian experience" a theological meditation on the "Name" given to Moses in Exodus, rather than merely a logical deduction of God's existence from God's essence.[51] In this sense the argument has a "prophetic" character (AmBR 248). For the believer reason cannot be separate from faith for it is always and everywhere grounded in the revealed *Logos*.

For Merton, then, finding "common ground" is never a matter of bracketing off one's faith.[52] Reason, entirely apart from faith, is the ground of the "fool" who is without any "sense of God." But "common ground" may be sought, and found, with any who are honestly seeking truth and therefore are, in Merton's mind, in some sense attuned to what he calls God.

> By apologetics, we must understand an appeal to arguments and a way of reasoning which goes out to meet the *insipiens* on his own ground. It is quite true that Anselm proceeds *sola ratione* as if there were no revealed explanations. But he never proceeds as if revelation as such were to be temporarily set aside as irrelevant. Yet this is what he would have to do to meet the "*insipiens*" on his own ground and bring him by logical, historical and other arguments to admit the

[51] AmBR 248. – The distinction between essence and existence is used probably for the first time by William of Auvergne (born after 1180, he died in 1249 in Paris); hence it cannot be used in the analysis of Anselm's thought without the risk of misunderstanding (ArAn 473).

[52] Despite strong statements to the contrary, William H. Shannon verges on this in his essay, "Thomas Merton in Dialogue with Eastern Religions" in *The Vision of Thomas Merton*, ed. Patrick F. O'Connell (2003 – see bibliography # 2), when, following Merton's recognition that the Catholic Church is for the "first time seriously taking note of the non-Christian religions in their own terms" (CGB vii), he suggests this "means letting others explain themselves in their own way rather than seeing them as we perceive them through our Catholic lenses" (213). As progressive as this suggestion sounds, one must ask: Through what other lenses can one see non-Christian religions? Not only is such a suggestion detrimental to dialogue by introducing an element of inauthenticity, but it is also entirely implausible. To bracket off one's faith is either to admit there was no faith there to begin with, or simply to deceive oneself about the possibility of actually doing so. These are some of the problems associated with the so-called 'scientific' or 'comparative' approach to religious studies – an approach Merton had no interest in whatsoever. This does not mean that Christians should not listen intently to persons of other religious traditions with the hope that there is something new to be learned; it simply means that there is no way of hearing or appropriating that truth apart from the religious matrix given by revelation (ArAn 474-78). To be fair, Shannon probably means simply to avoid constructing preconceived and ill-informed notions of other religious traditions before they have actually had a chance to speak for themselves.

> relevance and credibility of revelation. This Anselm never does. He starts from the fact of revealed truth, and then goes on to show that *if his imaginary interlocutor were really consistent* he would be able to recognize that he already held some truths which implicitly point to the evidence which Anselm is trying to show him. […] The unbeliever is not brought into the picture as an adversary to be "effectively reduced to silence." Anselm is not concerned with "silencing" the objector (to whom be barely accords the most transient and indirect attention) as with showing *believers* (his monks) that the very proposition "God is not" is self-contradictory to anyone who is fully aware of the meaning of *God* – that is to say to anyone who has a "sense of God" which preserves him from being "*insipiens.*"[53]

This approach ultimately recognizes that the dualistic approach of 'nature' and 'supernature' is insufficient. Although Merton was formed in this neo-scholastic theological framework, he was making significant steps toward an Incarnational approach to the world that saw all creation grounded and transfigured in the gratuity of the Word made flesh. However, it is precisely faith that makes the Incarnational approach fruitful.

In *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* Merton describes the *position* of the Christian in dialogue with the world by opposing Bonhoeffer who, Merton argues, approached the world from the perspective of "only […] faith," and Bonhoeffer's

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[53] AmBR 250f. - Barth writes: "Anselm gives credit to the unbelievers to the extent that the *ratio* of faith which they lack and for which they ask is one and the same *ratio* as the one which he himself is seeking," and then closely following says: "In face of the unbeliever's rock of offence thus understood, the Christian theologian does not feel himself powerless. Thus understood, it is in fact identical with the rock of offence by which he himself was driven and continues to be driven from *credere* to *intelligere*. Therefore all he has to do is to lead his opponent along his own path and thus be able to give him the answers to the questions that even he himself is asking. If such is Anselm's interpretation of the quest of the 'unbeliever' then we can understand how he comes to engage in a discussion with him without either accepting the unbeliever's criterion, such as universal human reason, or stipulating that the unbeliever in order to become competent to discuss must first be converted into a believer. Anselm assumes his own ground, the ground of strictly theological (we would nowadays say dogmatic) impartiality, to be likewise a ground on which the 'unbeliever' could quite well discuss and would want to discuss. Thus he summons him on to his own ground; or rather he addresses him as one who by his questions has already accepted this ground and therefore he is able (without renouncing the *credo ut intelligam* or his predestinarian background) to discuss with him as if he were a Boso or a Gaunilo" (FQI 66-67).
Despite the fact that Barth says that we meet the unbeliever "on our own ground," once again the similarities between Barth's view and Merton's are striking: both are willing to dialogue (or theologize) on the basis of reason alone, and neither is willing to part from the pre-eminence of faith that gives them a "'practically unlimited confidence' in the power of reason" (AmBR 247).

followers who approached the world from a secular perspective that seemed to disregard faith altogether. Instead, Merton holds in theandric tension both revelation and reason:

> I hold to the Catholic view which makes an Encyclical like *Pacem in Terris* possible and logical. Pope John could very well have called the world to peace purely and simply in terms of the Gospel of Peace. Instead he called it to peace in the name of humanity and reason. But was this a contradiction of the Gospel? No. Since Christ is fully and truly *man*, since the world, society, humanity, human and social life have been taken up and sanctified in the Incarnation, the Church can speak to the world in terms of a humaneness, a reason, a compassion which both the Church and the "world" are capable of understanding, but of which the Church also has a much deeper, theological understanding than the world.
>
> Pope John's approach, traditionally Catholic yet completely open to dialogue with the world in human and reasonable terms, represents at the same time an explicitly religious position in which, however, religion is not forced on anyone. In this very humaneness and reasonableness he is bearing witness to the Gospel. This also was the spirit of the Catholic reasonableness of Thomas Aquinas.[54]

'Faith seeking understanding' as theological method for interreligious dialogue recognizes the distance between the gift of faith received and the rigor of faith understood. It therefore empathetically and humbly seeks after common ground for the purpose of mutual understanding; but it cannot reduce its reasoned faith to the level of reason only or banal argumentation, for it always recognizes creation "taken up and sanctified in the Incarnation."

In opposition to the other danger facing the believer, that of secularism or so-called 'relativistic pluralism,' Merton argues that "It is a problem for the believer who is too eager to identify himself with [the unbeliever's] unbelief in order to 'win them for Christ'" (CGB 307, and also FaV 207). Merton identifies this attitude with the danger of

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[54] CGB 289-90. - In # 10 of the Encyclical *Pacem in Terris* Pope John XXIII addresses the dignity of the human person on the basis of nature and then continues on the basis of grace: "When, furthermore, we consider man's personal dignity from the standpoint of divine revelation, inevitably our estimate of it is incomparable increased. Men have been ransomed by the blood of Jesus Christ. Grace has made them sons and friends of God, and heirs to eternal glory."

heresy that exists for the Catholic today in the form of a "'believing zeal' which, eager to open up new aspects and new dimensions of faith, thoughtlessly or carelessly sacrifices something essential to Christian truth, on the grounds that this is no longer comprehensible to modern man" (CGB 307). In opposition to this heretical stance Merton proposes the following:

> I think a Catholic is bound to remember that his faith is directed to the grasp of truths revealed by God, which are not simply accessible by reason alone. That these truths are not mere opinions or 'manners of speaking,' mere viewpoints which can be adopted or rejected at will – for otherwise the commitment of faith would lack not only totality but even seriousness. The Catholic is one who stakes his life on certain truths revealed by God. If these truths cease to apply, his life ceases to have meaning. (CGB 306)

Clearly, Merton follows Barth on the order of faith preceding reason, and they both find this order paramount in any discussion pertaining to witness or dialogue. Merton accepts the challenge to meet the "modern man," the unbeliever, "on his own ground," but at the same time he recommends that "we must also be truly what *we* are;"[55] balancing these requirements is for Merton a matter of compassion (CGB 307). He concludes this two-page pericope by pointing to the Incarnation and Redemption as the revealed basis for both Christian humanism and Christian mission: "What is the use of coming to modern man with the claim that you have a Christian mission – that you are sent in the name of Christ – if in the same breath you deny Him by whom you claim to be sent?" (CGB 307) Merton's both-and approach to the believer's *position* in dialogue is clear: Revelation *and* reason; faith *and* common ground; commitment *and* empathy; giving *and* receiving; speaking *and* listening; witnessing *and* learning. He summarizes his perspective as

[55] CGB 307. - In a slightly more abrasive tone Barth says that "The dialogue form and desire for proof in no sense indicate that Anselm has accepted a position where faith and unbelief, the voice of the Church and every other voice, have equal rights" (FQI 60). As long as Barth means by "equal rights" that in dialogue, truth for the Christian is not for sale to the greatest intellect or the most convincing argument, Merton agrees with Barth.

follows: “While I certainly believe that the message of the Gospel is something that we are called upon to preach, I think we will communicate it more intelligently in dialogue. Half of talking is listening. And listening implies that the other speaker also has something to say.” (FaV 212)

2.3.3 Purpose

It is important to discuss also the *purpose* of dialogue. Once again, the purpose for Merton is in no way limiting: one may speak of other goals for interreligious dialogue, but with respect to Merton one can certainly speak of peace and the preservation and promotion of the *sapiential* tradition as recurring goals. However, in Merton’s essays on Anselm another end is dominant. It is not too strong to suggest that all other goals as relative to, or dependent upon, the one Merton proposes. Again here, ‘faith seeking understanding’ is central.

Merton’s purpose is in no way apologetic: he does not set out, on the basis of reason, to disprove the arguments of those who do not share his faith. Specifically, he sets forth his perspective in his article on Anselm’s *Cur Deus Homo* against that of Dom F. S. Schmitt who argues that “where we join *ratio* [reason] with belief, we have apologetics”; he easily dismisses this definition as “too sweeping,” one that renders “all theological science [as] nothing more than apologetics” (MonS 224-25). Rather than apologetics, Merton proposes Anselm as a model for reasonable, interreligious dialogue. He poignantly states that “St Anselm and his group were open to a more tolerant and reasonable dialogue with the Jew as well as the Muslim” (CGB 121). Likewise, in no way does Merton see in Anselm any sort of hidden agenda: the pragmatic use of reason

for the purpose of converting the other is as futile practically as it is theologically unsound.[56] Anselm's agenda is far more modest and humane:

> Anselm's *ratio* always begins and ends with a religious experience of the truth of faith concerning which his reason meditates and inquires. He seeks indeed to "convince," perhaps better to "satisfy," the unbeliever, but he does so in two ways. First of all, by implicitly declaring the intense fervor of his own faith, and then by showing that this faith is in no way irrational but is, on the contrary, perfectly consonant with reason, and more, that it fulfills all the inmost aspiration of reason itself. This means that the *Cur Deus Homo* is something much more subtle than an attempt to convert the unbeliever *sine die*, bludgeoning his intellect with "invincible" arguments. Without abandoning the level of faith, and yet without demanding that the unbeliever place himself on the level of faith, Anselm institutes an intelligent, sympathetic dialogue in which the truth of faith makes itself accessible and highly attractive on the level of reason. Here is the genuine essence of ecumenical dialogue in which, without one interlocutor trying to establish that he alone is "right" on all points, both strive to share as much as they can of a truth they possess to some extent in common. (MonS 225-26)

It is tempting to assume that *truth* is the primary purpose of interreligious dialogue. This is not entirely false, insofar as the truth one seeks is an increased understanding of the faith one has already received. This, however, is really just a matter of "fleshing out" the truth of faith. The knowledge gained in dialogue (and also in theological discourse) never reaches beyond the limits set by the faith that is received as gift. For Merton, then, there is a purpose in dialogue that goes beyond even truth. Immediately continuing, he explains:

> But Anselm's dialogue is actually for Boson and himself even more than it is for the hypothetical Moslem. His purpose is to increase, by reason, their Christian joy in revealed truth. Intelligible joy is regarded by Anselm as one of the characteristic fruits of monastic study and prayer. The understanding which faith attains by meditation, study, prayer and intuition stands half-way between the obscure assent of faith and the pure light of the beatific vision.[57]

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[56] Barth himself says: "The aim of theology cannot be to lead men to faith, nor to confirm them in the faith, nor even to deliver their faith from doubt" (FQI 17). This negates the crucial work of the Holy Spirit.

[57] MonS 225f. - Here Merton follows Barth's description of the "medial" character of knowledge in Anselm: "So we shall have to interpret the medial character of knowledge in Anselm's sense by saying that knowledge stands between faith and vision in the same way as we might say that a mountain stands between a man looking at it from the valley and the sun. *Intelligere* is a potentiality for advancing in the

The *purpose* of dialogue, according to Merton, is joy! This same purpose is expressly forwarded by Barth in his book on Anselm: "As *intelligere* [understanding] is achieved, it issues—in joy."[58] But this can hardly be called a *purpose* for there is nothing calculating about it: joy arises out of spontaneous desire (intellectual and volitional) for the triune God. Similarly, in his article on Anselm's *Proslogion*, Merton writes:

> In Anselm's mind, therefore, dialectic does not precede conversion, but follows it. […] Actually, the Anselmian method is not a method "for" anything. He is not seeking to prevail in any argument, and the word "*probare*" [proof] must not generally be taken to imply "putting over" his point and "winning" the argument. The Anselmian proof has no utilitarian purpose: it merely adds to the joy and serenity of belief the further joy and clarity of understanding the evident truth. (AmBR 252)

This agenda for theology and for interreligious dialogue may be found in Anselm when he writes: "I pray, O God, that I may know You and love You, so that I may rejoice in You" (*Proslogion* 26). Truth is already apprehended in faith. The purpose of interreligious dialogue is to somehow close the gap between belief and understanding and, in the process, experience the joy of participating in truth.

Although we have laid out the Christian's *position* in dialogue prior to that of their *purpose*, in reality this order should be reversed. The Christian's *position* in dialogue is in fact dependent on their *purpose* for dialogue. 'Faith seeking understanding'

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direction of heavenly vision to a point that can be reached and that is worth trying to reach. It has within itself something of the nature of vision and it is worth striving for as *similitude* of vision, just because it leads men, not beyond, but right up to the limits of faith. This is the *ratio* of *credo ut intelligam* — independent of all objectives and so of all attempts at proving or at finding joy: the God in whom we believe is *causa veritatis in cogitatione*. Knowledge at once combines with that love of God on which faith is set. *Intellectus* is also involved in actualizing the *imago Dei* as this occurs in faith. *Intellectus* is the limited, but fully attainable, first step towards that vision which is the eschatological counterpart of faith. Therefore *fides* is essentially—*quaerens Intellectum*" (FQI 21).

[58] FQI 15. - Barth continues: "The dominating factor in Anselm's mind is that even the Church Fathers wrote about it in order to give the faithful joy in believing by a demonstration of the *ratio* of their faith. This reason, which the *intelligere* seeks and finds, possesses in itself not only *utilitas* (by which Anselm may have been thinking of a polemical proof) but also *pulchritude*. […] Is it mere coincidence that in a work like *Cur Deus homo*, which on its own admission is so set on proving, its chief end should be given as, first, this *delectari* and, secondly, the polemical obligation of I Peter 3.15?"

as theological guards interreligious dialogue against the defensiveness of apologetics and the irresponsibility of syncretism. But it does not *try* to do this: these two extremes are avoided quite naturally when faith is held humbly yet unashamedly, when it is neither conflated with understanding nor carelessly set aside. Ultimately, 'faith seeking understanding' serves no purpose at all; it is the spontaneous desire of each Christian seeking to love God with all their heart, soul, and mind (Mt 22:37). Establishing this, faith may not be sacrificed in the search for understanding – this would completely undermine all authentic and honest dialogue. The more difficult question for the Christian becomes where we might find meaningful and theologically stable 'common' ground for dialogue. Merton himself pondered other "meeting grounds" including metaphysical experience (ZBA 42) and even the theological ground of the Trinity (ZBA 58). Neither of these need alter 'faith seeking understanding.' From an Incarnational approach the most obvious 'meeting ground' is, of course, reason rooted in the *Logos*. But Merton's own preference was not on the level of reason, but on the level of religious experience. It is significant in this light that Merton was willing to go beyond the more traditional Logos-Christology by affirming at least the beginnings of a Wisdom-Christology. This is the basis for Merton's move East, in search of a greater understanding of his faith in the *Sophia* of God.

C H A P T E R T H R E E

CHRIST AS *SOPHIA*

> There are seven fascinating lines in the book of Wisdom about ships (14:1-7): how the wood of ships carries men across the sea, even though "a man went to sea without art." It is a lovely and basically humorous passage, with all the bustle and business of building the ship and planning the voyage, and trusting life and fortune to a piece of wood, and going off to sea without knowing what it is really all about, and praying to a piece of wood even more frail than the wood that carries the voyager: and all the while God draws the madman over a safe path among the waves and saves him in spite of his nonsense and his idol: "For blessed is the wood by which justice cometh." If the author of Wisdom has nothing but approval for ships and shipbuilders, he has no patience with idols and their makers.[1]

The opening section of the previous chapter did refer to one of the limits of Merton's Christian humanism: "expansive life." By this Merton means hoarding material things, or exhibiting an inordinate love for money. In stealing the – perhaps not so metaphorical – gold from Egypt the Israelites are left only with idols. Reason, on the other hand, originating in the *Logos* of God, is fundamental to the logic of the cosmos; when used properly, it is foundational to understanding the faith received by revelation. Reason is central for Christian culture that is not content with 'austere faith' but accepts and encourages intellectual curiosity.

Many of these same themes are evident in the above pericope by Merton on the biblical book of *Wisdom* 14:1-7. Instead of gold, we have wood; and like gold, wood can be used improperly. It can be a material of choice for building idols in exactly the same way gold may be misused for the construction of idols. But if it is used properly – recall

[1] CGB 9. Immediately before this biblical quote Merton declares: "The Incarnation is not something that can be fitted into a system […] in this I would lean toward Barth much more readily than toward Teilhard de Chardin, for example. 'Divine revelation,' Barth continues, 'cannot be discovered in the same way as the beauty of a work of art or the genius of a man is discovered. […] It is the opening of a door that can only be unlocked from the inside.'" - Is it just coincidence that Wis 14:1-7 is placed by Merton immediately after this declaration?

Augustine's doctrine of using (*uti*) and enjoying (*frui*) (see beginning of # 2) – it is entirely compatible with the will of God for "It is your will that works of your wisdom should not be without effect" (Wis 14:5). The author suggests specifically that "wisdom was the artisan who built" the vessel about to voyage (Wis 14:2). Augustine points out that this appropriation of pagan culture "was done first by that most faithful servant of God, Moses, of whom it is written that he 'was instructed in all the *wisdom* of the Egyptians.'"[2]

This chapter is an attempt to show that for Merton wisdom, when used properly, may be affirmed because it derives from the openness to the *Sophia* of God who possesses all wisdom. No doubt Merton, trained in the Cistercian way of "seeing Christ on every page of the Bible" (WaS 298), highlights the blessed "wood by which justice cometh" because he views it as a type pointing to the wisdom of Christ crucified (1 Cor 1:23-24). Wisdom, like reason, is an appropriate and even beneficial tool in understanding the faith received by revelation. On this theme of wisdom Ross Labrie narrows in at what is the crucial point in this chapter: "Merton was inclined to use the terms *imagination*, *contemplation*, *mysticism*, and *intuition* interchangeably. In addition, the understanding that resulted from the fruitful contemplative use of these faculties Merton generally called *wisdom*."[3] After wrestling through Merton's reinterpretation of Barth in his book on Anselm, arguing that Merton's intuitive approach is distinct, though not separate, from Barth's more authoritative perspective, we may offer now the substance of Merton's religious experience: wisdom. One should recall that the most important figure in the Cistercian order, Bernard of Clairvaux, held not to *Credo ut*

[2] Acts 7:22. - Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, 76; italics added.
[3] R. Labrie, *Thomas Merton and the Inclusive Imagination* (2001 – see bibliography # 2), 22-23.

intelligam but rather to *Credo ut experiar* (LLD 263). With regard to a rational and intellectual approach to understanding faith, Merton is inclined to highlight Anselm's *spiritual* theology; with regard to Merton's own explorations in religious experience, we are in search of the opposing emphasis: spiritual *theology*. Our attempt is to uphold *both* the cognitive and the experiential aspects of faith according to Merton. Of course, we must affirm along with Paul that wisdom on its own and apart from faith is mere "foolishness,"[4] in the same way Merton, following Anselm and Barth, recognized the futility of reason, apart from faith, for 'proving' the existence of God.

The fact that 'faith seeking understanding' serves Merton both as a means for reconciling revelation and religious experience and for negotiating the difficult yet important work of interreligious dialogue has been shown already (# 2.3). However, this theoretical framework and the resulting hypothesis do focus on a narrow, albeit significant, portion of Merton's thought, and it remains to be tested. This chapter analyzes some of Merton's significant mature works relating to other religious traditions through the eyes of this theoretical framework. Lawrence Cunningham makes precisely this suggestion with respect to one of the most important avenues of Merton's curiosity. Cunningham says:

> What he wanted to discover, as he says in this book [*Zen and the Birds of Appetite*], is whether Zen wisdom might help him embrace more fully the wisdom Paul speaks of in the opening of his first letter to the church at Corinth, a wisdom that stands against rationality and in favor of the folly and stumbling block of Christ. This search for authentic wisdom (a major theme of Paul's letter) was a theme that harkened back to his thinking in the 1950's, as he attempted to work out a way of being faithful to his own deeply felt Christianity while not appearing

[4] 1 Cor 1:18-31. - Regarding this rhetoric in Paul Merton says, "[The Contemplative] is content with the wisdom of God, which is folly to men not because it is contrary to the wisdom of man, but because it entirely transcends it" (IE 109).

> as an aggrandizer or cover apologist. He wanted to be a seeker and a learner along the path of wisdom. (TMV 157)

3.1 Merton's Growing Interest in Universal Wisdom

What Merton called the *sapiential* or *sophianic* approach to life he found first and foremost in his own tradition, especially in the writings of the Desert Fathers, in Eastern Orthodoxy through the sophianic theology of Paul Evdokimov, Macarius Bulgakov, and Nicholas Berdayev, and in numerous secular writers including Boris Pasternak, Albert Camus, and William Faulkner, to name only a few. But he found it also through his study of Zen and subsequent correspondence with D.T. Suzuki, in conversation with the Dalai Lama on Tibetan Buddhism, through Chang Tzu and his interest in Taoism, through Gandhi and through his study of the *Bhagavad Gita*, through Abdul Aziz and his great respect for Sufism. His oft-quoted words from *Conjectures* serve best to display Merton's aim in uncovering this tradition of wisdom throughout the world:

> For myself, I am more and more convinced that my job is to clarify something of the tradition that lives in me, and in which I live: the tradition of wisdom and spirit that is found not only in Western Christendom but in Orthodoxy, and also, at least analogously, in Asia and Islam. Man's sanity and balance and peace depend, I think, on his keeping alive a continuous sense of what has been valid in the past." (*CGB* 176)

No doubt, this call for the retrieval, renewal, and preservation of Christian culture is opposed to Barth's 'austere faith.' Merton was not naïve about the Church's declining influence during his time. He saw it not as something to necessarily celebrate, but as a historical and theological reality. In appraisal of Karl Rahner's understanding of the "diaspora situation" with respect to the Church, he wrote in 1964 the article "The Christian in the Diaspora" (SeD 132-55). Merton's hope, in line with Rahner's, was based not in ecclesial triumphalism but in "the eschatological victory of Christ (SeD

135). However, he also believed that "faith needs a favourable milieu in which to develop" (SeD 140), and in direct opposition to what he regarded as Barth's secularizing position, he suggested that "Most individuals cannot preserve their faith intact if left alone with it in the midst of a hostile or indifferent society" (SeD 140; also CGB 176). Merton's call for a renewal of Christian culture was not the call of a monk with his head stuck in the sand; it was a call for cooperation and solidarity with any and all who shared something of his contemplative vision for life. It was a call, Merton suggests quoting Berdyaev, "to be human in this most inhuman of ages, to guard the image of man for it is the image of God." (RaU 6)

Merton wrote several books relevant to his sapiential or sophianic approach to life, including: *The Wisdom of the Desert* (1960), *Gandhi on Non-Violence* (1965), *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (1965), *Mystics and Zen Masters* (1967), *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (1968), and also the posthumously published *Asian Journal* (1968/1973) recounting Merton's final months and his journey through Asia. The secondary literature also abounds, and the following discussion can only be a limited and focused one. So far, this study did approach Merton through his interest in Barth; this focus must continue to remain constant. If we are to remain in contact with Barth after a brief discussion of Barth's interest in Mozart, it will be with respect to Merton's understanding of the analogous relationship of religion to Christian wisdom, and his appreciation for wisdom and the potential for 'Asian religions' to positively affect Christian spirituality.

Before launching into Barth on Mozart, a brief summary of Merton's understanding of wisdom will be helpful. Bonnie Thurston provides a succinct and

reliable analysis on this topic.[5] For Merton, wisdom represented the "Feminine Principle in the World" (TWS 5). Merton had always struggled with women in his life: his mother he perceived as "distant," and he misused the women he dated through University. "To put it bluntly, Merton had trouble with women" (TWS 5), and "It was wisdom as an image of the feminine in the world which finally extracted him from these difficulties."[6] Visiting Victor Hammer in 1959, Merton "was fascinated by a painting in which a stately woman is placing a crown on the head of a young man. He asked who she was, and Victor no longer knew. Merton says, 'I know her. I have always known her. She is Hagia Sophia.'"[7] Thurston suggests that for Merton, "Wisdom Makes the Transcendent God Approachable."[8] Not only is wisdom personified for Merton in women – particularly the

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[5] B. Thurston, "The Tradition of Wisdom and Spirit: Wisdom in Thomas Merton's Mature Thought," in *The Merton Seasonal* 20/1 (1995): 5-8 (= TWS 5-8). - For another brief and reliable analysis, see P. F. O'Connell, "Wisdom," in W.S. Shannon & others, *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* (2002 – see bibliography # 2), 533. O'Connell identifies four reasons for Merton's interest in wisdom during the last decade of his life: "It firmly roots him in his own Christian contemplative tradition; it serves as a point of contact and dialogue with the great traditions of the East; it provides a theological grounding for a sacramental view of creation; and it provides an alternative perspective to the analytical, quantitative, exploitative approach characteristic of scientific rationalism."

[6] TWS 5. - There are very significant pieces to the puzzle that must be hurried over for the sake of brevity. Merton's poetic and theological interest in chapter 8 of the biblical book of *Proverbs* becomes a part of his own lived experience, beginning with his own dream on February 28, 1958, about a young Jewish girl named "Proverb." This dream would later be lived out in reality [1966-67] with striking similarities through Merton's romantic relationship to his nurse, "M." Less than three weeks after his dream Merton records in his journal what would famously become known as his "Fourth and Walnut Experience." Visiting Louisville, in the midst of a busy shopping district, Merton had an experience of overwhelming love for the people around him. Merton suddenly felt that he was able to see past the surface of a sinful world and deeper into the image of God within each person in the world. The world, in Merton's eyes, had been transformed in Christ and no longer could he hold to the sense of pious separation from the world that he felt when he first entered the monastery. Particularly, Merton is struck by "Wisdom and Sophia" inherent in each woman (*SfS* 182).

[7] TWS 6. - For Merton's poem, "Hagia Sophia," and its analysis, see B. Dieker & J. Montaldo, eds. *Merton and Hesychasm* (2003 – see bibliography # 2).

[8] TWS 6. - This is the meaning of Merton's Wisdom-Christology focused on the Word *incarnate*. According to Paul Evdokimov in *Women and the Salvation of the World* (1994 – see bibliography # 3), "[i]t is the vocation of *Sophia* to bring forth divine thoughts, and to give them a *human form*; this is the *humanization* of Yahweh. Through the feminine principle of *Sophia*, the awe-inspiring countenance of Yahweh transforms itself into a human face. The Virgin Mary gives birth to Yahweh-Man. […] She is the medium of *Sophia*, and thereby the channel of the astonishing change in the destiny of Yahweh" (203). Moreover, "The overwhelming revelation of the humanization of Yahweh is possible only within the heart of the Trinity. *Sophia* prompts Yahweh to reveal himself as Trinity. This revelation, by means of the

Blessed Virgin – but in a letter to Victor Hammer he describes Hagia Sophia as "God Himself. God is not only a Father but a Mother. He is both at the same time, and it is the 'feminine aspect' or 'Feminine Principle' in the divinity that is the [Hagia Sophia]" (WiF 4). "Without the more gentle figure of Sophia […] God would, for Merton, be unapproachable."[9] Finally, Thurston describes wisdom for Merton as the "Focal Attainment of the Religious Life" (TWS 7). Quoting an unpublished paper by Patrick O'Connell, Thurston suggests that "Merton finds wisdom terminology particularly useful for articulating some of the common or at least analogous elements found in diverse traditions" (TWS 7). Specifically in "Contemplation and Dialogue" Merton asserts: "[…] in all religions it is more or less generally recognized that the profound 'sapiential' experience, call it gnosis, contemplation, 'mysticism,' 'prophecy,' or what you will, represents the deepest and most authentic fruit of the religion itself" (TWS 7). This aspect of wisdom is here the primary concern, although the approachability of God is pertinent in this respect as well.

3.2 Mozart and Wisdom

Only one day after Merton first makes reference to Karl Barth in his journals (9/17/60), he writes a rough version of what would end up being one of his most revealing and certainly his most well-known "conjecture" concerning Barth. The

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Incarnation, is articulated in Mariology, which alone clarifies and specifies the deepest foundations of Christology" (207).

[9] TWS 7. - The influence of the Russian mystical theologians – Berdyaev, Bulgakov, Clement, Evdokimov, Lossky, and Florovsky – has been widely noted. See A.M. Allchin, "Our Lives, A Powerful Pentacost: Merton's Meeting with Russian Christianity," in B. Dieker & J. Montaldo, eds. *Merton and Hesychasm* (2003 – see bibliography # 2), 121-40. Merton was no doubt also greatly indebted to Julian of Norwich on this topic. For his obvious appreciation see his letter to Sister M. Madeleva: "Julian is without doubt one of the most wonderful of all Christian voices. She gets greater and greater in my eyes as I grow older, and whereas in the old days I used to be crazy about St. John of the Cross, I would not exchange him now for Julian if you gave me the world and the Indies and all the Spanish mystics rolled up in one bundle. I think that Julian of Norwich is, with Newman, the greatest English theologian" (*WiF* 43).

published product, little more than one page long in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1965), is a revision of this journal entry dating from September 16, 1960, and it stands as the centrepiece in the first chapter called "Barth's Dream." The content of Merton's entry is drawn entirely from four sources written and published by Barth between February 13, 1955 and January 29, 1956. The four sources together make up a small book entitled, *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart* (1956 – see bibliography # 3). After a "Testimonial to Mozart" and a short "Letter of Thanks to Mozart," there is the central thrust of the book: an essay entitled, "Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart," and finally a written version of the address Barth gave for the Commemorative Celebration of Mozart's 200th birthday, entitled, "Mozart's Freedom." It is clear from Merton's various quotations that he would have read an early version of the essays printed in this book.

Barth's love for Mozart is well known. In the short "Testimonial to Mozart" Barth confesses, "If I ever get to heaven, I would first of all seek out Mozart and only then inquire after Augustine, St. Thomas, Luther, Calvin, and Schleiermacher" (WAM 16). John Updike, who provides the original "Forward" to the book, summarizes the meaning of this small, though influential, aspect of Barth's thought. Beginning with Barth's own words to Mozart – "With an ear open to your musical dialectic, one can be young and become old, can work and rest, be content and sad: in short, one can live" – he writes: "Thus Barth speaks directly to Mozart, in a tone of profound gratitude. Those who have not felt the difficulty of living have no need of Barthian theology; but then perhaps they also have no ear for music" (WAM 12).

With regard to this notion of "living," Merton wrestles with Barth's "dream about Mozart" and ultimately objects to what he believes is Barth's inability to make a connection between the hidden divinity within Mozart's music and his own salvation. He writes:

> Karl Barth had a dream about Mozart.
>
> Barth had always been piqued by the Catholicism of Mozart, and by Mozart's rejection of Protestantism. For Mozart said that "Protestantism was all in the head" and that "Protestants did not know the meaning of the *Agnus Dei qui tollis peccata mundi*."
>
> Barth, in his dream, was appointed to examine Mozart in theology. He wanted to make the examination as favourable as possible, and in his questions he alluded pointedly to Mozart's masses.
>
> But Mozart did not answer a word.
>
> I was deeply moved by Barth's account of this dream and almost wanted to write him a letter about it. The dream concerns his salvation, and Barth perhaps is striving to admit that he will be saved more by the Mozart in himself than by his theology.
>
> Each day, for years, Barth played Mozart every morning before going to work on his dogma: unconsciously seeking to awaken, perhaps, the hidden sophianic Mozart in himself, the central wisdom that comes in tune with the divine and cosmic music and is saved by love, yes, even by *eros*. While the other theological self, seemingly more concerned with love, grasps at a more stern, more cerebral *agape:* a love that, after all, is not in our own heart but *only in God* and revealed only to our head.
>
> Barth says, also significantly, that "it is a child, even a 'divine' child, who speaks in Mozart's music to us." Some, he says, considered Mozart always a child in practical affairs (but Burckhardt "earnestly took exception" to this view). At the same time, Mozart, the child prodigy, "was never allowed to be a child in the literal meaning of the word." He gave his first concert at the age of six. Yet he was always a child "in the higher meaning of that word."
>
> Fear not, Karl Barth! Trust in the divine mercy. Though you have grown up to become a theologian, Christ remains a child in you. Your books (and mine) matter less than we might think! There is in us a Mozart who will be our salvation. (CGB 3-4)

This is truly an *interpretation* of Barth: in fact, nowhere in Barth's dream does the topic of salvation arise; the recounting of Barth's dream in his letter to Mozart is a relatively insignificant matter Barth is willing to "let rest" without any sort of interpretation (WAM 20). Merton's interpretation is playful, whimsical: it calls the

reader's attention to the playful and personified wisdom of *Proverbs* 8 that was so important for Merton, and yet it is also theologically and poetically dense, with much to unravel. Encapsulated within Merton's words are the primary themes our study is wrestling with: revelation and religious experience, theology and spirituality.

There are two levels of understanding imbedded in Merton's conjecture, both of which are meaningful. One reading understands Merton to be critiquing Barth for intellectualizing his faith and therefore forgetting the emotive or affective side of faith. This interpretation is based on Merton's distinction between the heart and the head. The term 'cerebral' directs us back to Merton's analysis of Anselm's spiritual theology in contrast to the "dry and cerebral" theology of Scholasticism.[10] Here, Merton qualifies *agape* with the adjective "cerebral" – for Mozart, "Protestantism was all in the head" – and he poses to Barth the possibility that "[y]our books (and mine) matter less than we might think." One could then conclude that Merton objected to Barth's theology when it remained too intellectual or impassive, which of course is a right interpretation. However, as mentioned earlier (see # 2.2.6), any interpretation of Merton's spirituality that neglects his ontological emphasis is insufficient. In no way is it possible to suggest that Merton's notion of the heart be reduced to sentimental affection. The heart, for Merton, is always the whole person and loves universal being naturally. Anselm's spiritual theology depends on what Merton calls an "intuition of being" (see # 2.2.2); we would utterly miss the center of Merton's spiritual theology if we did not recognize that also in his interpretation of "Barth's Dream."

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[10] AmBR 243 (see # 2.2.6). - Merton uses the term 'cerebral' in other places as well. Anne E. Carr records that Merton, in reviewing his own book *Seeds of Contemplation*, wrote that it lacked "warmth and human affection," and that it was "cold and cerebral" (SWS 27). Elsewhere, Merton confesses to Rosemary Radford Ruether that his description of her as "cerebral" is "probably because I resented my mother's intellectuality, or what I later interpreted as that" (HW 51).

We are compelled to confront a reading of this passage that would seem to go beyond simple emotive response and to recognize at the root of Merton's interpretation what Barth so famously rejected: the *analogia entis*. This interpretation will focus on the approach to divinity and the direction of grace. Merton suggests that Barth played Mozart "unconsciously seeking to awaken, perhaps, the hidden sophianic Mozart *in himself*" (italics added). All the while Barth is grasping at a love that "is not in our own heart but *only in God*" (Merton's italics). Merton's approval of "the hidden sophianic Mozart" in them both could be viewed as a formal definition of Barth's understanding of the religion that faith opposes. In this light, however, even Barth's consideration of a "divine child" within Mozart's music becomes difficult to reconcile with his 'wholly other' God. To suggest it is a "'divine' child" who expresses himself in Mozart's music is to suggest one of two things: that within God's good created order the divine is readily accessible, i.e., the *analogia entis*; or that somehow Mozart has received direct inspiration and therefore immediate contact with God, apart from the mediation of Christ or the Bible. Neither of these options would be acceptable to Barth. Barth vigorously denies the first option in his rejection of natural theology, and the second he denies in any form of mysticism.[11] Barth would certainly have rejected any notion that Mozart, through his music alone, could have come to a saving knowledge of God. Surprisingly, however, Barth does allow for the possibility of the second option in the very unique case of Mozart. Setting aside Zwingli's propensity to grant "all kinds of virtuous pagans" direct access to God, Barth remarks quite unexpectedly that, "In the case of Mozart, we must certainly assume that

[11] CD II.1. - Barth attacks the concept of the *analogia entis* as the underlying principle of Catholic theology and the basis for natural theology (CD II.1, 81ff). He also charges Augustine with seeking to transcend, and therefore "wanting to abandon, the place where God encounters man in his revelation and where He gives himself to be heard and seen by man," that is, in his Word (CD II.1,10-11); this is the fault of mysticism in Barth's thought.

the dear Lord had a special, direct contact with *him*" (WAM 26). No less surprising, though probably more commensurate to Barth's theology, is his proposal to "leave open the question [...] whether Mozart could possibly have been an angel" (WAM 45). What are we to make of this seeming exception to Barth's theological rule?[12] Are we to assume that both Barth and Merton have transgressed their own theological interpretation of 'faith seeking understanding' and are therefore lost in contradictions?

It would be overstating the case to suggest that Barth here opens himself up to the *analogia entis* on its own and apart from grace. The doctrine of the Incarnation is foremost in Barth's mind when he uses the expression ''divine' child,' though he never makes it explicit. For him, there is no grace, no specific revelation or knowledge, and certainly no divinity within creation apart from the person of Jesus Christ. That said, Metzger argues that "The eternal Word, though identified with no creature save the human nature of Jesus Christ, nonetheless enfolds and indwells all creaturely reality, including human culture" (WCSS 173). In this way Jesus is distinct, though inseparable, from the created realm; never is he possessed by the creature on his or her own terms, yet never is he so distant as to render the creature utterly void of his presence. Without the presence of the Word to creation – creating, sustaining, and redeeming it – "evil casts its *shadow* over creation" (WCSS 219).

[12] Metzger argues that Barth's view on Mozart was in fact not at all an exception, but rather the rule of Barth's mature theology. However, it is more than peculiar that Metzger, in describing Barth's affirmation of the secular as God's good created realm, neglects to discuss Barth's suggestion that Mozart could either have direct contact with God or that he might be an angel. Although neither of these proposals by Barth would seem to fit neatly within Metzger's thesis, his discussion in WCSS is helpful. In the "Forward" Colin Gunton specifically stresses this point: "One misunderstanding that dies hard is that Barth's obsession with Mozart was an exception to the general rule that he was uninterested in and blind to the theological meaning of culture. […] Barth on Mozart is not an isolated episode in the theology, but a symptom of this theologian's more general capacity to let the world be the world – as God's world" (WCSS x-xi).

Based on these assumptions, Metzger poses the important question: "Could it perhaps be that Barth finds in Mozart's music signs that Mozart did not face the darkness in creation in his own strength, forcing his way through it, but instead created and played his work of music as if it were sustained by grace (and this regardless of Mozart's view of the relation of divine grace to human works)?" (WCSS 218) Moreover he ponders: "[C]ould it not be that Mozart's music rested in the justifying Word of God in creation who creates and sustains the creation, and who leads it forth to its created end, rather than resting on the presumption of human pride and the justification of the self and one's work, which in the end would but lead to condemnation?" (WCSS 219) Metzger responds affirmatively to both questions: "In this way and in this way alone could Mozart's creaturely songs sing clear praise to the creator, piercing the shadow of nothingness that so immerses the creation" (WCSS 219). In order to ensure Barth's consistency, one must then understand him to be saying that it was Mozart's child-like faith in Christ, and therefore union to Christ, that is the source of the "divine" voice within his music.[13] The reason why in Barth's dream Mozart does not respond verbally to Barth is, in Merton's view, because he experiences Christ through the *sophia* of music rather than the *logos* of discourse. But the experience is a matter of revelation nonetheless!

Merton's musings are hardly unhinged from his faith. His interpretation overtly recognizes the "'divine' child" as Christ, and therefore he is suggesting that Mozart

[13] In Barth's discussion on the *analogia entis* he is clear that ontology cannot finally be avoided: "Therefore the *participatio fidei* cannot be opposed to the *participatio entis*. On the contrary, it is participation in being – 'not a gracious participation in God by reason of a purely human ability for participation, but a truly human participation in God by reason only of the divine power of grace' (pp. 134f). […] 'For the Word of God must always be the sovereign Subject in every living movement of faith, which is always its own movement because it is carried by its substance and in that substance it has the inward constructive power consistent with its essence' (p. 185)" (*CD II.1* 82). - Here Barth is quoting and in agreement with Gottlieb Söhngen, professor of philosophical theology at the University of Munich (Germany). Faith for Barth, then, is never merely an intellectual assent to truth; it is participation in the very being of God by grace.

participates in Christ with his whole being. Everything that has been said concerning Merton's objections to Barth's "cerebral" theology remains true; however, the objections go far beyond the realm of affectivity. Mozart's faith is far deeper than mere intellectual concepts; his faith is relational and personal, uniting him to the person of Christ. The primary difference between Barth and Merton is that the latter sees Christ in many places precisely because the incarnation is an affirmation and elevation of God's good creation.

Still Barth's own words on Mozart offer deep affinities with Merton's sophianic interpretation. He describes Mozart's experience of disciplined play, the result of which is the same as that of theological rigour – joy.

> Beautiful playing presupposes an intuitive, childlike awareness of the essence or center – as also the beginning and the end – of all things. It is from this center, from this beginning and end, that I hear Mozart create his music. I can hear those boundaries which he imposed upon himself because it was precisely this discipline that gave him joy. (WAM 16)

It is difficult not to hear in Barth's words the echo of Paul's expansive Christology whereby "all things" are being reconciled through Him (Col 1:15-20).

3.3 The Experience of Revelation

3.3.1 Faith Seeking Experience

Chapter two showed that Merton's notions of revelation and of religious experience are intimately tied to the person of Jesus. Revelation cannot be merely a matter of conceptual formulation, for this would fall short of its ontological dimension. On the other hand, revelation cannot be reduced to religious experience; otherwise it would be no more than subjective intuition. Merton consistently attempts to maintain both God's revelation in Jesus and human experience within his understanding of faith. In one of his lectures to the novices on Anselm Merton links these two elements of faith by

explaining the relationship between faith and understanding. He says: "When [a person] makes an act of faith… he becomes receptive to the things of God… [Then] in some way or other he begins to *experience* them, and when he *experiences* them then he *understands* them."[14]

On the ground of reason alone, and therefore at home in the realm of doctrine, Merton's great concern is to avoid apologetics. On the ground of wisdom alone, and therefore at home in the realm of religious experience, Merton's concern is to avoid syncretism. Seeking after understanding in the light of reason Merton is concerned to maintain the 'spiritual' dimension of faith. Seeking after experience in the light of wisdom his concern is to maintain the 'theological' dimension of faith. In the same way that understanding is sought not for its own sake but for the joy of participating in the One Who is Truth, so experience is sought not for its own sake but for the joy of participating in the One Who is Love. Merton's emphasis throughout his life is on the experience of faith.[15] Although formed in the monastic tradition, Merton would be in agreement with Leclercq's affirmation that "[t]here exists and must exist only one theology in the unity of the Church. […] Accordingly, the [scholastic and monastic] methods […] are merely two complementary aspects of theological method." (LDD 277f)

Entering the discussion in a very limited way, so as to exhibit the connection for Merton between faith and wisdom and therefore establish his method of 'faith seeking experience,' there are a few key texts to examine. First, in *Life and Holiness* Merton upholds – and also limits – the authoritative approach to faith:

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[14] Th. Merton, "St. Anselm," *Recorded Conference*, CD 65.2 (7/16/63); italics added.
[15] On this, see for instance Christine M. Bochen's article, "With the Eye of the Heart: Thomas Merton on Faith," in VTM 43-64.

> If faith is so important, what is its real nature? Is it merely the intellectual acceptance of a few selected dogmas proposed to our belief by the authority of the Church? It is more. Naturally, faith implies the acceptance of dogmatic truth, but if it is only this, it does not go far enough. Merely to *submit*, even to submit one's judgment, is not yet the whole of faith. It is only one aspect of faith. In the last five centuries, due to the confusion of doctrines and the wrangling of sects, the authoritative definition of dogmatic truth has come to have a very great place in Catholic life. But this extraordinary emphasis must not give us the wrong perspective. Faith is not merely the acquiescence of the mind in certain *truths*, it is the gift of our whole being to *Truth itself*, to the Word of God. (LH 72-3)

Next, Merton upholds the rational character of faith in the context of God's very existence. He affirms Anselm's "*credo ut intelligam*" ("I believe in order to understand") over against Tertullian's "*credo quia impossibile*" ("I believe because it is impossible"), since the former is "more human" (LH 74), although he regards the Tertullian's perspective as "rhetorically significant as an expression of the mystery implicit in the Christian life" (LH 74). And yet, he warns the reader to beware of the possible "blind alley" of philosophical demonstration (LH 74); instead he reminds the reader of their "natural awareness of the reality of God" (LH 75). "This primal intuition," he argues, "can very well awaken the intelligence and lead it to an act of faith. It even constitutes a kind of permanent invitation to faith, and unless we go *against* this natural and thoroughly reasonable intuition […] we may quite spontaneously find ourselves on the way to faith."[16] Here we have Merton's affirmation of Anselm's *Proslogion* in simplified and summary form.

Finally, Merton aims to uncover the very heart of faith. Faith, he writes, "is not mere emotional or affective self-commitment. It is not a matter of blind will" (LH 80). "Faith is an intellectual light by which we 'know' the Father in the Incarnate Word (Jn 14:7-14)" (LH 80). Yet this "knowing" goes beyond the intellect as it knows by

[16] LH 75. – Here, there is a lack of consistency in Merton with respect to his language of nature and grace. Is this "permanent invitation" inhering in nature, or is it rather a matter of grace?

"unknowing" in the power of the Spirit of God (LH 80). Therefore, it is indeed a matter of grace, "a gratuitous gift of God, given according to God's good pleasure" (LH 80). Above all, it is a "total, unswerving acceptance of the person of Christ as a source of salvific power and of new life" (LH 80).

How is one disposed to receive this gift of faith? Merton outlines four helpful pathways to faith. "[W]e must inquire of the Church […] we must read the Scriptures […] we must acquaint ourselves with the basic truths of philosophy and theology. But since faith is a gift, prayer is perhaps the most important of all the ways of seeking it from God" (LH 81). Focusing on this last path he suggests that "[p]rayer is therefore the very heart and life of faith" (LH 81). Near the end of his discussion on faith in *Life and Holiness*, he directs the reader to the epistle of James:

> Is there one of you who still lacks wisdom? God gives to all, freely and ungrudgingly; so let him ask God for it, and the gift will come. (Only it must be in faith that he asks, he must not hesitate; one who hesitates is like a wave out at sea, driven to and fro by the wind; such a man must not hope to win any gift from the Lord. No, a man who is in two minds will find no rest wherever he goes) (Jas 1:5-8). (LH 82)

Faith-filled prayer is the first step on the way to wisdom for Merton. Once again, it is insufficient to stop here with wisdom acting only as some lofty virtue in the Christian life. Of course it is this, but it is also much more; this section on faith must be read in light of Merton's whole work. "Christian holiness," Merton posits, "is not a mere matter of ethical perfection. It includes every virtue, but is evidently more than all virtues together. Sanctity is not constituted only by good works or even by moral heroism, but first of all by ontological union with God 'in Christ'" (LH 57). Therefore, "[i]f we are to be holy, Christ must be holy in us. If we are to be 'saints,' he must be our sanctity" (LH

58). Immediately following Merton quotes 1 Cor 1:24 and 30: "To those who are called, Christ Jesus is the power of God and the wisdom of God. […] Christ Jesus has become for us God-given wisdom and justice and sanctification and redemption; so that, just as it is written, 'let him who takes pride take pride in the Lord'" (LH 58). 'Faith seeking experience' through wisdom is no mere abstract intuition of being; it is ontological union with Christ who has "become for us God-given wisdom."

Two chapters on faith in *New Seeds of Contemplation* (1962), Merton's most popular and perhaps most significant book on the spiritual life, complete this section on 'faith seeking experience.'[17] Many of the themes addressed above recur in this book. Once again, Merton rejects the reduction of faith to mere emotion or feeling: "It is not a feeling that God exists" (NSC 126). Nor is it merely an opinion. Merton once again affirms that "[f]aith is first of all an intellectual assent. It perfects the mind, it does not destroy it, it puts the intellect in possession of Truth which reason cannot grasp by itself" (NSC 127). The motive for this assent to revealed and propositional truth is "the authority of God Who reveals them." (NSC 127)

Despite the fact that faith "is primarily an intellectual assent," Merton clearly and forcefully moves beyond the *words* of revelation to the *Word* of revelation: "By faith one not only assents to propositions revealed by God, one not only attains to truth in a way that intelligence and reason can alone do, but one assents to God Himself. One *receives* God" (NSC 128). In fact, it is a capital error to "rest simply in the proposition or the formula" as opposed to "resting in God by faith." Such a reduction of faith leads only to

[17] The first chapter, "Faith," is drawn from his earlier work, *Seeds of Contemplation*, and has received minor revisions. The second, "From Faith to Wisdom," is entirely new material. To trace the development of these two texts, see Donald Grayston, *Thomas Merton: The Development of a Spiritual Theologian.* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1985).

"hair-splitting arguments, to controversy, to perplexity and ultimately to hatred and division" (NSC 129). Recalling the ever important distinction for Merton between the head and the heart, he proclaims: "But above all, faith is the opening of an inward eye, the eye of the heart, to be filled with the presence of Divine light." (NSC 130)

Immediately following his chapter on "Faith" is the chapter "From Faith to Wisdom." Although the authoritative element of faith remains ever-present,[18] Merton's contemplative vision is here paramount. 'Faith seeking understanding' through experience is highlighted. "God cannot be understood except by Himself. If we are to understand Him we can only do so by being in some way transformed into Him. […] Faith is the first step in this transformation" (NSC 132). Faith, therefore, goes far beyond conceptual formations (though these are primary and cannot be disposed of) to the transformation of the person in Christ. "Faith is not just one moment in the spiritual life"; Merton calls it "the beginning of communion" (NSC 135). "In this greatest perfection of faith the infinite God Himself becomes the Light of the darkened soul and possesses it entirely with His Truth. And at this inexplicable moment the deepest night becomes day and *faith turns into understanding*" (NSC 135; italics added). This understanding cannot be reduced merely to rationalization or verbalization. "In actual point of fact this verbalization – very often it is nothing more than verbalization – tends to cut us off from genuine experience and to obscure our understanding instead of increasing it" (NSC 136). So, while faith is in no way opposed to reason, when it ceases to move beyond conceptual formulations it is far from achieving its true end who is the triune God.

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[18] He says rather bluntly: "If you believe, if you make a simple act of submission to the authority of God proposing some article of faith externally through His Church, you receive the gift of an interior light that is so simple that i[t] baffles description and so pure that it would be coarse to call it an experience" (NSC 133).

The experience faith seeks is at the centre of all Merton's writing; it is what he calls contemplation, i.e. "a kind of spiritual vision to which both reason and faith aspire, by their very nature, because without it they must remain incomplete. […] It is a more profound depth of faith, a knowledge too deep to be grasped in images, in words or even in clear concepts" (NSC 1). And it is no more a matter of seeking after metaphysical experience*s* than is 'faith seeking understanding' a matter of seeking after proof for God's existence. In fact, understanding and experience are not to be divided. 'Faith seeking understanding,' if it is true theology, must always include a spiritual element; and 'faith seeking experience,' if it is true spirituality, must always include a theological element. The distinctions are for clarity and represent a spectrum, but there is no, and cannot be any, substantive difference. True theology is always contemplative, and contemplation is always theological.

Finally, Merton comes to the climax of this chapter by describing in greater detail this contemplation of – and therefore communion with – God. Following the Greek Fathers he defines the human as "at once "*anima* [*psyche*, "animal" soul], *animus* [*nous*, mind], and *spiritus* [*pneuma*, spirit]" (NSC 140). The *pneuma* "is not merely something in man's nature, it is man himself united, vivified, raised above himself and inspired by God. The full stature of man is to be found in 'spirit' or *pneuma*. Man is not fully man until he is 'one spirit' with God" (NSC 140). In this unity humans are "reconstituted in the image of the Holy Trinity." (NSC 140)

> The true spiritual life is a life neither of Dionysian orgy nor of Apollonian clarity: it transcends both. It is a life of wisdom, a life of sophianic love. In *Sophia*, the highest wisdom-principle, all the greatness and majesty of the unknown that is in God and all that is rich and maternal in His creation are united inseparably, as paternal and maternal principles, the uncreated Father and created Mother-Wisdom.

> Faith is what opens to us this higher realm of unity, of strength, of light, of sophianic love where there is no longer the limited and fragmentary light provided by rational principles, but where the Truth is One and Undivided and takes all to itself in the wholeness of *Sapientia*, or *Sophia*. When St. Paul said that Love was the fulfillment of the Law and that Love had delivered man from the Law, he meant that by the Spirit of Christ we were incorporated into Christ, Himself the "power and wisdom of God," so that Christ Himself thenceforth became our own life, and light and love and wisdom. Our full spiritual life is life in wisdom, life in Christ. The darkness of faith bears fruit in the light of wisdom. (NSC 141)

In Christ, in *Sophia*, God has come near. Faith therefore seeks experiential understanding through wisdom.

3.3.2 Plato, Aristotle, and Chuang Tzu

Already in late 1950's, prior to the opening of Vatican II (1962-1965) and well before the Council's "Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions" (*Nostra Aetate*, 1965), Merton was engaged in his own discovery of Eastern religions and even in interreligious dialogue.[19] In "Christian Culture Needs Oriental Wisdom"[20] Merton outlines a few of the reasons he sees for such an interest as well as some of the theological grounds for such an endeavour. This early look by Merton on Eastern wisdom is still a valid one.

For Merton, the utter dominance of reason (rationalism) and science (scientism) in Western culture are far outpacing society's ability to wisely use that which it produces.[21]

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[19] See for example his 1959 written encounter with D. T. Suzuki in *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (1968 – see bibliography # 1.3), 99-138.

[20] Published in *Catholic World* 195 (May 1962): 72-79. - While Merton often groups Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, and Japanese Zen under various collective headings – for instance 'Oriental wisdom,' 'Asian religions,' 'Eastern religions' - in part because they are together relatively new to the Western world and in part because he does see the common theme of 'wisdom' throughout, he is more than aware of the particularities in each religious tradition.

[21] In "Gandhi and the One-Eyed Giant," Merton states that the problem is not science in-and-of-itself; the problem is rather a matter of imbalance: "It is true that neither ancient wisdoms nor the modern sciences are complete in themselves. They do not stand alone. They call for one another. Wisdom without science is unable to penetrate the full sapiential meaning of the created and material cosmos. Science without wisdom leaves man enslaved to a world of unrelated objects in which there is no way of discovering (or creating) order and deep significance in man's own pointless existence. The vocation of modern man was to bring about their union in preparation for a new age" (GNV 1). Similarly, in a letter to Hiromu Morishita he says,

While the East was looking to the West for ways of moving forward into the 20th century, "tearing the place apart and rebuilding it in the likeness of our own utilitarian dwellings, department stores and factories" (CC 73), Merton felt that in looking East the West could have a chance of reviving its own spiritual heritage. Merton's call for 'Oriental Wisdom' cannot be seen as a call for religious syncretism; rather, he believed that "our spiritual and even our physical survival" in the West may depend on the development and sharing of new perspectives (CC 78). Merton's primary goal here is mutual understanding that leads to peace.

Merton's perspective may be summarized as a rejection of a pragmatic approach to life in favour of a contemplative way of life. While Merton realized that there was nothing inherently wrong with capitalism, he argues that we "should know […] that our material riches imply a spiritual, cultural and moral poverty that is perhaps far greater than we see" (CC 73). He was convinced that the ancient religious and philosophical traditions of Asia could provide some means of meeting the spiritual needs of people in an age of technological pragmatism. Nor did Merton view technology as an evil in and of itself, but as an example of efficacy and function outweighing truth and beauty.

Specifically, Merton looks at the wisdom of the *Tao Teh Ching* and the *Hsiao Ching* (a primer of Chinese Confucian ethics), and what he sees are affinities between these and the gospel of Christ. He draws parallels between Taoism and Christian contemplation on the level of spiritual epistemology. In the same way that he distinguishes between rationality and intelligence in the theological tradition, the latter being a way of knowing by connaturality, he describes the Taoist way of knowing in

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"The great defect of American thought is a lack of balance: too much science and not enough wisdom" (HGL 459).

terms not unrelated to his own definition of contemplation rooted in an apophatic approach to God.

> The whole secret of life lies in the discovery of this Tao which can never be discovered. This does not involve an intellectual quest, but rather a spiritual change of one's whole being. One "reaches" the Tao by "becoming like" the Tao, by acting, in some sense, according to the "way" (Tao). For the Tao is at once perfect activity and perfect rest. It is supreme, *actus purissimus.* (CC 74)

As noted in his evaluation of Anselm (see # 2.2.2), Merton's notion of spirituality is consistently linked with his ontology. Here Merton exhibits a way of knowing that involves both participation and experience in the very substance of the Tao – "shadowing and dim" as that substance may be.[22]

Although he does not make the analogy explicit in 1962, three years later in *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (1965 – see bibliography # 1.3) Merton likens the Confucian ethic of filial piety with the Old Testament law and the Taoist *Way* with the New Testament gospel of love:

> Once this [namely the fact that genuine virtue is beyond virtuousness] is clear, one can reasonably see a certain analogy between Chuang Tzu and St. Paul. The analogy must certainly not be pushed too far. Chuang Tzu lacks the profoundly theological mysticism of St. Paul. But his teaching about the spiritual liberty of wu wei and the relation of virtue to the indwelling Tao is analogous to Paul's teaching on faith and grace, contrasted with the 'works of the Old Law.' The relation of the Chuang Tzu book to the Analects of Confucious is not unlike that of the Epistles to the Galatians and Romans to the Torah. (WCT 24-25)

He quotes from the twenty-third chapter of the *Tao Teh Ching*, comments on it, and then quotes it again:

> *He who cultivates the Tao is one with the Tao;*
> *He who practices Virtue is one with Virtue;*
> *And he who courts after loss is one with Loss.*
> The way of Loss is the way of whirlwind activity, of rash endeavour, of ambition, the accumulation of "extraneous growths." It is the way of aggression, of spectacular success. The way of Virtue is the Confucian way of self-conscious

[22] See chapter 21 of Lao Tzu, *Tao Teh Ching*, trans. John C.H. Wu. Boston, MS: Shambhala, 2006.

> and professional goodness which is in fact a less pure form of virtue. St. Thomas would say it works *humano modo* rather than with the divine and mysterious spontaneity of the Gifts of the Holy Ghost. But the way of the Tao is just that: the way of supreme spontaneity which is virtuous in a transcendent sense because it "does not strive."
> *High virtue is nonvirtuous;*
> *Therefore it has virtue.*
> *Low virtue never frees itself from virtuousness,*
> *Therefore it has no virtue.* (*CC* 74)

Merton draws a comparison between the Tao and the Gospel by quoting John 3:8: "The wind blows where it will. […] So is everyone who is born of the Spirit" (CC 74). The spiritual life is not a matter of striving after virtue or fulfilling a law, but rather of participating in the Spirit of God.[23]

It is important to note that for Merton, the contemplative life is not at all the absence of activity. In the same way that he defended again and again his own monastic vocation from the charge of quietism or from some similar evasion from action (see CWA 157-65), he defends Taoism, arguing that "*Wu Wei* is far from being inactive. It is supreme activity because it acts at rest, acts without effort. Its effortlessness is not a matter of inertia, but of harmony with the hidden power that drives the planets and the world" (CC 75). Merton takes the analogy even closer to Christianity by suggesting that "The power of the sage is then the very power which has been revealed in the Gospels as Pure Love. *Deus caritas est* is the full manifestation of the truth hidden in the nameless Tao" (CC 75). Although he does not develop it here, this foundation provided Merton with the justification for his ethic of nonviolence.[24] He quotes a short excerpt from the

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[23] For an expanded discussion of this topic see WCT 15-32.

[24] For example, in *Faith and Violence* (1968 – see bibliography # 1.3) he says: "The Christian can renounce the protection of violence and risk being humble, therefore *vulnerable*, not because he trusts in the supposed efficacy of a gentle and persuasive tactic that will disarm hatred and tame cruelty, but because he believes that the hidden power of the Gospel is demanding to be manifested in and through his own poor person. Hence in perfect obedience to the Gospel, he effaces himself and his own interests and even risks his life in order to testify not simply to "the truth" in a sweeping, idealistic and purely platonic sense, but to

sixty-seventh chapter of the *Tao Teh Ching*, finding in it great parallels with the ethic of Jesus: "Because I am merciful, therefore I can be brave… For heaven will come to the rescue of the merciful and protect him with *its* mercy" (CC 75). In no way did Merton see the contemplative life as an escape from responsibility; if anything, contemplation is a call to rightly ordered action in humble dependence on the power of God.

Merton also contrasts the "organized efficiency" of "larger secular" universities and their "comparative" approach to religion with the more "sapiential" approach taken by some smaller universities that have developed what he calls a "spiritual perspective" (CC 73). There must be a better way forward, he argues, than a scientific approach to religious traditions that is content to approach the ancient wisdom traditions "like a bored tourist might saunter through the Louvre vaguely registering the famous masterpieces as he walked by them" (CC 78). He does not argue for a comparative approach, and for sure not for an apologetic approach that views other traditions as "'rival systems' which are known *a priori* to be 'false'" (CC 78); instead, he suggests that "The values hidden in Oriental thought actually reveal themselves only on the plane of spiritual experience, or perhaps, if you like, of aesthetic experience" (CC 78). Here we recall the "spiritual ground" and the "religious experience of truth" Merton speaks of in his evaluation of Anselm's argument, a ground rooted in an "intuition of being" that is "at least part of the way" toward the revealed truth of faith. (see # 2.2.2)

"Spiritual" or "aesthetic experience" takes on great import as one seeks to interpret Merton's interest in Eastern religions. In Merton scholarship, there are a variety of views with respect to the question of his appreciation of other religious traditions. Was

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the truth that is incarnate in a concrete human situation, involving living persons whose rights are denied or whose lives are threatened" (FaV 18-19).

Merton moving toward a pluralistic theology of religions in spite of the fact that he remained until his death firmly rooted in the Catholic faith and tradition? To address this question, it is helpful to take a look at an event in Merton's life that is widely regarded as the most profound interreligious experience recorded by him: his experience in 1968 at Polonnaruwa (Sri Lanka). In his *Asian Journal* he reports approaching the great Buddhist statues there and being

> suddenly, almost forcibly, jerked clean out of the habitual, half-tied vision of things, and an inner clearness, clarity, as if exploding from the rocks themselves, became evident and obvious […] everything is emptiness and everything is compassion. I don't know when in my life I have ever had such a sense of beauty and spiritual vitality running together in one aesthetic illumination. (AsJ 233-35)

Lawrence Cunningham keenly observes the significant terminology that many seem to breeze over: "aesthetic illumination." He comments:

> Merton was fully conversant with the language of religious experience in general and the language of mysticism in particular. He knew that generations of Catholic theologians distinguished aesthetic experiences – which may have overtones of the mystical about them – from authentically mystical ones, which come as an unearned grace from God.[25]

[25] TMV 177. Merton makes precisely this distinction in his letter of November 17, 1958 to Aldous Huxley (HGL 437). - There is another side to this issue: Merton himself would disparage this sharp neo-scholastic distinction while discussing his early work in a rare interview: "I was still dealing in a crude theology that I had learned as a novice: a clean-cut division between the natural and the supernatural, God and the world, sacred and secular, with boundary lines that were supposed to be quite evident" ("An Interview with Thomas Merton" by Thomas P. McDonnell. *Motive* 28/1 [October, 1967], 32-41). Some Merton scholars emphasize this later Merton to the exclusion of the former. For example, Ross Labrie says: "[Merton] came eventually to encounter the divine by staring at a bowl of carnations in a monastery chapel or in looking at the statues of two reclining Buddhas in a part of the world far away from his monastic home" (R. Labrie, *Thomas Merton and the Inclusive Imagination* [2001 – see bibliography # 2], 246). Both sides do emphasize the analogous ontological relationship between nature and supernature; the difference is that one side stresses distinction, whereas the other insists on similarity and even continuity. Merton is somewhere lodged between the two perspectives (or even holding onto both): he moves beyond neo-scholasticism, and yet he holds on to what he felt were necessary theological distinctions. 'Faith seeking understanding' resolves this tension by allowing the analogy of being to exist and to flourish within the analogy of faith. This is von Balthasar's way of reconciling Barth with the Catholic *analogia entis* (see BTK 161-67). In this specific situation Cunningham is right: Merton's language is telling with regard to his theological interpretation.

It would seem then upon initial glance that Merton's openness to the East lay in his very traditional understanding of nature and grace. This assumption would indeed be reinforced by the conclusions of Merton's article, "Christian Culture Needs Oriental Wisdom." In fact he argues that any true catholicity "necessarily impl[ies] an ability and a readiness to enter into dialogue with all that is pure, wise, profound and humane in every kind of culture."[26] He specifically argues for an incorporation of Eastern thought by reminding the reader of

> how much Greek philosophy and Roman law contributed to the actual formation of Christian culture and even Christian spirituality. We know too with what breadth of view and with what lofty freedom the scholastic doctors of the thirteenth century made use of Aristotle and his Arabian commentators. It can certainly be said that if a similar use had been made of Oriental philosophy and religious thought from the very start, the development of Christianity in Asia would have been a different story. Our Western Christian thought and culture would also have been immeasurably enriched and deepened.[27]

Merton believed that approaching Eastern religions on "the plane of spiritual experience, or perhaps, if you like, of aesthetic experience" would enable "us to a deeper and wiser understanding of our own magnificent mystical tradition, just as Platonism, without actually 'influencing' the Greek Fathers, gave them a language and a sensibility that were equipped to penetrate in a specially significant way the depths of the revealed mystery of Christ" (CC 78). Merton is careful to acknowledge that, "First of all, it is quite clear that

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[26] CC 79. This is an allusion to Paul's letter to the Philippians 4:8. - Similarly, in "Gandhi and the One-Eyed Giant," Merton writes: "Call these values what you will, 'natural religion' or 'natural law,' Christianity admits their existence at least as preambles to faith and grace, if not sometimes vastly more (Rom 2:14-15, Acts 17:22-31). These values are universal, and it is hard to see how there can be any 'catholicity' (*cath-holos* means 'all-embracing') that even implicitly excludes them. One of the marks of catholicity is precisely that values which are everywhere natural to man are fulfilled on the highest level in the Law of the Spirit. And in Christian charity. A 'charity' that excludes these values cannot claim the title of Christian love" (GNV 5).

[27] CC 78). - In the same vein Merton writes in 1961 to John C. H. Wu: "I have been for some time persuaded of the immense importance of a prudent study of Oriental philosophy by some of us in the West, particularly in the kind of perspective that guided some of the early Church Fathers in their use of Platonism, and St. Thomas in his use of Aristotle" (HGL 611).

no non-Christian religion or philosophy has anything that Christianity needs, in so far as it is a supernaturally revealed religion," and that Oriental thought belongs "to the natural order" while maintaining "deep affinities with supernatural wisdom itself." (CC 78)

Merton continues along this line of theological reasoning three years later (1965) in the "Note to the Reader" of his translation of Chuang Tzu. Following Augustine's "rather strong statement (which he later qualified)" in which he suggested: "'That which is called the Christian religion existed among the ancients and never did not exist from the beginning of the human race until Christ came in the flesh' (*De Vera Religione*, 10)," Merton suggests that

> If St. Augustine could read Plotinus, if St. Thomas could read Aristotle and Averroës (both of them certainly a long way further from Christianity than Chuang Tzu ever was!), and if Teilhard de Chardin could make copious use of Marx and Engels in his synthesis, I think I may be pardoned for consorting with a Chinese recluse who shares the climate and peace of my own kind of solitude, and who is my own kind of person. (WCT 10-11)

Merton pokes fun at the thought that he is attempting a sleight of hand whereby "Christian rabbits will suddenly appear by magic out of a Taoist hat" (WCT 10): "It would certainly be an exaggeration to call Chuang Tzu a 'Christian'" (WCT 10). In fact he rejects any sort of defensive or apologetic approach whatsoever: Chuang Tzu "is far too great to need any apologies from me" (WCT 10). Merton seeks to understand the religious other simply "because he is what he is" (WCT 10). There is no need to reduce Chuang Tzu, by labelling him either a pagan or a saint; he is first and foremost a human, and there is no other justification necessary for seeking to understand him. Merton's approach of 'faith seeking understanding' is here bearing fruit: he manages to avoid both apologetics and syncretism and in so doing, he is truly free to discover and experience the wisdom of his faith.

Ultimately, Merton is drawn to Chuang Tzu because his "way" is valuable for living: "Chuang Tzu is not concerned with words and formulas about reality, but with the direct existential grasp of reality in itself" (WCT 11). In the same way that Barth is open to Mozart's musical dialectic so as to "live" (# 3.2), so Merton is open to Taoism precisely because it is not the sort of "disincarnate spiritualit[y] that divide[s] man against himself, putting one half in the realm of the angels and the other in an earthly hell" (WCT 12). The West may appear life affirming with its materialism and technological development; and yet, "There is an affirmation of the world that is nothing but ruin and loss" (WCT 12). In opposition to this, Taoism is truly life-affirming in its "humility, self-effacement, silence, and in general a refusal to take seriously the aggressivity, the ambition, the push, and the self-importance which one must display in order to get along in society." (WCT 11)

3.3.3 The Word, and Wordless Experience

There are a few sources that relate to Merton's interest in Zen.[28] This section relates primarily to Merton's *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (1968) because it represents his most mature look at Eastern wisdom and experience, and because it contains reflections most pertinent to this present study. In discussing Merton's understanding of Zen, the approach based on 'faith seeking experience' (# 3.3.1) is preferable to that of

[28] See particularly MZM 3-44; 215-54; 281-88. - For an in-depth analysis of Merton's interest and understanding of Buddhism, see Bonnie Bowman Thurston, ed., *Merton and Buddhism: Wisdom, Emptiness, and Everyday Mind* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2007), particularly the essay by John P. Keenan on "The Limits of Thomas Merton's Understanding of Buddhism" (118-33). Keenan reveals the inadequacy of some of Merton's sources, including his most important: D. T. Suzuki. Merton's encounter with Zen through Suzuki was based on a westernized and naïve understanding of tradition as the "inner core of *all* religious experience" (124). This approach to Zen separates the experience from its "soteriological, cosmological, and ethical concerns" and makes it into "some sort of non-sectarian spiritual gnosis" (125, quoting Robert Sharf). "In a word, Zen is not the bare and pure experience of the ultimate that is beyond all words and doctrines. The Zen notion that one must go beyond doctrine is itself a Zen doctrine! Moreover, Zen is but one school of Buddhism among many, and in Japan it is not even the largest (which is Pure Land)" (126-27). Despite all this, the way Merton received Zen is a well-suited opportunity for examining his continued appreciation for the rational and conceptual character of Christian revelation.

'faith seeking understanding' because, as Merton admits, "Zen enriches no one."[29] Therefore, according to Merton, any understanding of Zen is no understanding at all.

Fortunately, our task is not to understand Zen, but rather to appreciate Merton's appropriation of Zen experience in the light of Christian revelation. In many ways, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* is frustrating to the theologian (or westerner for that matter) because it is for Merton an exercise in Zen itself: even in the midst of explaining Zen Merton seeks to understand it in the context of his own Christian tradition. It is only too clear in the end that he comes to no final conclusions on the reconciliation of revelation and experience. While describing Merton's personal effort to do so, there are still theological distinctions to be made. That this tension continued to be a struggle for him confirms that both doctrine and experience remain prominent and interrelated until the end of his life.

For Merton, Zen and Christianity are clearly not the same kind of thing: "[S]tudied as *structures*, as *systems*, and as *religions*, Zen and Catholicism don't mix any better than oil and water" (ZBA 3). But this is not the core for Merton, since Zen – he argues following D. T. Suzuki – is "not a religion, not a philosophy, not a system of thought, not a doctrine, not an ascesis."[30] It is, in Merton's view, "consciousness unstructured by particular form or particular system, a trans-cultural, trans-religious, trans-formed consciousness. It is therefore in a sense 'void'" (ZBA 4). He describes it as

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[29] ZBA ix. - This statement rejects any *notion* of seeking at all. Yet Merton does exhibit reasons for his appreciation of Zen. First and foremost is his desire to move beyond the Cartesian consciousness: "A taste for Zen in the West is in part a healthy reaction of people exasperated with the heritage of four centuries of Cartesianism: the reification of concepts, idolization of the reflexive consciousness, flight from being into verbalization, mathematics, and rationalization. Descartes made a fetish out of the mirror in which the self finds itself. Zen shatters it" (CGB 260). Also, Merton sees the importance for Christian mysticism of what may be "learned from a study of the techniques and experience of Oriental religions" (ZBA 21).

[30] MZM 12. – Merton notes that even within Christianity there are people like "Karl Barth for instance" "who see beyond the 'religious' aspect of their faith" (ZBA 5), though in a way profoundly different from his.

"a 'way' and an 'experience,' a 'life,' but the way is paradoxically 'not a way'" (MZM 12). Most important of all, and here the parallels with Merton's own spirituality are evident, he sees Zen as "the ontological *awareness of pure being beyond subject and object*, an immediate grasp of being in its 'suchness' and 'thusness'" (MZM 14). Even more specifically, "Zen insight is not *our* awareness, but Being's awareness of itself in us." [31]

If one reads closely, it is possible to see Barth (among others) in and behind the second chapter of *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (written in 1967). Especially apparent are the powerful and personal criticisms of a young Rosemary Radford Ruether (see HW) who sees Merton as a life-denying contemplative seeking to evade the real world, huddled in the monastery and concerned with dialogue instead of the real needs of the poor and oppressed.[32] One of her criticisms in particular draws the reader's attention to the word 'prophetic' that engaged Merton more and more in his final years:

> [W]hen I want prophetic insight I look to Barth, Bonhoeffer, Bultmann, etc. […] Perhaps the deeper question for you which you may not be really taking into account is whether you really want to be a Christian or not, whether you want to be an authentically creational, incarnate flesh and blood man, or whether you want to be an abstraction, zen mystic.[33]

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[31] MZM 17. - For a critique of Merton's use of ontological categories with respect to Zen, see Silvio E. Fittipaldi, "Preying Birds: An Examination of Thomas Merton's Zen." *Horizons* 9/1 (1982): 37-46.

[32] Mary Tardiff, ed., *At Home in the World: The Letters of Thomas Merton & Rosemary Radford Ruether.* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995. These letters, written during an eighteen-month period between 1966 and 1968, contain a fascinating and at times biting exchange between Merton and Ruether (only twenty-nine years of age at the beginning of the correspondence). Reflecting on these letters in the introduction to their publication Ruether admits, "I was looking for […] a genuine Catholic intellectual peer, one who would treat me as a peer, and with whom I could be ruthlessly honest about my own questions of intellectual and existential integrity. I was trying to test in this correspondence what was the crucial issue, for me, at the time: whether it was, in fact, actually possible to be a Roman Catholic and to be a person of integrity. […] In retrospect I might say that, for me, in 1966 Merton was my 'test case' for whether integrity was possible for Catholics" (HW xvi-xvii). - Merton writes in his journal of Ruether: "In her letter Rosemary challenges my solitude, but not understanding it, I think. She is very Barthian – which is why I trust her. There is a fundamental Christian honesty about her theology – its refusal to sweep evil under the rug and its 'No' to phony incarnationalism" (OSM 2/7/67).

[33] HW 21. - Recall Merton affirming Barth's interpretation of Anselm's "argument" as "prophetic" (AmBR 247-48; see # 2.2.4).

Barth's name arises precisely in these circumstances in *Zen and the Bird of Appetite*. Merton highlights the "new, secular, 'post-Christian' Christianity, which is activistic, antimystical, social and revolutionary" (ZBA 15), and he points to "the influence of Barth and the New Orthodoxy (in Protestantism), together with the Biblical renewal everywhere, [as] probably still very influential in this antimystical bias" (ZBA 17). Merton contrasts this "prophetic"[34] approach to Christianity with the "mystical" tradition (ZBA 22) that basically represents everyone from the Cappadocian Fathers all the way to the Spanish mystics. Is all of this "simply a deviation," Merton half-heartedly ponders? (ZBA 21) Ultimately, Merton does not see it necessary to choose between the "dynamic" and the "static" experience, – the dynamic one being an "existential sense of Christian encounter with God in Christ and in the Church as a *happening*," and the alluded static one being "an experience of stabilized *being*" (ZBA 19). Disappointingly, Merton neglects to dig into the issue, regarding instead the modern Cartesian consciousness as a more pressing concern for Christians today.

Merton's "A Christian Looks at Zen" written in 1966 (ZBA 33-58) is most pertinent to a discussion of revelation and religious experience. Here Merton wrestles with the nature of Christianity in contrast to Zen. He warns that "To approach the subject with an intellectual or theological chip on the shoulder would end only in confusion. The truth of the matter is that you can hardly set Christianity and Zen side by side and compare them. This would almost be like trying to compare mathematics and tennis" (ZBA 33). This, however, is precisely our task – though not necessarily with a "chip on

[34] In a letter to Roger Barnard Merton describes also Barth's essay on "The Righteousness of God" in *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (see bibliography # 3) as "perfectly prophetic" (Bellarmine archives [6/27/67]).

the shoulder" – because Merton's own understanding of Zen as experience is christologically grounded (see # 3.3.1). To avoid theology, as Merton sometimes does, is for the Christian to be content with vague and meaningless platitudes.

Merton begins by arguing that Zen is "not a theology of revelation and salvation;" he rather draws analogies between Zen and "the experience of God in the 'unknowing' of apophatic Christian mysticism" (ZBA 35). Therefore, he argues, with Zen

> It would be a great mistake to concentrate on the "doctrine," the formulated philosophy of life, and to neglect the experience, which is absolutely essential, the very heart of Buddhism. This is in a sense the exact opposite of the situation in Christianity. For Christianity begins with revelation. Though it would be misleading to classify this revelation simply as a "doctrine" and an "explanation" (it is far more than that – the revelation of God Himself in the mystery of Christ) it is nevertheless communicated to us in words, in statements, and everything depends on the believer's accepting of these statements. (ZBA 39)

We return to this same tension for Merton between, on the one hand, the revelation of God in the Word of Christ, the words of Scripture, the doctrine of the Church, and, on the other, the experience of that revelation of "God Himself in the mystery of Christ" (ZBA 39). However, in affirming the priority of cataphatic, even dogmatic theology, Merton is quick to remind the reader that "the heart of Catholicism, too, is a *living experience* of unity in Christ which far transcends all conceptual formulas" (ZBA 39). All of this seems perfectly in line with the Merton's understanding of 'faith seeking experience.' (# 3.3.1)

Chalmers MacCormick disagrees. In his article, "The Zen Catholicism of Thomas Merton,"[35] he suggests that Merton made three significant shifts in his life with respect to Eastern religions. The one to be considered here is that Merton no longer held to the priority of theology to experience for Christians. MacCormick argues for a "progressive

[35] Published in *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 9 (Fall 1972): 802-818. - First, the recognition that Eastern religions are not world-denying (he notes that Merton is not entirely correct in this belief). Second, that perhaps individuals (not religions) apart from Christianity could receive supernatural "graces." Third, that theology is no longer necessarily prior to experience.

shift" in Merton's thought: in later years, Merton no longer adhered to his 1951 statement that "theology forms mystics," in *The Ascent to Truth* (see # 2.2.6); rather, MacCormick argues, theology becomes for Merton "the means by which such experience is shared with the Church as a whole" (JES 811). As support for his argument he cites Merton on the importance of experience for Christianity, but he takes it entirely out of context; moreover, he disregards the important paragraph quoted above (i.e. ZBA 39). Let us quote the context in regular font and then quote MacCormick's selection in italics:

> We keep returning to one central question in two forms: the relation of objective doctrine to subjective mystic (or metaphysical) experience, and the difference in this relationship between Christianity and Zen. In Christianity the objective doctrine retains priority both in time and in eminence. In Zen the experience is always prior, not in time but in importance. This is because Christianity is based on supernatural revelation, and Zen, discarding all idea of any revelation and even taking a very independent view of sacred tradition (at least written), seeks to penetrate the natural ontological ground of being. Christianity is a religion of grace and divine gift, hence of total dependence on God. Zen is not easily classified as "a religion" (it is in fact easily separable from any religious matrix and can supposedly flourish in the soil either of non-Buddhist religions or no religion at all) […]
>
> On the other hand, let us repeat that *We must not neglect the great importance of experience in Christianity. But Christian experience always has a special modality, due to the fact that it is inseparable from the mystery of Christ and the collective life of the Church, the Body of Christ. To experience the mystery of Christ mystically or otherwise is always to transcend the merely individual psychological level and to "experience theologically with the Church" (sentire cum Ecclesia). In other words, this experience must always be in some way reducible to a theological form that can be shared by the rest of the Church or that shows that it is a sharing of what the rest of the Church experiences.* (ZBA 45-46)

Not only does MacCormick's citation disregard the context, but he also deliberately neglects the important indicator, "On the other hand," quoting the text as though it were the beginning of a new paragraph and an entirely new thought. There seems to be then good reason to continue maintaining that for Merton doctrine remains the structure that facilitates and leads one to an experience of Christ. This is most clearly proclaimed by

Merton in a statement that could stand as the précis of this entire chapter: "the fact remains that for Christianity, a religion of the Word, the understanding of the statements which embody God's revelation of Himself remains a primary concern. *Christian experience is a fruit of this understanding, a development of it, a deepening of it.*" (ZBA 40; italics added)

3.3.4 The Bible, and Religion

Religion for Merton is loaded with ontological significance;[36] religious experience is awareness of the ground of Being at the summit of one's own being. This fundamentally Augustinian intuition that "our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee"[37] is paramount to Merton's way of thinking. Whether one calls it a 'supernatural existential' or 'prevenient grace' was probably unimportant to Merton. He believed its truth from the depths of his own experience, and he witnessed it to be true also for many faithful adherents of other religious traditions.

> Everywhere we find at least a natural striving for interior unity and intuitive *communion* with the Absolute. And everywhere we find expressions of some kind of spiritual experience, often natural, sometimes supernatural. Supernatural mystical experience is at least theoretically possible anywhere under the sun, to any man of good conscience who sincerely seeks the truth and responds to the inspirations of divine grace."[38]

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[36] The various ways Merton sees religion cannot be examined here. O'Connell's article "Religion" in W. H. Shannon & others, eds. *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* (2002 – see biblioraphy # 2) suggests that "Merton recognizes and explores throughout his writings, particularly in the final decade of his life, the ambiguities inherent in the modern understanding of religion. When religion is recognized and practiced as an orientation toward the sacred that leads to inner transformation and to an attitude and acts of compassion, it is seen as crucially important for authentic human existence. When it is adherence to a formalized system of cult and dogma that domesticates the divine and is directed toward comfortable acceptance of a current social or economic system, it must be challenged."

[37] "[…] inquietum est cor nostrum, donec requiescat in te" (Augustin, *Confessions* (2006 - see bibliography # 3), p. 3 (begin of Book I).

[38] IE 116. - The *Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation* (2004 – see bibliography # 1.3)) was written by Merton in 1959, and he did minor revisions on it in the last year of his life (1967). Much has been made of this text since it was only published quite recently. Many consider it to contain significant material representing Merton's mature thoughts on contemplation.

Thus Merton would have found it impossible to agree with Barth that religion is the "contradiction" of revelation and a mere "grasping" at God.[39] By no means was religion for Merton an affirmation of some inherent capacity within human *nature* for the divine; rather, he viewed as a matter of grace that God meets humans where they most sincerely seek after God. To reconcile Merton and Barth is not our concern, nor is it a promising possibility. All that being said, there is much in Merton that affirms much in Barth. On the distinction between religion and revelation, between an intrinsic and extrinsic notion of grace, it may be stated that while Merton spent much of his life affirming what he could in others, he upheld the normative distinction between religion and revelation unashamedly his entire life.

In his dialogue with Suzuki in 1959 on the Desert Fathers (ZBA 99-138), Merton calls the "[p]urity of heart [that] establishes man in a state of unity and emptiness in which he is one with God" merely a hint of "the real work of God which is revealed in the Bible: the work of the *new creation*, the resurrection from the dead, the restoration of all things in Christ." (ZBA 132). "This," he continues, "is the real dimension of

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[39] The central picture that Barth paints in his rejection of religion is the same as that of his rejection of mysticism: one of humankind grasping at God. "Because it is this *grasping*, religion is the contradiction to revelation, the concentrated expression of the human lack of faith, that is, the attitude and activity directly opposed to faith. It is the feeble but also defiant, the high-spirited but also helpless attempt – by means of something that man could indeed do but now cannot do – to create the very thing that he can only create because and if God himself creates it for him: knowledge of the truth, knowledge of God. So this attempt cannot be interpreted, for instance, as though man by doing it were cooperating harmoniously with God's revelation, as though religion were the outstretched hand that God would then fill in his revelation. Neither can one say of the manifest religious capacity of man that it is, so to speak, the universal form of human knowledge, which then receives its true and proper content in the shape of revelation and faith. Here, rather, it is a matter of utter contradiction: in religion man resists and closes himself off to revelation by creating a substitute for it, by anticipating something that should be given him in revelation by God." Once again, refer to Garrett Green's translation of this section in Barth's *Church Dogmatics I.2* entitled, *On Religion: The Revelation of God as the Sublimation of Religion* (New York: T&T Clark, 2006 – see # 2.2.2). Barth is often misrepresented as though he himself judges all religions to be somehow inferior to Christianity. This could not be further from the truth. His theology pits rather the revelation of God in Jesus Christ – *not* in Christianity – against all human forms of religion, *including* Christianity. For Barth, each and every religion is in need of reconciliation.

Christianity, the eschatological dimension which is peculiar to it, and which has no parallel in Buddhism." Recognizing the vast chasm this creates between Christianity and Zen, Merton returns to the realm of faith as the basis for Christian contemplation. (ZBA 132-33)

In his less known – and less quoted – book, *Opening the Bible*,[40] Merton looks to several Protestant theologians – including Barth, Bonhoeffer, and Bultmann – in his evaluation of the Bible. To see the ultimate effect of Barth's influence on Merton's book one must read Barth's *The Word of God, and the Word of Man.*[41] Particularly in the second chapter called, "The Strange New World of the Bible," Barth reminds us that the Bible does not offer all that one might expect. He ponders whether the Bible is history. Certainly it is filled with historical events, he muses, but in the end historians are unable to understand the relationship between cause and effect in the Bible: "How much trouble the Bible makes the poor research workers!" (WGWM 36) Does the Bible primarily deal with morality, Barth wonders? How can it, he responds, when it offers David the adulterer as hero, or Abraham who was willing to sacrifice his son, or Moses the murderer. What we do find in the Bible, Barth concludes, is God: "We have found in the Bible a new world, God, God's sovereignty, God's glory, God's incomprehensible love. Not the history of man but the history of God!" (WGWM 45) In similar fashion, Merton warns the reader not to hope to receive from the Bible something it is not meaning to give. He suggests that if one is looking primarily toward the afterlife, the *Vedas* are far

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[40] (1970 – see bibliography # 1.3). - Merton wrote this extended essay in 1967, one year before his death, after being commissioned by rabbi and biblical scholar Abraham Heschel. It was to be used for an edition of the Time-Life Bible, but the project later fell through.

[41] (1928 – see bibliography # 3). Merton is particularly interested in Barth's understanding of personal identity, since the Bible is more than a dead word; it is living and responsive as it directs the reader to the Word of God who is Christ (see OB 27, 34-36). - This book along with Barth's *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum* is still available for viewing in Merton's library at Bellarmine University in Louisville, KY.

older than the Bible and "express the deepest longing for immortality and eternal life." If one wants to live the contemplative life, the *Upanishads* are "perhaps the most profoundly contemplative collection of texts ever written." If one is looking for a concrete ontology, then the *Tao teh Ching* is fundamental, and if one wants an ethical code, he says, go to Plato or Confucius. Certainly, Merton points out, we must not search the Bible for a scientific account of creation, and even Jerome knew that if one were looking for literature, then the Greek and Latin classics are far superior to the Bible (OB 60-68). It is not that the Bible does not contain all of these things, but these are not the Bible's primary concern. Of course, the Bible cannot have concerns of its own, but both Barth and Merton speak *as though* it did because they see something – better: someone – behind it. Just as Barth suggests that the strange new world of the Bible is God himself in his triune nature (WGWM 48-49), so Merton states: "The word of God is now not only event but person, and the entire meaning and content of the Bible is to be found, say the Apostles, not in the message about Christ but in an encounter with Christ, who is at once person and word of God and who lives as the Risen Lord." (OB 79)

In *Opening the Bible* Merton addresses the general question of religion in a direct and sustained way, and he explicitly follows Barth – though once again, not all the way. After summarizing – in capital letters – the possibility for restored relationship with God and other persons as a result of divine and decisive intervention in history, Merton explains that "[i]t will be seen from this that the Bible is concerned with something far deeper than the establishment of a religious system. In fact, the Bible is in some sense far more than a 'religious' book." He then refers to "Karl Barth [who] long ago pointed out the basic tension between faith and 'religion' in the Bible" (OB 84-85). His approval of

Barth's tension is rooted in the affirmation that 'religious acts' do not bridge the gap between God and humans. However, he also reminds the reader that the demands of Christ are not less than that of the religious law but far greater – for Christ did not come to abolish the religious law but to fulfil it. This discipleship[42] does not bridge the gap, for the gap has *already* been bridged through the incarnation of Christ. "To say that the Bible goes beyond religion is to say that it preaches the *kenosis* or self-emptying of God [Phil 2:6-8] and his identification of himself with man as person and as community, in Christ." (OB 86)

The kind of religion the Bible rejects is the religion that divides humanity by setting one person against another, each claiming God as his or her own. "Religion in this sense is gradually revealed in the Bible to be under [*God's*] judgment" because it exists as "*an external formality and a façade for exclusiveness, cruelty and injustice*" (OB 88; Merton's italics). Merton defends Bonhoeffer's notion of 'religionless Christianity,' arguing that Bonhoeffer did not mean that "true Christianity was religionless, or anti-religious" (OB 90-91). But ultimately, Merton remarks, "the point is that the serious questioning and criticism of 'religion,' 'the religious instinct,' and 'religious experience,' *have a firm basis in the Bible*" (OB 91; Merton's italics). His primary criticism is against religion that has lost its original love for God and others and has in turn become rigid and closed, "dividing men in hatred and mutual exploitation instead of uniting them in love

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[42] Despite Merton's appreciation for an appeal for the correlation of religion and culture in Tillich's *Theology of Culture*, Barth and Bonhoeffer had a significant influence on his understanding of discipleship: "We must now learn to distinguish between 'religiosity' and 'discipleship of Christ.' 'Religion' was an essential part of medieval culture. 'Irreligion' is an essential part of modern culture. What is of importance today is not to get modern man to accept *religion* as a human or cultural value (he may do so or he may not) but to let him see that we are witnesses of Christ, of the new creation, of the Resurrection, of the Living God: and that is something that goes far beyond the cultural phenomenon of religion" (CWA 134).

and peace" (OB 92). Merton closes the book with a decisive call for understanding grounded in faith:

> We are on the threshold of a new age. The Bible does not necessarily spell out what we can expect to find when we cross the threshold, but it does reveal to us the *basic dynamism* of human existence under God, a dynamism of awareness and response, in which lies "salvation." The rest is a matter of "believe and you will understand." (OB 94; Merton's italics)

3.3.5 The Fear of the Lord

In *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1966), following a short pericope in which he rejects the efficacy of works for salvation, Merton engages the thought of Julien Green who says: "Religion is not understood. Those who wish themselves pious, in order to admire themselves in this state, are made stupid by religion. What is needed is to lose ourselves completely in God; what is needed is perfect silence, supernatural silence. Pious talk has something revolting about it" (CGB 138). For Merton, religion in this sense, i.e. as false and self-righteous piety, has caused even religious people in his day to revolt against religion. He continues in this vein, his words echoing the language of 'grasping' so condemned by Karl Barth (# 3.3.4) in favour of God's movement toward the world:

> "Religion," in the sense of something emanating from man's nature and tending to God, does not really change man or save him, but brings into a false relationship with God: for a religion that starts in man is nothing but man's wish for himself. Man "wishes himself" (magically) to become godly, holy, gentle, pure, etc. His wish terminates not in God but in himself. This is no more than the religion of those who wish themselves to be in a certain state in which they can live with themselves, approve of themselves: for they feel that, when they can approve of themselves, God is at peace with them. How many Christians seriously believe that Christianity itself consists of nothing more than this? Yet it is anathema to true Christianity.
>
> The whole meaning of Paul's anger with "the Law" and with "the elements of this world" is seen here. Such religion is not saved by good intentions: in the end it becomes a caricature. It must. For otherwise we would never see the difference between this and the "religion" which is born in us from

> God and which perhaps ought not to be called religion, born from the devastation of our trivial "self" and all our plans for "our self," even though they be plans for a holy self, a pure self, a loving, sacrificing self. (CGB 138)

Insofar as religion represents a prideful attempt to "lay hands on God," Merton is in full agreement with Barth's position that brings revelation and religion into contradiction. But there is certainly a true kind of religion that does not seek after self-justification but humbly accepts the judgment of God. Merton states:

> It is in this sense that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom – and of true religion. This fear questions our own religiosity, our own ambition to be good. It begins to see with horror the complacency of speeches that "know all about" piety, possess the right method of pleasing God and infallibly winning Him over to our side, etc. This "fear" is what imposes silence. It is the beginning of the "supernatural silence" Green asks for. (CGB 139)

Merton's search in the last decade of his life for the wisdom of other religious traditions is therefore in no sense a search for the "human wisdom" that Paul so rightly rejects (1 Cor. 1:18-31). Rather, it is a search for a greater understanding and experience of the mystery of the gospel hidden in the *Sophia* of God and fully revealed in the foolishness of the cross.

C O N C L U S I O N

Thomas Merton has rightly been recognized as possessing an expansive religious imagination. In the final decade of his short life Merton indeed reached beyond the borders of Christian faith, entering into dialogue with the other great religious traditions. The nature and extent of his explorations have been hotly debated. Was Merton a forerunner of theological pluralism or simply a curious religious tourist? Neither of these conclusions take seriously Merton's theology of culture that envisions Christ holding together all of creation (Col 1:15-20). The wisdom of Eastern traditions, in a way similar to the reason of Western philosophy, witnesses to the One who is reconciling all things to Himself. It was, therefore, precisely his faith – certainly not his lack of it – that led Merton to seek a greater understanding of God in a variety of religious contemplative traditions. On the very basis of God's revelation in Jesus Christ, Merton was able to see the truth that creation itself is a revelation and a vocation to union with God.

Holding both revelation and religious experience together in the doctrine of the Incarnation was pivotal for Merton. Nature and grace cannot be viewed as opposing or even divisible parts of a whole. They are two ways of viewing the one revelation of God in Jesus Christ who is both the ground of creation and the fulfillment of covenant. To receive the gift of God's self-communication, then, is both to know and to experience the person of Jesus. Our participation in his life is both theological and ontological gift – *both-and*.

It seems most unusual that Merton would learn this from Karl Barth. Yet perhaps Barth is still more misunderstood than Merton. His rejection of natural theology is

certainly not the condemnation of creation that many assume; nor is his rejection of mysticism a capitulation to a cold and heartless theology. Even if Merton never fully appreciated Barth's theology, he nonetheless grasped and appropriated it on two of its most compelling points: Anselm and Mozart. Here Merton recognized in Barth a fully incarnational theology – the 'wholly Other' God made fully human.

In the same way that Barth rails against those who misunderstand Anselm as a rationalist, it is equally a mistake to view Merton as a pluralist. 'Faith seeking understanding' guards against either accusation. Likewise, Merton's agreement with Barth against the apologetic nature of Anselm's argument is a testimony against a syncretistic view of Merton's spirituality. Beginning with faith in Christ as *Logos* or *Sophia* and proceeding by way of reason or wisdom does not restrict Merton's religious vision.

In light of Merton's appreciation for Barth, it must be said that even his religious vision should not be perceived as naïve optimism; rather than a simple soteriological solution, it is for Merton an invitation to dialogue. It is a proclamation of epistemological humility and an open door toward understanding our religious other. All of this presumes a serious faith, not in the adeptness of our religious other any more than we have faith in our own religious competence, but in the mercy of a God known in the wisdom of the cross.

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