

An Experimental Life

“To be a saint means to be myself. Therefore the problem of sanctity and salvation is in fact the problem of finding out who I am and discovering my true self.”

—Thomas Merton¹

Thomas Merton’s mother died in 1921 when he was only six years old, and his father died in 1931 when he was only seventeen. This left him and his younger brother, John Paul, virtually alone in the world. As a consequence, Merton lived a rather wild youth—flunking out of Cambridge in his freshman year after fathering a child out of wedlock and participating in a drunken fraternity stunt in which he played the victim in a mock crucifixion.

After being kicked out of Cambridge, he moved to Long Island in 1934 to live with his mother’s family. In New York, he attended Columbia University, briefly joined the Communist Party, and eventually discovered his calling as a writer through contact with a series of influential teachers and friends that included Robert Giroux, Joseph Wood Krutch, Mark Van Doren, Robert Lax, and the avant-garde painter Ad Reinhart.

It was at Columbia that Merton first grasped the need to move beyond modernism and his literary hero, James Joyce. He discovered William Blake and the Christian critical romanticism that would influence him for the rest of his life.²

By Christian critical romanticism, I am referring to that set of writers who first translated the spiritual traditions of the West into secular terms—figures like Blake, Coleridge, Emerson, Whitman, Tolstoy, and Dostoyevsky—writers who celebrated the interior life yet also emphasized the need for a prophetic public witness over and against the powers that be. Blake's claim that it was possible to attain a second innocence on the far side of worldly experience appealed to Merton so much that he wrote his thesis on Blake's vision of art and nature.

Merton's interest in Blake prefigured his ultimate transition from an aspiring novelist to full-fledged Christian contemplative. And it also helps to explain the perpetual tension throughout his life between his calling as a writer and his calling as a monk. Merton was, like Blake, forever of two minds, always thinking in terms of antipathies, contrasts, dialectical tensions, and reconfigurations.

Moreover, Blake gave Merton another way to understand his terrible first year at Cambridge. Education is always a move into experience—and, as such, a fall from innocence. It is, by its very nature, tainted with corruption—that is, unless one acquires a second innocence on the far side of worldly experience. In Merton's case, this worldliness was a heady stew of Marxism, Bohemianism, and literary ambition. But his mature works, written after his conversion, express his second innocence (or rebirth in Christ), with Blakean reflections on overcoming life's antitheses through the transcendent experience of a higher Self.

At the time of his conversion to Christianity, Merton's college friend Robert Lax confronted him with a question: "What do you want to be?"

Merton answered that he wanted to be "a good Catholic."

Lax replied that if he wanted to be a good Catholic, then he should say that he wanted to become a saint, for hadn't Augustine himself said that we must be emptied of all with which we are full

so that we may be filled with that of which we are empty? Merton demurred, telling Lax he couldn't be a saint, but immediately realized that in denying that aspiration, he was indulging in "the false humility which makes people say they cannot do the things they must."³ This was the turning point in Merton's life, for in that moment he recognized that even Christian converts could deny their our own true selves—their souls' true destiny—in the name of their own personal, lesser conception of the faith. But to truly be a "good Catholic" meant more than that. It meant living in accord with the Christ within, the saint within, your own true Self that knows you better than you know yourself.

Saints know that their concepts of God get in the way of their own souls' truth, and so conversion of manners, that is to say, of behavior and belief, has no simple pattern. Each of us has to take on the difficult, individualized task of seeing through ourself and even beyond the petty pride that fuels our first nascent ambitions to become a "good" Christian. A greater love calls.

And so from that very moment forward, Catholicism became for Merton a pathway to sainthood—not merely the acceptance of a particular religious dogma. To be a "good Catholic," one could just follow the rules of canon law, but to aspire to sainthood meant dedicating oneself to living out the highest values, meaning, and witness of Christ. It meant embarking on a voyage.

Saints are men and women of faith who embark on that voyage and by so doing become transparent vehicles of the Holy Spirit. Their creative acts of love and gratitude challenge the values of empire and push the envelope of conventional spirituality. Saints redefine the norms of moral behavior within the Church and sometimes even redefine the Church's own understanding of itself. As such, they help us all overcome the false separations between theory and practice, theology and personal life, will and conscience. They accomplish this by personalizing God's providence through moment-by-moment spiritual discoveries. Their "present," it turns out, is as mysterious as the Trinity itself—not self-evident, not even actually present, and by no means ordinary. To be constantly praying is to be constantly awakening—not just to the moment,

but beyond it into the moment's hitherto unknown significance. As a result, saints are often charged with heresy because their acts of love and service challenge the old paradigms of religiosity. That is, they are charged with heresy *until* the Church catches up with their inspired visions and changes itself to accommodate their greater spiritual reach.

Unlike Joyce's modernist literary epigone Stephen Daedalus or Joseph Campbell's hero "with a thousand faces," Christian saints do not "return to their communities with a boon"; rather, they implode within themselves into God—transforming their communities from the inside out by taking the community's own ideals even more seriously than the community itself takes them. Saints reinstate the lost newness of a faith tradition by living it more deeply and authentically than those who merely conform to its rules and conventions. Thus, Merton converted to an inspired faith, not an institutional religion, moved by the creativity of those odd, passionate religious innovators such as Saint Francis, who gave sermons to the birds, and Theresa of Lisieux, who, as a young tourist, ran past the guards and threw herself onto the floor of the Coliseum so as to mingle with the dust of the martyrs.

Robert Lax's advice to Merton was later echoed by, of all people, the post-Beat writer Charles Bukowski when he wrote:

If you're going to try, go all the way. Otherwise, don't even start. This could mean losing girlfriends, wives, relatives and maybe even your mind. It could mean not eating for three or four days. It could mean freezing on a park bench. It could mean jail. It could mean derision. It could mean mockery—isolation. Isolation is the gift. All the others are a test of your endurance, of how much you really want to do it. And, you'll do it, despite rejection and the worst odds. And it will be better than anything else you can imagine. If you're going to try, go all the way. There is no other feeling like that. You will be alone with the gods, and the nights will flame

with fire. You will ride life straight to perfect laughter.
It's the only good fight there is.⁴

Of course, the hard-drinking Bukowski was not counseling the young to seek Christ, but rather to embrace a brave Nietzschean solitude. Lax, on the other hand, was telling Merton that his desire to be “a good Catholic” required more courage and risk than he had yet to imagine. But Merton was to move away from the Gods of “a proud isolation” toward solidarity with the innocent and downtrodden of this world: away from the egotistical sublime toward the second innocence and exalted humility of the Christian disciple.

Lax understood the communion of saints as a wonderful corrective to a narrow, metaphysically determined conception of Catholicism, for not only did it prove that there were many different ways to follow Christ, but the communion of saints historicized and concretized the Church's theology. The saints existentially embody the values that sustain community: diversity, plurality, and tolerance of imperfection. And their lives represent the most radical virtues of the Christian life: moral imagination, social dissent, and devotional innovation.

Saints remind the Church hierarchy of Christ's humble origins and love for the people, whereas institutions too often value individuals for their place in the hierarchy and their adherence to rules and authority. This is why the organized Church has always had problems with the ingenuity and audacity of its saints—even leading it to employ a “devil's advocate” to smoke out the personal failures and unconscious heresies of its most controversial disciples. Christopher Hitchens, for example, author of *The Missionary Position* and *God is Not Great*, was asked to testify against Mother Teresa's beatification. This was done not only to ensure an objective examination of her life and work, but also to ensure that her values and practices were consistent with Catholic orthodoxy.

In this sense, the communion of the saints functions within the Church much like Kant's notion of “public reason” functions

within philosophy: as a court of appeal through which the “private reason” of Catholic doctrine can be thought through with reference to public ideas, premises, and practices. Public reason does not proceed from precise definitions or predetermined ends, but rather seeks to think through the public meaning of concepts originating within otherwise closed systems. Catholic theology insofar as it remains confined to the definitions and ends of the Church can be seen as a form of *private reasoning*. Its sectarian job is to fix false thinking and articulate doctrine, whereas, the community of the saints celebrates the redemption of the fallible and the wisdom of the people living out the faith in the world. Indeed, the lives of the saints represent a public theology coming into being that is often initially at odds with old ideas but orthodox in its values, thereby serving as a court of appeal for the larger universal Church coming into being. In this way, saints recontextualize doctrinal truths by demonstrating what they include and exclude within the emerging sociohistorical reality. They are often exemplars of energetic, transformative, populist religious values where human relatedness and love triumph over rules and regulations.

Oscar Wilde described this plurality of the practical theologies bequeathed by the experimental lives of the saints this way:

And so he who would lead a Christ-like life is he who is perfectly and absolutely himself. He may be a great poet, or a great man of science; or a young student at a University, or one who watches sheep upon a moor; or a maker of dramas, like Shakespeare, or a thinker about God, like Spinoza; or a child who plays in a garden, or a fisherman who throws his nets into the sea. It does not matter what he is, as long as he realizes the perfection of the soul that is within him. All imitation in morals and in life is wrong. Through the streets of Jerusalem at the present day crawls one who is mad and carries a wooden cross on his shoulders. He is a symbol of the lives that are marred by imitation. Father Damien was Christ-like when he went out to live with the lepers,

because in such service he realized fully what was best in him. But he was not more Christ-like than Wagner, when he realized his soul in music; or than Shelley, when he realized his soul in song. There is no one type for man. There are as many perfections as there are imperfect men.⁵

The saints weaken theology proper while empowering the faith in general. That is to say, they undermine the assertion that there is only one metaphysically true way to be a Christian. This does not, however, lead to moral relativism but to a perpetually self-redefining tradition—as adaptable as process theology but more existentially grounded in the lives of actual individuals. Theology becomes the unfolding, flexible revelation of a God who transcends any and all systems, a God who sides with the poor, the just, the obscure, the innovative, and the personally authentic. This was the kind of “good Catholic” Robert Lax was urging Thomas Merton to become when he advised him to become a saint.

A saint may start from the same point of view as an iconoclastic poet, going against convention and comfort for the sake of an abundant, truthful, and self-sacrificing life, but he eventually arrives at a very different place. Like the hero and the artist, saints live beyond life. But saints are unique among this triumvirate because they do not advance any specific worldly agenda or immanent teleology; rather, they embrace spiritual solitude as part of the price one must pay for a creative dependence upon God. They die to the values of this world in order to live in the life of the spirit. Or, as G. K. Chesterton described it, the Christian must seek his or her “life in a spirit of furious indifference to it; he must desire life like water and yet drink death like wine.”⁶ The hero and the artist, by contrast, drink life like wine and death like water—that is to say, their indifference to the world is stoic, not religious, and so their hope is placed on the future immortality of their work, whereas the Christian lives content within the ordinary graces of anonymity, truth, and love in the eternal presence of God.

Another way to put this is that saints are those who exercise inner balance within the shifting sands of existence. They don't dissolve the chaos but master it by mastering themselves. The hero and the artist have a different calling. Outraged by the chaos they encounter, they seek to set matters right—if only in their work. Saints, by contrast, transform the dangerous and finite pains of personal isolation into spiritual revelations through contact with the energy of love. When Teresa of Avila remarked that all the way to paradise is paradise, she was speaking as someone for whom everything in this world had become a blessing, someone who was no longer in the grip of illusory images, things, or ideas. Because saints do not lay any conditions upon the world, its dark realities do not diminish their hope, but rather inspire them to even greater acts of love, surrender, and sympathy. Twenty-five years after his conversion, Merton would write: “[T]he saints are what they are *not* because their sanctity makes them admirable to others, but *because the gift of sainthood makes it possible for them to admire everybody else.*”⁷

The saint, like the child, pours out love in the moment without ulterior motive—undiluted by any hope of changing the world or him- or herself. A saint's charity is an absolute sacrifice, which to him or her is no sacrifice at all, but an end in itself, free from expectations. To the degree that we are all compelled by our desires to control the situations in our lives, the saint stands over and against us as a reminder that there are other, better ways to live—free from pettiness and scorn, so filled with love that pity itself dissolves into an absolute identification with everyone and everything alive—extending one's vitality and empathetic reach virtually to infinity.

In *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton quotes Augustine's claim that human nature is ordered to an end that it is not equipped by nature to attain. And so when Merton visited the Abbey of Gethsemani in 1941 and found a spiritual community organized around this very paradox, he felt he had discovered the center of America—the hidden vortex around which the basic truth of the human condition spun. This community of contemplatives—free

from the rush toward economic development—proved by its mere existence that it was still possible to live a life in accord with conscience without being crippled by either Bohemian isolation or middle-class conformity. Merton found in monasticism a way to *be*, not merely to *seem* to be, a Christian. It was a way of embracing the absurdity of the human condition without succumbing to the false solace of superstition or the false pride of an untethered Nietzschean bravado. The monastic life provided a way to admit that his life had hitherto been compromised by all that he had done and had failed to do.

Historically, monasticism was a movement both within and against the Church, a movement within a movement. Its doctrines were orthodox but its suspicion of empire subversive, and as such, it served as a model for building the new world within the shell of the old. Monasticism was a model for how revelation, creativity, and devotion could find their way around the institutional focus of the Constantine Church. What was being reborn in monasteries was not a new form of institutional power but rather the energy, idealism, and independence the Church had lost by becoming an imperial power.

The monastery, in this sense, was a world inside the world but outside the world's conception of itself. As such, it became a refuge for the soul—what Merton called “an earthly paradise because it is an earthly purgatory.”⁸ That is to say, unlike the secular world, monasteries see themselves as under an inconceivable horizon of responsibility and therefore inherently vain but also open to redemption. Monks are what the Franciscan Richard Rohr calls “lifestyle Christians”—people who define their faith by how they live, not by what they believe. A monk is not a religious seeker so much as a religious “finder”—a spiritual athlete more than a theologian. His primary concern is with moving his head into his heart by living out his faith—not merely describing it or coming to understand its philosophical implications.⁹ “Putting one's head into one's heart” is not a metaphor for subjecting thought to feeling. On the contrary, it is a metaphor for bringing one's intelligence into contact with the divine: bringing intellect

under the tutelage of the Divine—which is the ultimate goal of the Christian spiritual journey.¹⁰

This is not the same thing as thinking deep thoughts or theorizing one's place in the cosmos; it is more an act of perception, of *seeing* the beauty and dignity in all things through a change of heart or *metanoia*. Scientists are currently exploring the neural correlates to such altered states of consciousness that Merton and his contemplative predecessors strove heroically to make permanent in their lives.¹¹

The split between knowing and feeling is reunited in the monastery through a life of obedience, service, and devotion. Monastic formation is the journey back to oneness with God and with oneself. Conversion is, in this sense, transformation and rebirth into a completely new, open-ended way of life, which we find in Merton's famous prayer, composed in 1953:

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.¹²

Many years later, we find a more mature expression of this perspective in Merton's essay *The Day of a Stranger* (1967),¹³ where the result of this transformation upon ordinary consciousness is narrated with a completeness found nowhere else in his writings. Most of Merton's works, from the poems, to the letters, lectures,

and reflections, are life writings. That is to say, unlike biography or theology proper, they narrate bits of life reflected upon and purified into spiritual substance. Like the works of his contemporaries Jack Kerouac, Henry Miller, and Norman Mailer, they record the transformation of the self as it happens. *Day of a Stranger* is different in that it completes the cycle: unifying the saint, the tramp, the outside, the monk, and the man of Tao within a single, shared consciousness. Merton writes: “What I wear is pants. What I do is live. How I pray is breath.”¹⁴

It may sound odd to say it, but monasticism—like Christianity and even like writing itself—is a therapeutic action ethic. One gives up worldly status in order to live a nonviolent life in harmony with nature and, therefore, with one’s hitherto undiscovered true Self—married to poverty, chastity, and moral stability—for the sake of a life that is more than merely living. This is why Merton says, “The monastery is not an ‘escape’ from the world. On the contrary, by being in the monastery, I take my part in all the struggles and sufferings of the world. To adopt a life that is essentially nonassertive, nonviolent, a life of humility and peace is in itself a statement of one’s position.”¹⁵ And that position is an outright rejection of nationalistic propaganda, power-seeking advertisers, self-promoting politicians, and the various other fads and fashions of commercial culture.

The primary antidote to these trends offered by the monastery was contemplation. Meditative prayer and self-recollection serve as an antidote to “identity thinking,” where a thing is known only when it is classified in some way. The progress Enlightenment thought made in getting beyond myth and superstition ironically ended up establishing its own mythic goal of controlling nature. Power over things and people came to define progress and replaced the classical domains of thought, which sought understanding as an end in itself, not primarily as a means of control. Humanity no longer sought to incorporate its past with its own deepest biological nature, and instead developed discrete sciences and disciplines designed to gain power over various aspects of experience leading

to the creation of an increasingly self-conscious, global “subjectivity” bent on using technical force to abolish all forms of material deprivation.

Calling for a return to the selfless self of the Christian contemplatives in such a context is not an easy thing to do, and Merton went about it with great care and circumspection, for the contemplative arts taught in monasteries are tied to a sophisticated sociohistorical analysis of their own origins, without which they could all too easily turn round on and devolve into mere techniques and end up stewing in their own supernatural ethos.

This may account for the insular (and esoteric) nature of so many of the sermons and essays one reads in the works of otherwise brilliant meditation teachers. Like Merton, their writings provide powerful phenomenological descriptions of the interior life, but, unlike Merton, they make little or no effort to link the interior life to social reality or “manners.” Their works do not contextualize spiritual truths so much as reveal them, and this weakens their significance as a form of cultural critique.

To be fair, many spiritual writers simply assume that once one is liberated from conventional ignorance through the experience of Christian *metanoia*, a well-formed social conscience will follow as a matter of course. But the absence of any unified political alliance within religious communities gives the lie to this assumption and helps to explain why Merton’s willingness to address political issues from a contemplative perspective was so important and got him into so much trouble. Indeed, his most important contribution to the thought of his time may be his *marriage of contemplative and intellectual awareness into a single prophetic point of view*.

From Merton’s contemplative perspective, human injustice remains uncured because it remains unaddressed, and it remains unaddressed because it continues to go undiagnosed. In the global context, the institutional Church finds itself just another player in a political calculus—offset by competing interests and power blocs. And so, like any other stakeholder, it is forced to compromise rather than exert moral leadership. As a result, the socioeconomic order (and not the Kingdom of God) ends up shaping the world’s

interpretation of the Christ's teachings. To challenge this standard or to question this context requires a reassessment of the historical ground upon which we stand. So, unless clarified by a transhistorical point of view informed by post-Enlightenment categories of thought, even the most practiced contemplative will find it difficult to speak truth to power—caught as they are within an all-prevailing, systematically distorted system of communications.

In the 1950s, Merton became master of scholastics and then master of novices at Gethsemani, which meant that he was in charge of the spiritual formation of many returning World War II veterans. He quickly realized that in order to initiate these war-hardened veterans into the contemplative life, he would have to find a way of explaining the Christian tradition in nontraditional terms. That is to say, he would need to invent a contemporary spiritual pedagogy that spoke to and through their experience.

From these lectures, Merton culled the passages that make up his books *Seeds of Contemplation* (1948), *No Man Is an Island* (1955), and *Thoughts in Solitude* (1958). All three became devotional classics because Merton did not lean upon antique jargon or bury contemporary issues under overworked religious bromides. He spoke to his war-hardened audience of would-be monks about their call to the religious life—rescuing contemplation from its quietist reputation.

Take, for example, Merton's explanation of the identity of Christ in *No Man Is an Island*. "The Spirit of God must teach us who Christ is and form Christ in us and transform us into other Christs. . . . Therefore if you want to have in your heart the affections and dispositions that were those of Christ on earth, consult not your own imagination but faith. Enter into the darkness of interior renunciation, strip your soul of images and let Christ form Himself in you by His Cross."¹⁶ Here is a definition that is not scholastic but contemplative, reminding us that to define Christ, one must experience Christ—not know him as a metaphysical concept or even as a person, but experience him as the revelation of one's own true and deepest self—that is to say, as an intrinsic reality.

Another example of this is Merton's explanation of prayer: "The whole function of the life of prayer is to enlighten and strengthen our conscience so that it not only knows and perceives the outward, written precepts of the moral and divine laws, but above all lives God's law in concrete reality by perfect and continual union with His will. The conscience that is united to the Holy Spirit by faith, hope, and selfless charity becomes a mirror of God's own interior law which is His charity."¹⁷ Again, no scholasticism here, but experiential appropriation and poetic insight. Prayer, in its deepest sense, is a revelation in which there is no separation between oneself and God. Merton even went so far as to warn his postulants: "A man who is not stripped and poor and naked within his own soul will unconsciously tend to do the works he has to do for his own sake rather than for the glory of God. He will be virtuous not because he loves God's will but because he wants to admire his own virtues. But every moment of the day will bring him some frustration that will make him bitter and impatient, and in his impatience he will be discovered."¹⁸

These ideas reflect some of the best thinking of Urs von Balthasar and Henri de Lubac, whose work greatly influenced the Second Vatican Council, but Merton presents them in a middle style, where the rigor of the thought is tamed by the forthrightness of expression. Both Christ and prayer are contemplative realities, not merely philosophical concepts or historical facts, and so they can only be grasped devotionally—that is to say, feelingly. This is a truth that must be carefully unpacked because its implications are so profound. Scripture, as these mid-century Catholic theologians pointed out, is intimately tied to the traditions and experiences out of which it emerged and can be rediscovered only through a rigorous fourfold hermeneutic that reads the Bible as operating at several levels at the same time.

The body, mind, soul, emotions, intellect, and conscience are all processed differently in competing realms of experience that nevertheless are unified in and through the Christian mythos. The gospels are not to be decoded or systematized metaphysically so much as experienced and reiterated in and through prayer, com-

munity, and service. They do not comment on reality so much as add an additional reality to it. They do not explain experience; they are part of experience itself. The resulting iconic meanings cannot be simply or systematically rendered, and any literal interpretation is, ipso facto, heretical.

Urs von Balthasar once remarked,

The doctrines of the Trinity, of the Man-God, of redemption, of the Cross and the Resurrection, of predestination, and eschatology, are literally bristling with problems which no one raises, which everyone gingerly sidesteps. They deserve more respect. The thought of preceding generations even when incorporated in conciliar definitions is never a resting-place where the thought of the following generations can lie idle. Definitions are less the end than the beginning. . . . Whatever is transmitted without a new personal effort, an effort which must start *ab ovo*, from the revealed source itself, spoils like the manna. And the longer the interruption of living tradition caused by a simply mechanical transmission the more difficult the renewed tackling of the task.¹⁹

This radical task, the task of a well-articulated orthodoxy—in all its challenging perpetual originality—was picked up by Merton and reflected in his writing.

And so, when the 1960s arrived with their political crises and social unrest, Merton found that he had important things to say about civil rights, the nuclear threat, and Vietnam as well as about religion. As one might expect, he took the side of the poor, the powerless, and underrepresented—openly declaring his progressive contemplative vision in informal essays and poems. “Our vocation is not simply to be,” Merton told his fellow monks and novices,

but to work together with God in the creation of our own life, our own identity, our own destiny. We are free beings and sons and daughters of God. This means to

say that we should not passively exist, but actively participate in His creative freedom, in our own lives, and in the lives of others, by choosing the truth. To put it better, we are even called to share with God the work of creating the truth of our identity. . . . To work out our own identity in God, which the Bible calls 'working out our salvation,' is a labor that requires sacrifice and anguish, risk and many tears. It demands close attention to reality at every moment, and great fidelity to God as He reveals Himself, obscurely, in the mystery of each new situation.²⁰

To be a monk, therefore, is to embrace a certain social oblivion that, nevertheless, opens one up to see social reality without illusion. There is a strange clarity of perception that follows from being written off by the world—a world that had largely forgotten why monasteries even existed in the first place. Merton's point of view was interesting to secular readers precisely because it offered such an entirely different critique of the contemporary life and because Merton identified so deeply and completely with his faith—not in a spirit of irony or self-drama, but with purity of heart and real intelligence.

In one of his later lectures, Merton explained the essential nature of the religious life this way:

There is something about man that when he is not doing what he was made for, he knows it, and he knows it in a very deep way, and it becomes very important to him to change things. . . . How do you explain these things? The thing is not to explain them, the thing is to deepen them, the thing is to live them, and instead of getting by the thing with explanations and forgetting about it, it is much better not to and to get deeply into it. And that's what the monastic life is about. The monastic life is given to us for one reason only, it's to really deepen this dimension of religious reality.

You come to a monastery because you are looking for something, and you stay here because you keep looking for it, and the whole thing about it is that you believe that there is a point to this search and when you get away from this search . . . you begin to hear the voice, “This isn’t the job you’re supposed to be doing. Get back on the track of what you are looking for. Do the thing you’re supposed to be doing.” . . . Once a person has received from God the charge to seek what he has to seek, then he puts everything else aside and seeks it. On the basis of truth like this, accepted and lived, you get a Sufi and you get a monk. The beginning of the spiritual life: “I need God desperately and I am blocking him from helping me because I am getting in His way. I am doing my will not His, and I don’t really know quite what to do about it.”²¹

This impatience infects self-righteous extremists of every political persuasion. None are free from contamination. “Our choice,” Merton explained, “is not that of being pure and whole at the mere cost of formulating a just and honest opinion. Mere commitment to a decent program of action does not lift the curse. Our real choice is between being like Job who knew he was stricken, and Job’s friends who did not know that they were stricken too—though less obviously than he. (So they had answers!).”²²

But for Merton, the monastery was not an island of peace and order amid a sea of immoderate extremes. It had become more of an outpost on the frontier of an emerging counterculture, that is to say, a culture counter to modernism. As a result, Merton wrote as a guilty bystander to the cultural changes taking place—changes that were challenging the status quo but that also seemed to be bringing about a more universal Catholic Church at the same time. Merton agreed with Jean Danielou’s remark—later enshrined on a plaque at Gethesmani—that “Too often we think of hope in too individualistic a manner as merely personal salvation. But hope essentially bears on the great actions of God concerning the

whole world of salvation. It bears on the destiny of all humanity. God cares for all creatures, not just Catholics or even Christians. It is the salvation of the world that we await.”²³

Still, Merton insisted on challenging the easy conscience of the age. Upon reading Aldous Huxley’s description of his LSD experiences, Merton, a longtime admirer of Huxley’s work, wrote a letter asking him whether LSD could really be said to open the door to the divine if it forced God to reveal himself. If LSD compels a response, Merton argued, it is a forced relationship—and, therefore, not an experience of true grace. Huxley never replied.

Merton continued to address the spiritual poverty of the consumer society. Lenny Bruce read Merton’s poems in his nightclub act. Joan Baez visited him at Gethsemani. Jack Kerouac contributed a poem to Merton’s journal, *Monk’s Pond*, and Allen Ginsberg wrote about him in his journals. As a result, Merton found himself becoming identified with the emerging counterculture, but his contemplative perspective was in stark contrast to one of the signature critiques of Western civilization to emerge in the 1960s: Norman O. Brown’s *Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytic Meaning of History*.

In *Life Against Death*, Norman O. Brown argued that Freud had revealed a sober truth about our culture: that despite all our scientific and political gains, we still do not know what we want. This essential ignorance at the heart of our desires divides us from within and from without. Brown went to great lengths to reveal the full implications of this psychoanalytic insight that history itself was a neurotic replaying of past traumatic events, and that it was not a utopian fantasy to suppose that this unhappy replay of self-defeating behaviors might yet be overcome by putting an end to repression. The way out of personal neurosis, he argued, was to recover our capacity to live life on the far side of civilization and its discontents—in a polymorphously perverse kingdom of free expression not yet of this world.

In the final chapter of his book, “The Resurrection of the Body,” Brown made an explicit connection between Christian mysticism and Freud’s theories. “If Christianity wishes to help mankind

toward that erasure of the traces of original sin which Baudelaire said was the true definition of progress, there are priceless insights in its tradition—insights which have to be transformed into a system of practical therapy, something like psychoanalysis, before they can be useful or even meaningful.”²⁴

And then Brown offered this concluding observation:

The resurrection of the body is a social project facing mankind as a whole, and it will become a practical political problem when the statesmen of the world are called upon to deliver happiness instead of power, when political economy becomes a science of use value instead of exchange values—a science of enjoyment instead of a science of accumulation. In the face of this tremendous human problem, contemporary social theory, both capitalist and socialist, has nothing to say. Contemporary social theory (again we must honor Veblen as an exception) has been completely taken in by the inhuman abstractions of the path of sublimation, and has no contact with concrete human beings, with their concrete bodies, their concrete though repressed desires, and their concrete neuroses.²⁵

These ideas broach a contemplative perspective, but Brown’s bold formulation was relatively unschooled in the long re-educative practices of monastic formation. The happiness of the contemplative, as Merton so often reminds us, is not the same thing as “a science of enjoyment,” even though both challenge the prevailing consumer economy of accumulation. And though Brown is right to see the resurrection of the body as a *social event*, his understanding of it as liberation from genital fetishism does not do justice to Christ’s tragic identification with the dispossessed as the *sine qua non* of a life lived in accord with conscience and his definition of happiness (*agape*) as moral joy.

The resurrected body of Jesus, for Merton, is not the resurrected physical body of a redeemed hedonism, but the spiritual

body of a fallen humanity animated by love (the Holy Spirit). And so, as the 1960s progressed, Merton's writings featured significant contemporary social criticism—challenging rigid Cold War dichotomies and shifting the conversation away from the bitter rhetorical battle between East and West and toward the search for a universal, nondualistic expression of what it means to live life in accord with conscience. Merton's work from this period began where Brown's critique left off, granting the need for a post-historical (i.e., eschatological) perspective on existence, but also articulating the lost tradition of apophatic Christianity that had already thought through many of these same problems.

This defense of the mystical roots of contemplation led him into a head-on collision with consumer society, and although Merton only watched television twice in his life, when he saw a Tidy Bowl commercial, he felt compelled to write about its iconic and liturgical presumptions—about how it elevated bathroom hygiene to the level of a religious absolute. He followed up this essay with a reading of an Arpège cologne advertisement in the *New Yorker*—exposing its transformation of beauty into a vehicle for perfume sales via a McLuhanesque interpretation of its rhetoric and form.

Advertisers, marketers, and political propagandists, Merton argued, had become magicians with words—unlike poets, who expose the limits of language and highlight the ineffable truths of experience. Advertisers use words and images as tools and weapons to weave spells—not as precious human resources whose integrity must be preserved for the common good. Poets enter into communion with the world from inside their own experience and so come to know things as aspects of themselves. The readers of poetry enter into empathy with poets, acquiring a greater sympathetic imagination and with it a larger sense of self. The more the reader disengages from his or her own interior noise—from his or her self-conceived dramas and perceived personal failings—the more the poet's experience comes through, and so, with practice, the mind becomes adept at perceiving universals. Great literature can open our eyes to the operations of grace, the unperceived blessings in