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From Nothing to Nothing: Merton's Modern Mysticism

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From Nothing to Nothing: Merton's Modern Mysticism

The immense social, economic, and cultural changes that have occurred in the modern era present religions with serious concerns about how well their traditions address adherents' needs in a radically altered spiritual climate. Thomas Merton, a twentieth-century Cistercian monk, minces no words in his denunciation of the modern condition: "it is a systematic and cynical affront to human dignity," he writes.¹ Merton claims that modern values and assumptions have changed not only the ways in which people interact with each other, but also individuals' deepest perceptions of the most important aspects of reality: the self and its relation to God. Throughout his career, Merton focused on how the problems of modernity have affected various aspects of Christian belief and practice, but his work shows an especially pervasive concern with the state of the contemplative mystic tradition. In an age dominated by scientific knowledge and a concept of the self as a distinct subject that is radically discontinuous with the external world, is mystical experience even possible? And if so, what would a modern mysticism look like?

Merton argues that while the life of a contemplative mystic can still be attained, the modern Christian consciousness differs substantially from those that preceded it. So much so, in fact, that while the goal of the contemplative life is the same as it has ever been (the shedding of a "false self" and the realization of a new "self" that subsists entirely in God), the path to this goal must be modified to accommodate the uniquely modern obstacles that hinder attainment of the radical reorientation that the mystic seeks. For Merton, these obstacles are twofold: first, a pervasive and deeply imbedded belief in an illusory sufficient self; and second, an emphasis on rational and notional concepts of God (as opposed to intuitive and direct knowledge of God.) Writers in the Christian mystical tradition often employ apophatic theology to undo belief in the illusory self and to counter abstract, rational, and notional concepts of God, which they perceive as obstacles to true understanding of the divine nature.² Thomas Merton similarly uses apophatic theology, but with a modern spin. In his mystical texts, Merton weds apophatic theology to notions culled from existentialism (and to a lesser extent, psychoanalysis) to create an antidote to what he sees as the conditions of modern humanity that make attainment of the mystical life and true self-realization so difficult for the modern Christian. That

¹ Thomas Merton, "Vocation and Modern Thought," in *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 29.

² Apophatic (literally, un-saying) thinkers emphasize the unknowability of God and argue that to apply positive predicates to explain God is not necessarily the best way to understand him. Rather, apophatic theologians suggest that the best way to understand God is through the *via negativa*, the process of systematically negating predicates that are typically applied to God. Pseudo-Dionysius, for example, begins by denying clearly metaphorical notions of God (e.g., "God is a rock") before progressing up to denials of seemingly essential aspects of the Christian concept of God (e.g., that he can be described as "good" or as possessing "being.") The idea is that conceptual understandings of God, constructed as they are by language and earthly frameworks, are necessarily inadequate to describe such a transcendent entity.

antidote is to undo the modern self by demonstrating that the self is not coextensive with its rational faculties and that God must be apprehended experientially as well as intellectually.

Before delving in to the specifics of Merton's modern mysticism, it is necessary to understand the broad contours of what he sees as the endeavor of the contemplative mystic. We must start here because in order to examine Merton's ideas on the potential for modern mysticism, we first have to understand just what he understands as mysticism. Merton's concept of the Christian mystic's project is deeply traditional and commentators have noted that he adds little theologically to long-standing Catholic teaching on mysticism.³ He sees the mystical endeavor as a process of a radical reorientation in which one recovers one's "true self" by shedding the "external, everyday self," which "is to a great extent a mask and a fabrication" because it is socially mediated and contingent on ephemeral things.⁴ In Merton's thought (as in that of Gregory of Nyssa, Origen, and other Christian mystics), this shedding is a process of purification. By ridding herself of the false self, the contemplative is able to realize her true self, which subsists in (and is made in the image and likeness of) God.⁵ The mystical endeavor culminates in moments of "transcendent experience."⁶ To attain transcendent experience, Merton writes, "is to penetrate the reality of all that is, to grasp the meaning of one's own existence...to relate perfectly to all that is in a relation of identity and love."⁷ In these experiences, which "are beyond the ordinary level of religious...experience," the individual viscerally discovers her true self in *experiential* knowledge.⁸ Of course, Christianity has long taught that a disconnect between the true self and the false self (as Merton calls them) exists and that this disconnect is a result of original sin. In Merton's thought, however, the ways in which the modern condition obscures the true self are distinct from (and more intractable than) the ways in which previous cultures obscured the true self. As Merton's mystical thought is deeply rooted in the modern condition, in order to understand the nature of his use of existentialism and apophatic theology, we must situate it within his critique of modernity.

I. Critique of Modernity

Merton critiques modernity from two perspectives. First, he argues that the prevailing philosophical tendencies of the modern age lead to an orientation in which the inlets for direct and intuitive knowledge of the divine are neglected and obscured. I call this his epistemological critique of modernity. Second, Merton argues that the material conditions of

³ John F. Teahan, "A Dark and Empty Way: Thomas Merton and the Apophatic Tradition," *The Journal of Religion* 58, no. 3 (1978): 284.

⁴ Thomas Merton, *The Climate of Monastic Prayer* (Washington, D.C.: Cistercian Publications, 1973), 97.

⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, "Sermon Six on the Beatitudes," in *Light From Light: An Anthology of Christian Mysticism*, ed. Louis Dupre and James A. Wiseman (New York: Paulist Press, 2001), 43-44.

⁶ Thomas Merton, "Transcendent Experience," in *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968), 72.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

modern culture, which chain people to utility and consumption, lead people to weave an incredibly complex false self that prevents them from realizing their insufficiency and thus from turning toward the divine. I call this his existential critique of modernity. Merton thus works to describe the mystical endeavor in terms that will enable the modern Christian to recover her “true self” in light of these obstacles.

Merton’s epistemological critique of modernity hinges on his belief that with modernity (and especially since Descartes), Western culture experienced a fundamental epistemological shift—one in which the culturally defined notions of what “knowledge” consists of have changed in a way that hinders contemplative purification. The fundamental principle of the Cartesian worldview, famously summed up in the *cogito*, is that the thinking subject is the only feasible starting point for an investigation of reality. Descartes argued that because we consistently misperceive (or are deceived by) the external world, it is untenable to use external data to construct a worldview. The only thing we can be sure of, according to Descartes, is that “I think, therefore I am.”⁹ But for Merton, “nothing could be more alien to contemplation than the *cogito ergo sum* of Descartes.”¹⁰ The logical conclusion of Cartesian assumptions, Merton writes, is “a solipsistic bubble of awareness—an ego-self imprisoned in its own consciousness, isolated and out of touch.”¹¹ He claims that Descartes’ influence is “still” one of “overwhelming importance” in the modern orientation and that many of the modern obstacles to spiritual progress stem from this influence.¹²

For Merton, Descartes’ impact on Western spirituality has been profoundly negative because it has deeply ingrained in the Western mind a belief in a discrete self that is a center of will, which is a conception of the self that, because of its illusory sufficiency, limits the modes by which God can be perceived. Merton problematizes the Cartesian self because it “assumes that the individual is a center of volitional force that is supposed to exert itself upon or against a world outside it.”¹³ This model engenders misapprehensions of the external world and God, Merton argues, because the Cartesian self is radically bounded; it cannot *participate* in the world or in God—it can only observe. If an individual’s epistemological framework is the Cartesian self, her knowledge is always the result of “consciousness *of*” something rather than “consciousness.”¹⁴ Because of the radical disconnect between the subject and the world that results from a Cartesian model of the self, Merton asserts that the possibilities for direct intuitive knowledge of God are limited where

⁹ Rene Descartes, *Meditationes de Prima Philosophia: Meditations on First Philosophy* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 101.

¹⁰ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961), 8-9. Above all, he writes, it prevents Christians from the “humble realization of our mysterious being as persons in whom God dwells.”

¹¹ Thomas Merton, “The New Consciousness,” in *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968), 22.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Thomas Merton, “Vocation and Modern Thought,” in *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 42.

¹⁴ Thomas Merton, “The New Consciousness,” in *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968), 22. My emphasis.

this is the prevailing notion of the self.¹⁵ Much of his modern mysticism involves attempts to make people realize that the self is not coextensive with one's rational faculties.

In addition to the fact that the Cartesian orientation causes people to be blinded to the possibility of experiential, participatory knowledge, Merton takes further issue with the "solipsistic" Cartesian mode of thought because it leads to an excessive dependence on verbal formulas (rather than intuition) as the primary way of knowing about God. This excessive rationalism has firmly taken root in the Western mentality, to the point that Merton can claim "no one cares for fresh, direct, sincere intuitions of the Living Truth."¹⁶ Not only does the prevalent spiritual outlook elide experiential knowledge of God, it can also cause an almost blasphemous concept of the relationship between humans and God: the Cartesian outlook leads people to seek discursive knowledge of the divine, which implies the desire to have "power over God."¹⁷ The reason for this is simple: if the human mind could compass God, it would necessarily be greater than God. Thus while the path to Christian enlightenment requires "a spiritual outlook which is not abstract (read: philosophical) but concrete, not pragmatic but hieratic, intuitive and affective rather than rationalistic and aggressive," the modern mind wanders in a barren tautological wasteland of "names, labels, numbers, and slogans."¹⁸ According to Merton, such are the epistemological barriers to mystical enlightenment caused by our position as heirs to Descartes. Knowledge is only legitimate if it is something that can be observed by this radically discontinuous self. This outlook precludes the individual from realization of "true self," which is an expansive, dynamic, non-dualistic, experiential, and almost pantheistic state: "When a man has been purified and humbled, when his eye is single, and he is his own real self, then the *logoi* of things jump out at him spontaneously."¹⁹

Second, in a separate critique of the modern condition (his "existential" critique), Merton argues that the existential situation of moderns (which is a function of the industrial revolution) creates an incredibly complex "false self" which, by virtue of its intractability, poses a more dire obstacle to spiritual enlightenment than did the "false selves" created by earlier cultures. He writes that the modern environment, shaped as it is by consumerism and a deification of

¹⁵ Cf. Merton, "The New Consciousness," 22-23. The Cartesian self limits intuitive experience of the divine for two reasons for Merton. First, he claims that it limits "self-awareness" to the "thinking, observing, measuring, and estimating" faculties. The implication is that intuitive knowledge is dismissed as invalid because it engages a different (non-rational) aspect of the self. Second, the "solipsistic...and imprisoned" Cartesian self is incapable of "a genuine I-Thou relationship," between individuals and between individuals and God.

¹⁶ Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985), 566.

¹⁷ Thomas Merton, *The Climate of Monastic Prayer*, 113.

¹⁸ Thomas Merton, "A Letter to Pablo Cuadra Concerning Giants," in *The Complete Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), 372.

¹⁹ Thomas Merton, *An Introduction to Christian Mysticism: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition*, ed. Patrick O'Connell (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2008), 131.

technological progress, has been constructed without regard for “man’s true self,” and is as such “a systematic and cynical affront to human dignity.”²⁰

Merton identifies conformity and widespread lack of individual development as the most salient and stultifying existential situations engendered by modern culture. The frenetic pace and fierce competition of life demand conformity from the individual if she wishes to succeed, for only a narrow type of person can excel in the world of deified utility. Borrowing from Kierkegaard, Merton asserts that modern social life is marked above all by “leveling”—a process by which the individual loses herself in the “vast emptiness” of the public mind.²¹ The public mind is a “vast emptiness” because it consists of “individuals at the moments when they are nothing.”²² When an individual is engaged in a public social situation, she cannot possibly have recourse to considerations about her true self because her energy pours outward into the collective—thus she is “nothing”. So when she accedes to notions of utility, consumerism, secularism, scientism, and the whole host of modern values, the individual “abdicate[s]” personal “experience and intuition.”²³ The complexities of industrial society demand an intense division of labor (and mutual codependence). As a result, in modern culture, much more of life takes place in the nothingness of the public mind than in previous cultures. In the modern era, people tend to neglect their true inner selves and instead to dedicate energy to the construction and adornment of the false, social self. Merton sees evidence of this pervasive neglect in a peculiar and uniquely modern terror of solitude.²⁴ Because the modern individual puts so much weight on the construction of the externally mediated social self (which is typically a function of one’s social use value), aloneness is a mortifying prospect. Without the constant external reification of the false self that public life provides, one becomes aware of a gnawing dissonance inside—the most painful effect of a lifetime of ignoring the exigencies of being.²⁵ Yet this gnawing dissonance is for the most part drowned out by “elaborate conventional models of thought” which, instead of helping people realize “true self” serve as veils that keep them from experiencing the “anguish” that is the catalyst for personal growth.²⁶ Thus for Merton modern society demands conformity to a utility-obsessed ideal that was constructed with little regard for the health of the individual as well as a

²⁰ Merton, “Vocation and Modern Thought,” 29.

²¹ Thomas Merton, “The Other Side of Despair: Notes on Christian Existentialism,” in *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1967), 263. Merton takes his discussion of “leveling” from the “prophetic pages” of Kierkegaard’s *The Present Age*. He quotes Kierkegaard extensively in this discussion.

²² *Ibid.*, 264.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Merton, “Vocation and Modern Thought,” 42. “Critics have also noted the American fear of loneliness. Individual identity is sacrificed in order to remain close to the herd... Yet one of the surest signs of the resolution of the identity crisis is an increased capacity for being alone... There are decisions in life and aspects of life’s struggle that a person must face alone.”

²⁵ *Ibid.* Merton describes this dissonance throughout the essay as the “identity crisis.”

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 36-37.

stultified self that is mired in “infantilism and irresponsibility.”²⁷ The manner in which the individual functions in mass society in Merton’s writing is like a negative and diabolic version of Christian mystical ecstasy: the self is lost, but it is lost in a human “anthill, without purpose, without meaning, without spirit and joy.”²⁸ This existential state necessarily precludes self-realization and contemplative mystical experience.

Another damaging effect of industrialized society on the prospects of individual mystical experience, according to Merton, is the pervasive emphasis on process, which is again a function of the modern glorification of utility and technological progress. The primacy of the scientific method in an age of progress means that “know-how” has replaced “what” in the process of inquiry: “The question of *what*...or *who* is relatively insignificant. As long as one knows *how*, the *what* will take care of itself. You just initiate the process and keep it going.”²⁹ In an age of mechanistic philosophies in which the universe, the person, and society function like clockwork, understanding process trumps ultimate questions of meaning or authority.³⁰ The problem that the modern emphasis on process poses for mystical experience is simple: a mystical experience involves being outside causal, mechanistic life—it demands an expansive, free, and undetermined existence in God, and when process becomes one of the fundamental ordering principles of reality, it obscures the possibility of attaining this state.

Furthermore, viewing the world as process obscures *reality* itself—for in Merton’s thought, reality is a pure ground of overflowing Being, not a process.³¹ He writes, “We have renounced the act of being and plunged ourself into *process* for its own sake. We no longer know how to live, and because we cannot accept life in its reality life ceases to be a joy and becomes an affliction.”³² In other words, when modern Christians envision themselves as cogs in a processual universe, they cannot participate in Being—and cannot, therefore, attain the life of a mystic.

In summary, Merton critiques the modern condition on two fronts. First, he argues first that the epistemological orientation of the era creates a radical division between the subject and the external world that precludes intuitive ways of knowing God. Second, he asserts that industrial society keeps individuals chained to a barren, fruitless consumerism that limits individual development while at the same time providing ample palliative measures to keep people from feeling

²⁷ Ibid., 38.

²⁸ Thomas Merton, “A Letter to Pablo Cuadra Concerning Giants,” in *Collected Poems*, 372.

²⁹ Merton, “The Other Side of Despair,” 262.

³⁰ I draw this conclusion from the above quote. If, as Merton asserts, “know-how” has replaced “what” in the process of inquiry, it follows that the primary concern of “know-how” type inquiries is to understand a chain of causal relationships. Thus, “know-how” inquiries exclude questions of “what,” which would address the underlying causes and meanings of relationships, but not necessarily the process itself. For example, models of the universe explain *how* it functions mechanically, but do not address questions about its origin or purpose. This mode of inquiry becomes more problematic for Merton when people begin to use it to investigate themselves and their relationship to society or the universe, because an understanding of the *processes* of the self is spiritually impoverished compared to an understanding of its ultimate purpose, which for Merton is a reorientation toward God.

³¹ See p. 9 below

³² Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Image, 1968), 222.

the anguish that would catalyze a turn toward God. Thus, today's aspiring contemplative has the cards stacked against her: Merton outlines, through his various works, a set of enormous structural and subjective barriers to the freedom that mysticism demands.

Merton clearly is a vitriolic critic of the modern condition, but he does not advocate turning our backs on modernity. "We are all moderns," he writes—to deny that Christians are somehow outside of the massive cultural shifts of modernity would be counterproductive.³³ Even novice monks who have been fervently Christian their whole lives are socialized into modern values. For Merton, the false self of moderns who seek contemplative union with God must be exploded using a modern paradigm. In other words, Merton advocates fighting fire with fire.

II. Merton's Modern Mysticism

Merton's goal in his marriage of modern thought and apophatic theology, then, is to appropriate those elements of modern thought that cast light onto "modern man's confusions" and to render these confusions "more tractable."³⁴ Remarkably, he goes so far as to call Freud, Nietzsche, and Marx "prophets"—he sees them as holy in so far as they make modern humanity aware of its debased condition.³⁵ And if one considers Merton's emphasis on experiential, intuitive knowledge of the divine above rationalistic, formulaic knowledge, his appropriation of existentialism and the nineteenth- and twentieth-century social critics makes sense. The latter he uses to decry the falsity of the seemingly monolithic modern mindset, while the former he uses to create a mode of presentation that makes the mystical endeavor understandable to moderns. For Merton, existentialism is a "philosophy" that may save the West because it is "an experience and an attitude rather than a system of thought"; like "Zen and apophatic theology," it is "hidden in life itself."³⁶ In other words, because existentialist concepts can bring humanity out of the solipsistic, abstract, bare, and desacralized modern world back into a realm of visceral experience, they can serve as a guide to the aspiring mystic.

Merton's entire project (that of using modern thought to combat the modern mindset) rests upon a metahistorical idea that he develops in *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*: that there are fundamentally distinct epochs in the history of thought, each of which shapes human beings' concept of reality so strongly that there have been many different "Christian consciousnesses."³⁷ Each new Christian consciousness brings about "a radical shift...in the Christian's

³³ Merton, "Vocation and Modern Thought," 53.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Merton, "The Other Side of Despair," 259.

³⁷ Merton, "The New Consciousness," in *Zen and the Bird of Appetite*, 18-20

experience in relation to Christ and the Church.”³⁸ The first epoch occurred from the earliest days of the Christian communities (the Jesus Movement) until the great Hellenizing theologians of the third and fourth centuries. Christians in this era “experienced themselves as men ‘of the last days,’...expecting [Jesus’] imminent return.”³⁹ After the original apocalyptic consciousness of the earliest Christianities came the age of Hellenization of Christian thought. The epoch of Hellenization complemented the eschatological concerns of the early Christians with “a metaphysical dimension” that “radically altered the perspective...and experience” of Christians in a way that opened the door to mystical experience.⁴⁰ The epoch of Hellenization gave way to the age of “ontological mysticism,” which emphasizes “absorption in the Godhead through the Word by the action of the Spirit.”⁴¹ Just as each of these epochs in Christianity have been discontinuous with those that preceded them, the contemporary Christian spirit, conditioned by the industrial revolution and capitalism, marks a departure from the age of “ontological mysticism.”⁴² Interestingly, this idea suggests an acknowledgement that mystical experiences depend on the epistemological assumptions that the mystic holds. Keeping in mind Merton’s idea that the modern era marks a distinct break from previous Christian experiences, we can proceed to examine the ways in which he weds existentialism and psychoanalytic theory to the Christian tradition of apophatic theology.

Because the mystical endeavor involves, above all, a radical reorientation of the self, the first part of Merton’s mysticism that we should examine is his anthropology. While Merton’s understanding of the human person is rooted firmly in the Christian mystic tradition, his mode of presentation of these ideas is remarkably different from his mystical antecedents in that it uses ideas and terms culled from existentialism and psychoanalysis. In terms of the conception of the self, Merton’s most obvious influence is Gregory of Nyssa.⁴³ Gregory asserts that individuals are indeed made in the image and likeness of God, but that the defilements and false self that are accrued during life dull and obscure the true inner self, which is a mirror that reflects the divine spark. The mystical endeavor is one of purification; by removing the

³⁸ Ibid., 19.

³⁹ Ibid., 18. Merton sums up the mindset of the first epoch of Christian thought with a quote from the *Didache*: “Let grace come, and let this world pass away!”

⁴⁰ Ibid., 18-19. Merton suggests that the introduction of a metaphysical element to Christian experience opened the door to mystical experience because the focus of Christian life shifted away from “an event” and toward “the acquisition of a new ontological status and a ‘new nature.’”

⁴¹ Ibid., 19. Merton does not specifically date the transition between the epoch of Hellenization and the epoch of ontological mysticism, but based on his description of “ontological mysticism,” it is likely that he refers to medieval to early modern mystic thought—his description of “absorption in the Godhead” resembles the thought of John of the Cross (in which the “*nada*” becomes absorbed in the “*todo*”) and Meister Eckhart.

⁴² Ibid. Unfortunately, he also neglects to provide dating for this transition as well, but we can assume it roughly coincides with harbingers of modernity such as the industrial revolution and the rise of global capitalism.

⁴³ Teahan, “Thomas Merton and the Apophatic Tradition,” 267.

defilements, one can recover one's true nature.⁴⁴ Similarly, Merton consistently argues that one must move beyond the "false self," which is utterly contingent (and thus unreal) to realize the "true self," which subsists entirely in God.⁴⁵

While Merton's concept of the self and its reorientation in the mystical endeavor is profoundly traditional, his detailed descriptions of the nature of the self employ Freudian and existentialist terms. The fallen state of the "false self" consists in the illusion of individual sufficiency, of the ego as author of a plenary being.⁴⁶ The self cannot be in harmony with the divine as long as this illusion persists: "When we seem to possess and use our being in a completely autonomous manner, as if our individual ego were the pure source and end of our acts, then we are in illusion and our acts lack spiritual meaning and authenticity."⁴⁷ In other words, the illusion of the sufficiency of being comes from the mistaken belief that the ego, that which we identify during the day as "I", is truly the author of its own desires. Merton's theory of the volitional insufficiency of the "I" or "ego" is clearly rooted in and supported by Freud's concept of the human psyche, in which the conscious part of the "ego" possesses the illusion of freedom but is constantly buffeted and controlled by unconscious internal forces (the "id") and demands placed upon it by social existence (the "superego").⁴⁸ Thus, Merton argues, the reality of our divided and opaque psyche belies our supposed freedom—the "self" that we perceive as full is actually pure nothingness, contingent on socially mediated demands and a brambly mess of internal, subconscious drives:

All sin starts from the assumption that my false self is the fundamental reality of life. I use up my life [in attempts] to clothe this false self and construct its nothingness into something objectively real. I wind experiences around myself like bandages in order to make myself perceptible to myself and to the world.⁴⁹

Here, we see Merton casting the traditional Christian idea of the illusion of individual sufficiency in a new light, enriched and informed, molded to the modern condition, by a Freudian concept of the self and existentialist notions of nothingness.⁵⁰

⁴⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, "Sermon Six on the Beatitudes," 43-44.

⁴⁵ Thomas Merton, *The Ascent to Truth* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1951), 48.

⁴⁶ Cf. the discussion in Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 8-10. I leave "being" uncapitalized here, following Merton's usage. He capitalizes being when he uses the word to refer to the fabric of reality, an emanation from the Godhead that keeps all things in existence. When referring to an individual or to the ontological experience of an individual, he leaves the word uncapitalized.

⁴⁷ Merton, *Climate of Monastic Prayer*, 96.

⁴⁸ Sigmund Freud, *An Outline of Psychoanalysis* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1949), 72-78; 120-124; and 62-63.

⁴⁹ Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 35.

⁵⁰ Merton only rarely cites Freud himself directly. In "Vocation and Modern Thought," he refers to Freud as a luminary for his insight into the effects of modernity on the individual and for his insight into the nature of the psyche with its illusory belief in the volitional sufficiency of the ego. So while Merton's notion of the self is indebted to Freud (in that he uses Freudian terms such as "ego" and a basically Freudian model of the self), he sees more value in the application of psychoanalysis in general: "psychoanalysis and existentialist thought work together to explain some of modern man's confusions." He additionally devotes an entire essay to argue that psychoanalysis should be used as a valuable tool in monastic life (see "Final Integration: Toward a Monastic Therapy" in *Contemplation in a World of Action*.)

According to Merton, the nothingness of the insufficient and contingent false self reveals itself to the individual through “dread”: “a sense that one has...been untrue not so much to abstract moral or social norms but to one’s inmost truth...it is the profound awareness that one is capable of ultimate bad faith with himself and with others.”⁵¹ Dread, for Merton, is the realization of original sin by a visceral awareness of the vanity and empty falseness of the self and the profound dissonance between one’s socially constructed self and one’s deepest essence. It is absolutely central to self-realization and can be the catalyst to the profound reorientation that occurs in the mystic endeavor.

In Merton’s concept of dread and its effects, we see the appropriation and synthesis of both Kierkegaard and Sartre. For Kierkegaard as for Merton, dread is a function of original sin, and stems from “the reality of freedom”—a reality that is ever refuted by the contingency of the self.⁵² Moreover, freedom is possibility, but it is not realized because one’s emotions are constantly directed *at* something—they reveal the nothingness of the self and its lack of freedom. Merton compounds this description of dread by connecting it explicitly with Sartre’s idea of bad faith.⁵³ For Merton, the postlapsarian state of humanity requires that humans live in a state of bad faith or self-deception. Be it conscious or unconscious, the false self (as a product of social mediation) necessarily must be at odds with the true self. Dread occurs when one becomes aware that one is living in “bad faith with” oneself (against the true self) and with “others.”⁵⁴ Thus, while the underlying structure of Merton’s concept of the “false self” is virtually identical to Gregory of Nyssa’s impure self, his presentation of the false self appropriates the existentialist concepts of dread, bad faith, and nothingness in order to adapt age-old mystical thought to modern notions of the self.

Merton similarly describes a “true self” that differs little from earlier Christian mystics’ anthropology in a manner that makes use of existentialist thought. Central to the “true self” is the reality of an underlying “ground of Being” in which the true self resides and is realized. “Underlying the subjective experience of the individual self,” he writes, “there is an immediate experience of Being...It has none of the split and alienation that occurs when the subject becomes aware of itself as a quasi-object.”⁵⁵ Here, Merton suggests that once the mind is liberated from the shackles of the false self

⁵¹ Merton, *Climate of Monastic Prayer*, 131; 36.

⁵² Soren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Dread* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1944), 38; 53. “Dreamingly the spirit projects its own reality, but this reality is nothing.”

⁵³ Merton, *Climate of Monastic Prayer*, 36. “Dread is the profound awareness that one is capable of ultimate bad faith with himself and with others: that one is living a lie.”

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Merton, “The New Consciousness,” in *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, 24. Although Merton could not possibly have been exposed to the thought of Georges Bataille in his lifetime, it is worth noting that his concept of the experience of the unified experience of the ground of Being bears striking similarities to Bataille’s theory of immanence. So much so, in fact, that Bataille’s theory can help elucidate that of Merton. Bataille suggests that all religion is a search to regain humanity’s lost immanence. Humans used to be in the world “like water in water,” unaware of radical subject-object distinctions. When humans made the first tool, however, they had to begin conceiving the world in terms of subjects and objects that can be manipulated. The necessary result of this conceptual shift was that (among other things) humans began to conceive of *themselves* as objects. This leads to

(which can never be unified because it exists in the tension between pure perception and *a posteriori* rationalization), it can experience the hidden, true ground of Being—a nondualistic state of Edenic integration with the whole of creation. Merton writes that this ground of Being “underlies” the experience of the individual self: this means that it is prior to the individual self and subsumes the individual self.⁵⁶ Attaining mystical union, then, is not so much the discovery of a realm of existence heretofore never experienced by the self so much as the realization that one *at all times* participates in this mystical ground of Being.

Merton’s concept of the ground of Being is conceptually quite similar to corollaries in earlier Christian mystical thought (especially Pseudo-Dionysius and Gregory of Nyssa), but it is most clearly influenced by the thought of Martin Heidegger. Ross Labrie notes that Heidegger, too, “posited a direct, intuitive apprehension of Being that preceded systematic reasoning.”⁵⁷ For Merton, the “true self” is immanent in (and thus largely inseparable from) the ground of Being: “The rock, all matter, all life is charged with dharmakaya. Everything is emptiness and everything is compassion.”⁵⁸ As such, it would be no great stretch to say that in Merton’s thought the “true self” *is* mystical experience. And by considering the “true self” in this way, we see that the mystical endeavor is a journey from nothing to nothing. Spurred by the dreadful realization that one has no ultimate substance and is thus pure nothingness, the individual embarks on the mystical journey—a journey that reaches its climax when one becomes pure divine nothingness and is subsumed ecstatically into God or the ground of Being. Merton describes the process:

The self is void indeed, but void in the sense of the apophatic mystics like John of the Cross...the nothingness of the self that is entirely empty of fictitious images, projects and desires, becomes the *todo* (all) in which the freedom of love discovers itself in its transcendent Ground and source.⁵⁹

It is precisely because the false self is empty that one can realize the true self, which consists in this union with the underlying ground of Being. The “freedom” that Merton speaks of is rooted in the existentialist credo of existence preceding essence. One can make over one’s essence by freely choosing to live in love alone.

what Bataille calls “estrangement” and what Merton describes as “the split and alienation” of the “subject” that has become “aware of itself as a quasi-object.” See Georges Bataille, *Theory of Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991).

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ross Labrie, “Consciousness and Being,” in *Thomas Merton and the Inclusive Imagination* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2001), 53.

⁵⁸ Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1973), 233. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper, Merton frequently uses Buddhist (and especially Ch’an and Zen Buddhist) ideas of the self and contemplation to clarify his own interpretations of Christian mysticism. Cf. especially *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* and *Mystics and Zen Masters*.

⁵⁹ Thomas Merton, “The Other Side of Despair,” 269.

It is clear that Merton's understanding of the human condition is fundamentally the same as that of Gregory, Origen, and other apophatic writers in the Christian mystical tradition.⁶⁰ But the ways in which Merton uses Freud, Sartre, Kierkegaard, and Heidegger to create a more nuanced explanation of the false self demonstrate his intent of adapting modern thought in such a way as to make humanity's modern self estrangement something "more tractable."⁶¹ He attempts to shed light on humanity's self-estrangement by using modern conceptual frameworks. After all, these modern frameworks explain humanity's *current* situation, which Merton believes is distinct from earlier Christian epochs. We have seen the starting point (dread and nothingness) and ending point (divine nothingness) of the mystical endeavor. We can now fill in the middle points of his theory of modern mysticism and move on to examine the union of apophatic thought and existentialism in Thomas Merton's notion of mystical progress.

III. The Union of Apophatic Thought and Existentialism in Mystical Progress

Central to Christian mysticism is the idea that one mystical experience does not make one a mystic; rather, mystical states of consciousness act as waypoints on a graded path toward a radical reorientation of the self in the divine. For this reason, Christian mystical treatises are commonly structured as step-by-step guides to the attainment of this transformation.⁶² Merton's mystical thought is no exception to this trend. In fact, his notion of mystical progress varies minimally (if at all) from traditional notions. But with his ideas of mystical progress as with his anthropology, Merton's originality lays not in the content of his thought but in the way that he presents the material. He weds the fundamental existential concepts of "nothingness," "dread," and "freedom" to a pervasive emphasis on apophatic theology to create a hybrid that integrates the Christian mystical tradition with modern thought.

I suggest that Merton's emphasis on apophatic theology as the primary route to mystical experience relates to his understanding of the type of "false self" that modernity creates. We have already seen how Merton feels that the modern "false self" is more deeply rooted than previous "false selves" because of the many ways that it is reified in social life and the general philosophical orientation of the modern West. Because of how deeply rooted the false self is, the realization of its falsity is more difficult and requires much purgation. Most importantly, moderns require the purgation of false notions of God that hinder intuitive union. Merton argues consistently that the modern philosophical orientation saddles people with abstract, notional ideas of God and the self. He emphasizes apophatic thought in order to counterbalance modern,

⁶⁰ For Merton, "the difference between the apophatic and cataphatic schools consists in the language each uses to describe mystical union rather than in the nature of the experience described,"—in other words, the cataphatic school is no less efficacious in describing or engendering mystical experience than the apophatic tradition, if used properly. But the apophatic tradition has historically been linked to purification, which Merton clearly sees as necessary to combat the modern mentality.

⁶¹ Merton, "Vocation and Modern Thought," 53.

⁶² Cf. Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle: The Classic Text with a Spiritual Commentary* (New York: Christian Classics, 2007). Also John of the Cross, "The Ascent of Mount Carmel," and "the Dark Night," in *The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross* (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1990).

overly rational and notional concepts of God. This technique, of using apophatic language to combat sterile and rational ideas of God is not unique to Merton. As Wayne Proudfoot points out, apophatic descriptions of divinity (those that emphasize its “ineffability”) often serve in mystical thought as “formal operator[s], or placeholder[s], systematically excluding any differentiating description or predicates that might be proposed.” They “maintain, and perhaps even create, a sense of mystery” and are “prescriptive and evocative rather than descriptive or analytical.”⁶³ In other words, apophatic descriptions of God are not descriptions at all—they simply block the application of conceptual predicates to God. And this is exactly what Merton seeks most of all to do in his mystical theology: to undo Descartes’ emphasis on rationality (“consciousness of”) and all the discursive, conceptual ways that moderns define (and thus experience) God. Merton never explicitly states that this is his purpose in emphasizing apophatic theology. However, the suggestion that his extensive use of apophatic thought serves to refute impoverished and overly abstract definitions of God seems to follow naturally from his fundamental assumptions. This use of apophatic theology would thus be similar to his use of existentialism—as a way of unraveling the seemingly intractable modern “false self.”

A number of Merton scholars have noted his extensive reliance on the apophatic tradition: “viewed as a corpus...Merton’s writings exhibit a marked preference for the apophatic tradition. Symbols of darkness and night appear more frequently...than symbols of light.”⁶⁴ Merton himself suggests a rationale for his use of apophatic theology in a late essay: in the modern world, “even well-ordered and productive lives conceal an abyss of irrationality, confusion, pointlessness, and indeed of apparent chaos.”⁶⁵ Awareness of this state relates in his thought to the apophatic tradition, and it serves as the foundation for mystical progress.

For Merton, the mystical journey begins and ends with nothingness—a negative, empty nothingness at the beginning, and a positive nothingness at the end in which the individual’s “*nada*” becomes the “*todo*,” united in God. As we have seen above, existential dread catalyzes the individual’s turn toward God. Dread consists of two elements: first, an awareness of one’s own nothingness and contingency; and second, the realization that by living in the illusory “false self,” one shirks the exigencies of existence (namely, freedom and self-realization).⁶⁶ Merton’s use of Sartre in his description of dread serves as a way of opposing the nothingness of dread to the positive nothingness that accompanies

⁶³ Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985), 127-129.

⁶⁴ Teahan, “A Dark and Empty Way,” 268.

⁶⁵ Thomas Merton, “Final Integration: Toward a Monastic Therapy,” in *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 206.

⁶⁶ Merton, *Climate of Monastic Prayer*, 130-131.

mystical union. He writes, "Sartre's *neant* [nothingness]" is "blank, godless nothingness."⁶⁷ This initial awareness of nothingness is opposed to the summit of inner experience, mystical union, in which an unknowing, non-discursive "true self" unites with God. Dread plays a central role in Merton's mystical thought because, aware of the "inner waste within" one's soul is "emptied and humbled," and this purgation is a prerequisite for the Holy Spirit to move the soul toward mystical union.⁶⁸ Thus dread, a concept Merton borrows from existentialism, serves a purgative function similar to that of apophatic theology. In fact, Merton links the function of existential dread to apophatic theology explicitly in *Ascent to Truth* as he quotes John of the Cross saying "in order to arrive at being everything, desire to be nothing."⁶⁹ He sees this as describing the role of dread (realization of nothingness) in apophatic theology.

In addition to inducing a turn toward God, existential dread serves a second preparatory function in the mystical quest as it leads to the "dark night" that renders the soul ready for mystical union. This idea is obviously culled from apophatic theology; in fact, Merton takes it directly from John of the Cross, the early modern Spanish mystic who wrote of the purifying functions of the existential pain that accompanies periods of spiritual aridity. But again, Merton describes the "dark night," in existentialist terms in order to make its nature and function more accessible to moderns. After first allowing seekers to taste his "sweetness," God induces the "dark night of the soul."⁷⁰ While the first experience of existential dread (described above), which Merton equates with John of the Cross' "night of the senses," enables individuals to become aware of their ontological insufficiency, the "dark night of the soul" rids them of the false self by forcing them to realize painfully that such a self is incompatible with divine union. It is "a very painful state in which [individuals'] own wishes, their self esteem, their aggressivity, and so on are systematically humiliated."⁷¹ Merton links this process of self-abandonment that occurs during the dark night to the importance of the intuitive experience of the divine. He writes that the perceived "darkness" of the dark night is actually "pure light" but that it is perceived as darkness by "sense and reason."⁷² In other words, the dark night of the soul is "directly induced by God," and is an outpouring of pure, divine light.⁷³ But because this light cannot be apprehended by "sense and reason," it is experienced as a time of harrowing darkness and spiritual aridity. Because of this, the "dark night" purifies: it enables the aspiring mystic to realize that "ego" and selfish personal desire have become tied up in her quest for union—in other words, that

⁶⁷ Merton, "The Other Side of Despair," 269.

⁶⁸ Merton, *Climate of Monastic Prayer*, 62; 55.

⁶⁹ Merton, *Ascent to Truth*, 53.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 188. This idea is also expressed in similar terms in *Climate of Monastic Prayer*, 62, and is well summarized by Teahan in "A Dark and Empty Way," 273.

⁷¹ Merton, *Climate of Monastic Prayer*, 62.

⁷² Merton, *Ascent to Truth*, 188.

⁷³ Teahan, "A Dark and Empty Way," 272.

she has not yet given up the personal will. To see how Merton's reading puts a modern spin on the apophatic idea of the "dark night," we can turn to the original text by John of the Cross:

The dark night is an inflow of God into the soul that purges it of its habitual ignorances and imperfections, natural and spiritual. It produces two...effects in the soul: It prepares the soul for the union with God...by both purging and illumining it....When the dark night strikes souls not yet entirely illumined, it causes spiritual darkness, for it not only surpasses them but also darkens their act of understanding.⁷⁴

Mystical experience cannot occur without the abandonment of the will made possible by the dark night. Here we see the role of passivity in Merton's mysticism: "The faculties of the soul remain passive...when they are absorbed by God in rapture and lose all power to move themselves."⁷⁵ Not only does passivity play an important role in the dark night of the soul (after all, it is an action of grace; God decides when to induce it) but also in mystical experience itself, as the soul and its willing power get subsumed into the Godhead.

Thus, in the intermediate stages of the mystical journey, Merton weds existentialist thought to apophatic theology. The ideas he culls from existentialism complement his apophatic theology and prepare the aspiring mystic for experiential, intuitive knowledge of God. Teahan claims that "Merton recognized that negative theology lacks the clarity and precision of conventional epistemological endeavors."⁷⁶ Especially in the modern age (in which Merton believes that experiences of the divine are limited by rationalism and arid intellectualism), there exists the danger that even apophatic theology can become a meaningless set of concepts. But by coupling his use of apophatic darkness with very modern (and widespread) descriptions of experiential states, Merton clears the way for a more visceral, experiential knowledge of God. Existentialist thought enables him to assert time and time again that the mystical quest is not just an intellectual one, but one deeply rooted in affective, intuitive, and seemingly irrational states. As Ross Labrie aptly puts it, Merton finds in existentialism a means of "mediating the particular [the individual] and the universal [mystical union]."⁷⁷ Simply put, Merton complements traditional apophatic darkness with existentialism because doing so makes apophatic theology vivid to a generation of moderns not accustomed to the visceral, intuitive power of the *via negativa*.

Merton also roots his descriptions of the pinnacle of mystical experience in apophatic theology. By explaining "transcendent experience" in terms of apophatic theology, he again emphasizes the idea that the illusory "ego-self" created by modern culture is utterly incompatible with mystical union. He writes, "mystical possession of God takes place

⁷⁴ John of the Cross, "The Dark Night," in *Light From Light: An Anthology of Christian Mysticism*, ed. Louis Dupres and James Wiseman (New York: Paulist Press, 2001), 348-349.

⁷⁵ Merton, *Ascent to Truth*, 190.

⁷⁶ Teahan, "A Dark and Empty Way," 266.

⁷⁷ Labrie, "Consciousness and Being," 51.

in deepest darkness."⁷⁸ It does so because since the fall of Adam and Eve, humanity's non-sensory faculties have been obscured—thus, what in reality is the brightest of all possible light is perceived as darkness. The experience of the mystical summit is everything that the experience of the "false self" in the world is not:

This form of consciousness assumes a totally different kind of self-awareness from that of the Cartesian thinking-self which is its own justification and center...the metaphysical intuition of Being is...of a ground of openness, a kind of ontological openness and an infinite generosity which communicates itself to everything that is.⁷⁹

Thus true self is realized in this state of union. The false self is discontinuous from the world, imprisoned within its own ego (an imprisonment made worse in modern times) and has no authentic will. In comparison, the true self is also empty—but in a positive sense. It is in the world (actually, in Being, of which the world is just a part), and it realizes that it participates in an eternally kenotic ground of Being and unity. The self finally has a real will, because it has abdicated its will to God. The mystic pursuit ends in nothingness and emptiness just as it began there: "True emptiness is that which transcends all things and yet is immanent in all. For what seems to be emptiness is in this case pure Being."⁸⁰ The difference between the two kinds of emptiness is that the latter, the "ground of Being," is suffused with divinity, a constant emanation of pure goodness. By way of contrast, negative emptiness is the awareness of the "ground of Being," but in a way that is not suffused with the divine emptiness. In this negative emptiness, one realizes that all created things are contingent, dependent, and empty of individual meaning. This is the "godless nothingness" that individuals arrive at through non-theistic contemplation. It is disordered, chaotic, and terrifying.⁸¹ Thus it is only through the abdication of the will to God that one can realize the eternal benevolent outpouring that gives rise to Being. In describing the summit of mystical experience, then, Merton again couples apophatic theology with existentialist terms and concepts in order to make the mystical endeavor understandable and attainable to the modern reader. As such, his description of the mystical experience ends up being a description of everything that the everyday self is *not*.

In every stage of Thomas Merton's conception of the mystical endeavor he links apophatic thought inextricably with existentialism. On one level, this technique is rooted in his critique of modernity. The continued centrality of the Cartesian concept of the self (that "solipsistic bubble," as Merton calls it) in modern thought creates an insurmountable

⁷⁸ Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 135.

⁷⁹ Merton, "The New Consciousness," 24.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁸¹ Cf. Georges Bataille's non-theistic mysticism. Bataille's mystical states are often marked by anguish and horror—which he says are necessary aspects of an intellectually honest mystical experience. Interestingly, Merton and Bataille share many common philosophical assumptions (especially in their critiques of modernity, affinity for apophatic thought, and ideas of the self) but their mysticisms could not be farther removed from each other. A comparative study of these two fellows would be fruitful, I believe.

obstacle to a substantial relationship with God. The modern emphasis on rationality precludes existential and experiential knowledge of God. And finally, consumerism and the comforts of society serve as palliatives that prevent people from experiencing the anguish and dread that catalyze a turn toward God.

Merton's understanding of modern mysticism has at its basis the metahistorical theory of different, unique Christian epochs that Merton expresses in *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*. Because of the modern condition and the "new Christian consciousness," the apophatic tradition suits individuals better in this epoch. Merton himself attributes this to the purgative functions that apophatic theology serves. But it can be understood even better in light of Wayne Proudfoot's description of the linguistic function of claims of divine ineffability (which, by extension, can be applied to apophatic thought in general)—that they serve as placeholders that prohibit the application of conceptual predicates to God. Since Merton's project is to use modern thought in ways that make it possible to unmake the modern individual, it makes perfect sense for him to emphasize apophatic theology. One of the main ills of the modern orientation, he argues, is that because of its emphasis on rational, systematic thinking, today's conception of God is tarnished. Abstract philosophizing about God has progressed at the expense of intuitive, experiential apprehension of his nature and the nature of Being, and Merton attempts through apophatic theology to jettison the misleading predicates and concepts that moderns apply to God.

Because the "Cartesian consciousness" is deeply rooted, Merton proceeds with caution in his use of apophatic thought—he must avoid the danger of apophatic theology becoming yet another empty verbal formulation. In order to do so, he consistently employs existential thought. Through discussions of states of existential dread—which moderns are well acquainted with, he elucidates the functioning of the self and how the self can be united in God. Existentialism, Freudian understandings of the self, and psychoanalysis in general thus serve as mediators in Merton's thought between the universal and the particular and as bridges that span the chasm separating moderns from the age-old traditions of Christian mysticism. For Merton, existentialism is useful because it is not an abstract philosophy but rather a system of thought based in experience; it forces the individual to experience helplessness, insufficiency, and above all, dread, and thus catalyzes the turn toward God. Merton also uses it to describe the "dark night of the senses" and the "dark night of the soul," thus making the centuries-old thought of John of the Cross more understandable to moderns. Finally, he uses existential thought to describe what he calls the ground of Being—a concept that he articulates through the thought of Heidegger, but which essentially varies little from similar ideas presented in earlier Christian mysticism, especially John of the Cross. Merton's writings on mysticism thus show the clear desire to fight fire with fire—to undo the stultifying

modern condition of humanity by using the insights of modern social critics, philosophers, and psychologists to challenge those widely accepted definitions of self and God that limit modern individuals' ability to experience divine union.

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