

COSMOSOPHIA

THE DWELLING OF THE DIVINE IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD

BY

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to Patricia Plouffe St. Onge
without her neither this
nor anything else
is thinkable

If you have seen a lover of God you have seen a very wonderful thing—of one in grief not settling in the earth but like a wild bird whose delight in solitude has kept him from rest, while he yearns in remembrance of the Beloved, and his food is love in hunger and his drink is love in thirst and his sleep is the thought of union and his waking hours mean no neglect. . . . At last through love (shawq) and long service he attains to the degree of all-absorbing love, then his tranquility returns and his fire dies down and its sparks are quenched and his grief decreases and he becomes one with the object of his longing.

—BAYDĀ BINT AL-MUFADDAL
A WOMAN SAINT OF DAMASCUS (C. TWELFTH CENTURY)
FROM MERTON'S READING NOTEBOOKS

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This work hopefully resonates my wonder and awe in the presence of God, not because it simply presents intricacies of theological reflection but the personal experience of a life becoming more conscious of aspiring toward the Mystery—lived in and with the Holy.

Since my high school days, I have cherished and grown from my connection with the men of the Cistercian community. Abbot Mark Delery now deceased, our spiritual father, and the monks of Holy Cross Abbey; Father Kevin Hunt Sensei, my teacher and mentor in the Zen tradition and the brothers of St. Joseph's Abbey; Father James Connor, retreat master and a friend of Merton and the monks at Gethsemani; Father Basil Pennington and Abbot Thomas Keating, cofounder and leader of the Centering Prayer movement with whom I studied Christian meditation and *lectio divina*; Father Robert Kennedy, SJ, Roshi who led my first Zen sesshin in the Soto tradition; the Benedictine Monks at Weston Priory, akin in steadfast fidelity to the

Monks of Tibhirine, have been an ongoing inspiration. They exemplify the possibilities for a life of contemplation and action in the Catholic Church of the West.

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PREFACE

There is a perceived crisis of identity in Christian life in our postmodern world. The crisis is in the realm of praxis or discipleship, in the doing of one's faith. A primordial innocence once awakened and nourished by religion seems to be overrun by a postmodern generation increasingly riveted and mesmerized by technology and myriad short term agendas inherent in consumerism. It is understandable in a climate of mockery, quick ridicule and contempt, that the best of theologians and teachers find it difficult not to despair of passing on the wisdom of ancient tradition. "Do not give your poetry to a non-poet," might easily be a heart's reprise.

Nearly five decades ago, a church council committed itself to being a dynamic, living tradition vibrantly responsive to the signs of modern times. The council urged a renewal and reinvigoration of its members by learning from "companions of ours in the human condition" who faithfully followed Christ (*Lumen Gentium 50*).

Less than ten years later, nearly four decades ago, Pope Paul VI urged the Cistercians to help the Church re-find its contemplative dimension. That directive still holds today. We need to recover, not uncritically, the mystical tradition and its resources.

This dissertation is predicated on the certitude that Teilhard de Chardin, Thomas Merton and Raimon Panikkar are some of our best faithful companions. They have much to teach us about the human condition, Ultimate Mystery and Christ who radically images the meaning of both.

This project looks to the three figures as theologians of the mystical tradition and proposes the reclamation and rendering of their mature christologies. This thesis does not pretend to offer conclusive answers. On the contrary, the attempt is to reframe the important

question(s). It suggests that there is significant promise in reaffirming the transcendent dignity of human persons everywhere.

Each of these illustrious figures, briefly explored here, presents capacious, imaginative, even seemingly mercurial approaches in their realms of poetics and contemplative experience, mystically envisioned. Each employs language they have coined to speak of the Unspeakable. Each contributes to the christological and trinitarian discourse in their own bold, unique way.

Teilhard presents a spirituality of love by envisioning indestructible meaning in the divine functions of an evolutionary cosmology. His live sense of universal relationships of interdependence helps us to become increasingly aware that we are organically part of the universe. As such, each “part” in any field of inquiry makes sense only within the whole context of events proceeding through time.

Merton’s wisdom inspired Christology offers a captivating and irresistible narrative, reconceptualizing the essential presence of God in the world and humankind’s eternal grandeur. In his Sophia is knitted the biblical and patristic categories of creation, incarnation, grace and divinization. For these reasons, Merton’s is the sustaining ikon fortifying this thesis.

Raimon Panikkar’s cosmotheandric intuition breaks open traditional categories to get to the mystical core of Christian life. His “Radical Trinity” proposes this as the universal structure of Reality. In other words, “Being,” for Panikkar, “is trinitarian.” This implies very open-ended ramifications for a mutating tradition. A converging global matrix requires a new myth.

All three of these visionaries provide continuity with the Christian tradition. In their narratives, the traditional center “holds” while allowing their creative imaginations to animate their contemplative intuition for novel discoveries. Their gift to us is that each articulates that it

is only God who is able to guarantee immortality for person and community; only this loving, present, personal Center is able to set in motion a love capable of embracing the entire human community as well as the cosmos. These are precisely the divine functions within each of these writer's myths.

Would that such vision and passion infuse new vitality into our own religious imagination and awaken us to new hope for realization of that which Is. In this regard, perhaps Merton said it best. We paraphrase: "From now on sisters and brothers, we all have to stand on our own two feet!" What counts ultimately is not what you say or think but what you experience. No one understood this better than Thomas Merton in the twentieth century and perhaps Panikkar in the twenty-first. "My aspiration does not consist so much in defending my truth," said Panikkar, "but rather in living it out." Raimon Panikkar died on August 26, 2010, as I completed this dissertation.

Ewert Cousins died as I began writing this paper in the aftermath of many hours spent gleaning much from a master in loving pursuit of Wisdom. Huston Smith said this of Cousins, "Not many academicians can be credited with founding a new sub-discipline in their field, but with 'world spirituality'—a phrase that joins breadth (the world) with depth (spirituality)—Ewert Cousins has done just that."¹†

Dr. Cousins introduced me to his friend and colleague Raimon Panikkar in Barcelona at the 2004 Parliament of the World's Religions. Both Cousins' and Panikkar's paths were dedicated entirely to the search of the Source in which their spirits now rest.

† Huston Smith, "Conversations on Global Spirituality in honor of Ewert Cousins" in *Doors of Understanding: The Intellectual Mysticism of Meister Eckhart* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 203.

ABBREVIATIONS

Titles of Texts Used in References

<i>RB</i>	<i>The Rhythm of Being</i>
<i>WDCS</i>	<i>The New Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality</i>
<i>FW</i>	<i>The Future of Wisdom</i>
<i>C21</i>	<i>Christ of the 21st Century</i>
<i>T21</i>	<i>Teilhard in the 21st Century: The Emerging Spirit of Earth</i>
<i>TF</i>	<i>Toward the Future</i>
<i>HP</i>	<i>The Human Phenomenon</i>
<i>HB</i>	<i>How I Believe</i>
<i>HM</i>	<i>The Heart of the Matter</i>
<i>HU</i>	<i>Hymn of the Universe</i>
<i>SL</i>	<i>The Silent Lamp</i>
<i>MT</i>	<i>The Monks of Tibhirine</i>
<i>ICP</i>	<i>The Intercultural Challenge of Raimon Panikkar</i>
<i>CY</i>	<i>Christophany: The Fullness of Man</i>
<i>MCU</i>	<i>The Myth of Christian Uniqueness</i>

Abbreviations

Works by and about Merton for Chapters VI and VII

AJ	<i>The Asian Journal of Merton</i> (1973)
BT	<i>The Behavior of Titans</i> (1961)
BW	<i>Bread in the Wilderness</i> (1953)
CGB	<i>Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander</i> (1966)
CT	<i>The Courage for Truth</i> (1993)
CWA	<i>Contemplation in a World of Action</i> (1971)
DQ	<i>Disputed Questions</i> (1960)
DWL	<i>Dancing in the Water of Life</i> (1997)
ESF	<i>Emblems of a Season of Fury</i> (1963)
FV	<i>Faith and Violence</i> (1968)
GNV	<i>Gandhi on NonViolence</i> (1965)
HGL	<i>The Hidden Ground of Love</i> (1985)
ICM	<i>An Introduction to Christian Mysticism</i> (2008)
LE	<i>The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton</i> (1981)
LL	<i>Love and Living</i> (1979)
LTL	<i>Learning to Love</i> (1997)
MHPH	<i>Merton and Hesychasm: Prayer of the Heart</i> (2003)
MZM	<i>Mystics and Zen Masters</i> (1967)
NM	<i>The New Man</i> (1961)
NSC	<i>New Seeds of Contemplation</i> (1962)

Abbreviations

OB	<i>Opening the Bible</i> (1970)
RU	<i>Raids on the Unspeakable</i> (1960)
SD	<i>Seeds of Destruction</i> (1964)
SFS	<i>A Search for Solitude</i> (1996)
SJ	<i>The Sign of Jonas</i> (1953)
SSM	<i>The Seven Storey Mountain</i> (1948)
STM	<i>Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton</i> (2009)
TME	<i>The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia</i> (2002)
TTW	<i>Turning Toward the World</i> (1997)
WCT	<i>The Way of Chuang Tzu</i> (1965)
WF	<i>Witness to Freedom</i> (1994)
ZBA	<i>Zen and the Birds of Appetite</i> (1968)

Other Works

ED	<i>An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine</i> (John Henry Newman)
GA	<i>An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent</i> (John Henry Newman)
HW	<i>Holiness in Words</i> (Edward K. Kaplan)
MRT	<i>Modern Russian Theology</i> (Paul Valliere)
OUS	<i>Fifteen Sermons Preached Before the University of Oxford</i> (John Henry Newman)

I. INTRODUCTION

A. The Aim:

What I am saying in this thesis is not something new. The aim is to convey a wisdom germinating for millennia by highlighting ancestral insights that happen to vibrate in Chinese wisdom and among mystics of Christian, Muslim and many other persuasions. The vantage point of the present moment allows us the honor of being heirs to wisdoms and insights decanted over the centuries.

This in turn means that a treatment confined to a single paper must be impressionistic and selective: nevertheless, this may turn out to be an advantage rather than the reverse, in letting us go to the heart of the matter.

What is original on my part, is my gathering from the fecund field of human experience of ancients and contemporaries. The ideas expressed herein reflect my deep respect for these sources. They inform, and mostly are the fruit of, my personal experience. This has been subsequently cross-checked and criticized by the wisdom of those whom I have read or listened to and with whom I have had the privilege of being personally and creatively engaged.

B. The Motive:

While the topic is deep and wide and pursuing it would seem perhaps futile, a few motives have influenced my decision to go forward. The topic is personal: Confronted with the Ultimately Real, I cannot be satisfied with arrivals that are partial. The topic is intellectual: A philosophical inquiry of Reality, unlike other disciplines, involves a vision of all of it. Yet, contrary to being what appears to be complicated, this vision can be stated rather simply with true significance for

people's lives. Human wisdom is understandable to all because it involves us all. The topic is political: I am conscious of the human predicament that discourages and mistrusts *transformation*. The public is encouraged to increase *information* access and be better *formed* in their own specialized areas. This strategy well serves the dominant culture but also eclipses provisions for holistic views of Reality and our personal calling for freedom. Our dignity is inherent in the freedom grounded on this Reality.

C. The Context:

The context of this paper is the situation of contemporary persons in our world. The complexities of our modern technocratic culture have busied people out of any sense of the cosmic or mystical dimensions of life. Mass media has co-opted serious political, ethical and societal discussions by debating, complaining about, attacking or defending systems within a limited circumference. At times this comes with the residue of a metaphysic but mostly it is of individualistic concern. The universal God seems only tolerable within the horizon of the private domain. This is the self-contradiction of our time.

Where is the coherent narrative of our cosmic meaning? Early humans had an orientation in life with an intentionality toward the Whole. Myths of human heavenly destiny informed our efforts. The meaningfulness of history and a God manifested in it have become increasingly questioned and less credible. The major myths humans held dear are contracting, becoming exhausted and collapsing.

Nearly ninety percent of the American indigenous groups have vanished. Two billion people live in substandard conditions. On the heels of the most violent century in history, we are seemingly promised the safeguard of technocratic globalization to fix very human ailments.

Our species cannot afford to be myopic or grandiose by acting as if the whole point of nature's multibillion year evolution project on earth stopped with us. We may be setting ourselves up for an eventual shock when someday we grasp the wholeness of nature. That is to say, when we accept the machine worldview of wholes assembled from replacement parts and count on instant replays, a deeper awareness is stolen from us. Our state of awareness will influence what comes next on earth. Would that we begin to develop awareness corresponding to our impact, a wisdom in balance with and even exceeding our power.

This deeper awareness regards perhaps the most mysterious aspect of parts and wholes found in nature, "The part is a place for the presencing of the whole."¹ As physicist Henri Bortoft says, "Everything is in everything."² Contemplative praxis deepens consciousness, expands awareness and cultivates the best opportunity to experience self as both a part of the whole and the whole.

The belief in God or some other saving power embedded in history is no longer alluring for many. The common denominator for humanity today is a pan disenchantment with a confused orientation. We are searching for an intuition capable of orienting us in life. This intuition is not necessarily about clear ideas because it is not about concepts. Rather, it is about the ability to orient self to ultimate questions. The attitude behind this approach is one of being known, realized and assimilated. This wisdom of direct experience is named by different cultures in a variety of ways including the vision of the third eye, religious faith and mystical experience.

¹ Peter Senge, et al., *Presence: Human Purpose and the Field of the Future* (New York: Doubleday, 2005, first edition, 2004), 7.

² *Ibid.*

D. The Bias:

This paper is written by a Roman Catholic thus from a perspective within the Christian tradition. The author is married with two adult children. His upbringing and education were influenced by mostly a North American culture. This paper is biased in its commission as well. Its epistemological approach will super-value experiential knowing, suggesting that deepening and broadening our consciousness will be the centerpiece of a new Christian wisdom.

The bias of this paper is that the Divine dwells here and now. Hope is possible now. It is not about the future. Hope ensues from the simple regard of the invisible inner dimension of reality. This dimension is accessed by contemplative vision and awakening to the discovery of hidden meaning in the present moment.

Reality is not limited to the visible and rational universe. It is telling that our culture lacks hope or enthusiasm for life while advancing the illusion of being in control by manipulating the surface of things as if the world is malleable upon request.

The cultivation of the contemplative core intuition offers a pneumatic approach for direct experience of life that transforms our lives and incorporates us into the destiny of the universe igniting hope that is sustainable. The human spirit is not satisfied with less than the whole of reality but intuits that its most intimate nature is mysteriously an aspect of ultimate reality and must continue the quest on the edge of one's life.

E. The Method:***1. Becoming Pure of Heart***

I say on the edge of one's life to convey the ontological requirement of being in harmony within oneself, the immediate context of one's local environment and the cosmos. This is the language

of being which is the language of movement and dynamic development. Thus, being is not static or sedentary. Rather, being is really *be-ing*, that is, *becoming*. These verbs indicate the process of creation. It is the harmonic vibration of mutual reciprocal flourishing. It is the musical silence of loving Presence. “God is absolute letting-be, and letting-be is the ontological foundation of love.”³

Being “lets-be.” This letting-be of Being is a prior condition to anything that is. Being is “more beingful, in the sense that ‘isness’ is swallowed up in ‘letting-be.’”⁴ This is the situation we need to discover, and most importantly, it is the situation we need to engage in: to let individual and collective becoming be more in rhythm with the rhythm of Being.

Sufis constantly repeat the traditional Islamic saying, “He who knows himself knows the Lord.” Meister Eckhart iterates this charge, “He who knows himself knows all things” so, “Know yourself.”⁵ Several traditions speak of cleansing the mirror of the self, the sacred emblem of the Divine. The mature contemplative aspires to become transparent, that is to say, empty of preconceived notions and void of selfishness to experience self and observe reality with a pure heart.

This enterprise connotes both an intellectual and spiritual discipline bringing one into participatory awareness in harmony with the reality of the present moment. The Beatitudes of Jesus in Matthew 8 suggests that the entire reality will be experienced, “The pure in heart shall see God.” Kierkegaard says that purity of heart is to will one thing. “The Good always wishes

³ John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1977, first edition, 1966), 141.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 302.

⁵ Meister Eckhart, *Vom Edlen Menschen*, DW V, 498 as cited in Panikkar, *The Rhythm of Being*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2010), 34.

one and the same thing. But it reckons with exactness and can be that which demands sincerity and can see whether it is present!” Moreover, “Eternity asks solely about faithfulness, and with equal earnestness it asks this of the king and of the most wretched of all sufferers.”⁶

The sanctity of the mature contemplative is a pure heart. This fruitful wisdom empowers creative participation in the rhythm of Reality.⁷ The human community desperately needs this adequacy. Cultivating it requires a tranquility of spirit honed by a discipline of silence that inclines the ear of the heart to be in tune and in harmony with Reality’s dynamism. In this way, masters of the spirit remind us that we can reflect and shape reality without blemishing it. The *Chung Yung* says, “Only the most absolute sincerity under heaven can effect any change.”⁸ A Merton aside caught on audio tape while teaching novice monks at the Abbey of Gethsemani heads in the same direction, “A little sincerity goes a long way!”

2. *The Approach and Intent*

These pages represent a way for me to language a subject proven to transcend the powers of my intellect for all ultimate questions cannot have final answers. My voyage into the heart of human belief and meaning continues to pique the limits of my understanding and rouses my awareness of the problem herein presented.

This project is at times written in a theo-poetic or mytho-poetic register. The ground of my thought is spiritual experience filtered through metaphysical reflection. The perspective of this paper attempts to transcend a mono-cultural vision to convey an intercultural sensibility. At

⁶ Soren Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing* (New York: Harper & Row, First edition 1956), 201, 210.

⁷ Raimon Panikkar, *The Rhythm of Being* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2010) 36; hereafter, RB.

⁸ *Chung Yung*, 23 (Ezra Pound’s translation) as cited in RB, 35.

this historical juncture, it is vital to integrate the ways of thinking of other contemporaries to fashion an intelligible language so that our thinking and sharing remain dialogical.

The pretext and intent avows to be contemplative. “No word should be uttered if not out of contemplation, but no contemplation is possible if it is not the fruit of action....experience needs to be expressed and interpreted. Expressions are contingent and interpretations are not infallible.”⁹

We are at a time of vague and tentative post modern approaches to religion. Alternative attempts to diagnose our human religious condition and meet our spiritual requirements need to be offered. Remaining insular and provincial, whether on the level of either intellectual or spiritual practice, simply keeps many Westerners unaware of the extensive religious material, thinking and experience available in other areas of our world. We must not squander our world’s inherited wisdom or abdicate our responsibility for human fullness. It must be possible to present a vision of Reality that emerges out of long years of prayer and reflection, developed in awareness of and in dialogue with the long history of reflection about the Ultimate in the East and in the West.

3. A Holistic Attempt

This is an effort to reach the Whole through immediate contact. To prepare ourselves to open to the Whole which pervades us. It is the deep interior journey of contemplation.

a) Three Way Approach

Being mindful and attentive to Reality, the approach attempts to get past impressions and to the core of that which is presented. Methods are phenomenological, metaphysical and sophianic.

⁹ Ibid., xxxi.

1. *Historical*: Whether interpreted from an eastern or western perspective, we are temporal beings. Because we move in a historical context, our vision of the universe has been qualified and stipulated by the human experience of time. The rich and complex past emerging into our present is an intrinsic factor of our human existence. However, important as the disciplines of history and sociology are to our understanding of the human milieu, they only give a survey summary and do not come close to exhausting human experience and/or reality.
2. *Philosophical*: This inquiry method makes necessary meditation, reflection and thought regarding knowing the “truth of things.” Philosophers need some detachment and solitude, not for specialized knowledge of details like other disciplines, but to struggle with a human knowledge of reality that requires transcending the inertia of the mind and overcoming proprietary thinking. However, philosophy is rooted in history and cannot be isolated. The philosopher cannot attempt his craft outside of a tradition pretending to be self-sufficient.
3. *Sophianic*: The first two approaches are ingredient in this paper, however, the primary approach is sophianic. Wisdom is the mystical core of philosophy. Raimon Panikkar says it this way; “Sensual knowledge puts the fruit in our hands, rational knowledge breaks it open and eventually cuts it into pieces so that it may be more understandable, but intellectual or spiritual knowledge eats and assimilates the fruit so that it may nurture our lives.”¹⁰ He continues, “What we seek is an experience that transforms our lives and incorporates us into the destiny of the universe. We are looking for an intuition capable of giving us an orientation in life, even if for the time being, for our being in time.”¹¹

¹⁰ RB, 21.

¹¹ Ibid.

Our sophianic approach embraces stewarding two major problematics of our time: a metaphysical grounding on which to envision humanity's destiny burdened with a clear challenge of converting from a culture of war, in whatever form, to a culture of peace; and, how we envision the Ultimate Mystery. These are unbearable burdens veiling unspeakable gifts. The irony in the ultimate journey to the real is that there *is* no way. All paths are part of the reality for which we search. Real wisdom is the experience of "*no where*" else to go except for "*now*" and "*here*." This is the "Gateless Gate" of Christ who said, "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life,"¹² revealing that the real way *is* Truth which *is* Life. This raises questions around usual methods of research and habits of thinking. To open ourselves to the Reality permeating us, requires the deepest contemplative sense that reflects the image of the reality of the Whole. The attempt here is a non-dual epistemology by way of immediate contact with the Mystery of the Whole.

The state of soul, mind and consciousness depicted in the biblical Garden Story¹³ raises two primordial human questions: "Who am I?" and "Where am I?"¹⁴ These questions the questioner asks in the context of the Questioned. These questions are related to Christ's question reverberating throughout twenty centuries of history: "Who do you say that I am?"¹⁵ At a tipping point in world history occasioned by a new cosmology of an expanding universe and the

¹² John 14:6.

¹³ Genesis 3:22-24.

¹⁴ These are themes the Cistercian Thomas Keating has consistently reiterated in his addresses to Contemplative Outreach audiences since founding and leading this organization whose educational and formational mission is to advance the "method-less" method of Centering Prayer--now global in its reach.

¹⁵ Mark 8:27.

emergence of a consciousness of planetary proportions, this question presents with new urgency: Who is Christ for us today?

We will explore these imperative questions mindful of the overriding preoccupation with the practice of the Christian life in the contemporary world. This is to say, a spirituality that stresses the need for active engagement and immersion in the world along with passive and self-denying virtues serving to enhance the vitality of the individual and collective community. It is a spirituality of love which unites and at the same time personalizes. The questions will be asked in the context of the common global history that religions are becoming more aware that we share.

Nuclear holocaust and ecological pollution which both threaten the life of our planet no longer allow us to refer to our primordial questions merely locally, provincially or regionally. Social, economic and political oppression affect over half the world's population. "Changes now wrought by the scientific-technological phase of Homo sapiens accomplish—or destroy—in a week what required millions of years of fashioning with the prehuman Earth community."¹⁶ Indigenous groups possessed of the ancient wisdom of humankind's direct relationship to the earth and the cosmos have been either obliterated or their way of life overrun, compromised by modern technological industrial greed and ignorance. These groups could be vital collaborators in transforming a checkered approach to our ecological plight.

b) The Starting Point

No one person can claim to have an inside track on a uniquely valid and universal perspective. In the last thirty years, we have experienced the availability and exposure of cultures to each

¹⁶ Brian Swimme, "The New Natural Selection," in *Teilhard Studies* no 10 (fall 1983).

other in an unprecedented “global village.” From this vantage point, it is tempting to suggest a world view. The dilemma inherent in any perspective which advances a global view is that the starting point is necessarily limited. We have peripheral vision with blind spots. We are not absolutizing human values or suggesting a universalism. We are interested more in a disposition or attitude over against a dialectic approach.

(1) Companion Ways to Nurture our Passion

We need a fresh approach to our philosophy and theology of God. These disciplines are different but companion ways to nurture our passion for life. These strands of inquiry are for wounded souls provoked by the depths of beauty and haunted by primordial questions impossible to subdue. Exposed to great doubt, vulnerable to love’s trauma, we necessarily yield to darkness and ambiguity. We find in the richness of this darkness an invitation kindled to offer a plausible interpretation of this ambiguity short of final certainty. “We need an account of theology as normative for spirituality in a way that keeps it open to the unconventional and unpredictable; we need an account of spirituality as universal but not shapeless.”¹⁷

(2) Narrative as Vital

We need a spirituality honoring the depth and mystery of our being and within which all is held. One way to do this is to move from speculation to trust, for we who tell the story belong intimately to this story—the sanctuary of paradox and possibility where ultimately, gratuitous grace guarantees the re-realization of our identity and our meaning in life.

¹⁷ Philip Endean, “Spirituality and Theology,” in *The New Westminster Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* edited by Philip Sheldrake (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press), 76; hereafter, WDCS.

Even with the complexity of contemporary approaches to history and its relationship to spirituality, a viable narrative is still important. Narrative is essential to our individual and collective identities, Paul Ricoeur reminds us. He argues it is implicitly vital for our spiritual well being. "Time becomes human time to the extent that it is organised after the manner of a narrative, in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal existence."¹⁸ There is a strong postmodern skepticism for narratives which can risk two things. It undermines a key element of human solidarity (we bond together by sharing stories) and it removes a key incentive for changing the status quo as well as an important means of bringing this about. "We tell stories because in the final analysis human lives need and merit being narrated. The whole history of suffering cries out for vengeance and calls for narrative."¹⁹

Philip Sheldrake writes:

Narrative is a critical key to our identity for we all need a story to live by in order to make sense of the otherwise unrelated events of life and to find a sense of dignity. It is only by enabling alternative stories to be heard that an elitist 'history,' even a spirituality, may be prised open to offer an entry point for the oppressed who have otherwise been excluded from 'official' history. Without narrative, a person's life is just a random sequence of unrelated events, and suffering and loss remain unintelligible. Rather than reject narrative entirely we need to ask 'whose narrative is told?' 'Who belongs to the story?'²⁰

It seems that a constructive and realistic alternative human story is needed but still far away. A new myth, a deeper horizon than the story entertained in our age is necessary and emerging. We need to remedy an acute and pan sense of disjointedness and incoherence in our era including traditions of inquiry representing earnest truth seeking in their respective ways of

¹⁸ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 3 Volumes (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984-88), 3.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 75.

²⁰ Philip Sheldrake, "Spirituality and History," in *WDCS*, 42.

knowing reality. Stephen Hawking attempts to find a place for God in the universe employing modern scientific cosmology only to say: “there is nothing for the creator to do.”²¹ He once stated that mysticism is for those who can’t do the math. Mystics would reply “we don’t need to do math, we have direct experience!” Diverse and divergent, even opposed interpretations of the world are apparently irreconcilable, unable to see the same processes at work from their respective positions. With a better vantage point, incorporative of our ancestral wisdom everything might become clearer and fall into place.

We need a resurgence, not only of theologians who enjoy the freedom, the width and depth of knowledge, we also need a pneumatic approach that retrieves our ancestral inheritance of wisdom. Contemporary spirituality needs creativity, imagination and vision to shift to new horizons and new insights which move boundaries with innovative overtures. If we are to advance a meaningful Christian understanding of reality to a world in need of vision, meaning and hope, it needs to be translated in an idiom of a new cosmology, a new story, a new myth. Reformulating or re-mythologizing our heritage implies the cherishing of a tradition forged in the past but with a recognition of its limits. We must have a meaningful, inspiring expression of the Christian vision that serves the requirements of the new present. That is, it must be coherent, sustainable and congruent with the convergence of a global consciousness. To put it another way, “The development of theology is like evolution, it is a co-inherence of continuity and

²¹ Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes* (New York: Bantam, 1998).

novelty.”²² The structures have to be open to extension and development as new evidence unfolds if knowledge is to grow.²³

(3) *Harbingers of a New Myth: Continuity and Novelty*

We will briefly explore three narratives that may help bring to mind an enduring meaning for our human condition in the third millennium. These narratives will be assimilated into two trajectories at the beginning of the paper: (1) *reclaiming Christian wisdom consciousness* and (2) *recovering tradition through models and spirituality*. In this way, we are conscious of the riches and limitations of an old wisdom corresponding to its development in an ancient cultural milieu. Framed in these perimeters, we honor tradition and orthodoxy as eschatological. Theology and spirituality, like evolution, are oriented towards eschatology and manifest continuity and novelty, never fully attaining or comprehending it.²⁴

(4) *Three Visionary Narratives*

The evolutionary vision of Teilhard de Chardin will be surveyed. The masterful storyteller weaves a cosmic history, a new creation epic with the power to transform consciousness and open new creative spirituality. Teilhard situates the current phenomenon of globalization within a vision of human planetization where the evolutionary super-milieu is christified, which emanates the divine energy towards totality. This new convergent phase is energized by an emerging Christ-Omega. Teilhard’s extraordinary effort to coherently juxtapose the Christian

²² Donald P. Gray, in “Teilhard and Roman Catholic Orthodoxy,” 55; presented at a symposium at Marist College, May 14, 2005 on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of Teilhard’s death,

²³ Philip Endean, WDCS, 78.

²⁴ See Donald P. Gray in “Teilhard and Catholic Orthodoxy.”

and scientific traditions will be nuanced with insights of Ewert Cousins' Second Axial Age. This new age is marked by the possibility of a depth encounter of world religions.

We will plumb the mature capacious imagination of Thomas Merton. His eloquent sophianic approach provides the foundational heart of this paper. His contemplative vision is ingeniously inventive, establishing a ground of hospitality within which all other ideas herein may be considered. For Merton, divine wisdom has become incarnate. Merton's contemplative intuition envisions the place of wisdom in our global world as found in an inclusive universal consciousness. It is depicted as the final stage of psychological and spiritual integration. Unitive wisdom, for Merton, is a down-to-earth incarnating process seeking full realization. The essential divinity of the person and oneness of humanity are actualized in justice and love and therefore practical and imperative for sapiential consciousness.

These two unparalleled contemporary mystics bequeathed prescient and capacious narrative templates of ultimate meaning. Their contributions are massive as we segue into the dawning of a new myth emerging in the twenty-first century. Raimon Panikkar provides an alluring vocabulary which, like Teilhard and Merton, conveys continuity with tradition and novelty in discovery. His efforts are designed to create opportunities for communication and discussion in a converging global situation where myths are becoming outmoded, exhausted and are collapsing. His Christology is expressed within a triadic structure of Reality comprising the Divine, the Human and the Cosmic involving fully inherent relationality. Panikkar posits an understanding of reality which offers universal accessibility to Christian categories benefiting what he construes as a sacred secularity.

These narratives embody christologies that illumine. In other words, they generate vision and consciousness. They evoke an energy for cooperative participation through illumination and communion. We humans need visions that liberate us from entropy in our human intercourse. Each narrative is less a thesis and more a proposal, a presentation or summons, calling us on the spiritual journey to wake up to divine presence and to see the signs of a new myth dawning.

Each of these contemporary mystical writers is exceptionally mature in that their spiritual insights strongly emphasize the illuminative and unitive aspects of the journey while seemingly neglecting the purgative. Apparently, these narratives have this in common: they are written primarily for the Christian already somewhat advanced along the spiritual way. However, none of these stories ignore the problem of evil or the purgative aspect of the spiritual journey. On the contrary, each evokes purification for the capacity to see. Every human has the potential to develop this capacity with an ascetic practice peculiar to their own unique creative spirituality.

Each of these narratives are inherently enthusiastic and confident in the continuity of evolution from the outer world to the inner world. This inner enthusiasm, our endowed ancestral grace, is part of a universal process. "A single evolutionary drive has been building the universe; now within my psyche it is continuing the process. . . . The love that seems to realign my inner world is the same love that has been realigning matter from the beginning."²⁵

(5) Shift In Consciousness

Ewert Cousins claims that we are living in a mutational moment in history which includes inter-religious convergence, spiritual mutation and new forms of consciousness. One of these new

²⁵ Thomas M. King, "Teilhard's Unity of Knowledge" in *Teilhard Studies* no 9 (summer 1983).

forms of consciousness will be linked to a sacred secularity²⁶ that explicitly breaks from dualistic notions of sacred and secular since nothing in a non-dual interrelatedness is not sacred.

In 1992, Cousins formulated the thesis that we are at the dawn of the Second Axial Age. He and other pioneers of interfaith dialogue in the twentieth century, including Panikkar, were paradigmatic in their thinking. Karl Jaspers first advanced the idea of the First Axial Age. He was referring to what he saw as a fault line in history from 800 to 200 BCE when distinctive and formative religions and associated forms of consciousness came into being.

This period marked for Jaspers a dividing line in growth and development of human consciousness shaping the next two and a half millennia. First Axial consciousness was personal, self-reflective and inner directed as opposed to the Pre-Axial forms of consciousness which were mythic, ritualistic and tribal.

This shift of consciousness away from the tribal and ritualistic opened up many possibilities and enhanced the individual's development of interiority, authenticity and autonomy not without consequent difficulties. For instance, dualisms between body and spirit, transcendence and immanence, secular and sacred, earth and heaven, individual and society were incubated at this time.

With the current mutational shift of consciousness in mind, we turn to the two trajectories which prepare the field of reference for our focus. Again, they are: *reclaiming Christian wisdom consciousness* and *recovering tradition through models and spirituality*. Within this ambit, the power of limits has inspired discoveries of global harmony. Teilhard de Chardin, Thomas Merton and Raimon Panikkar advance continuity of the Christian wisdom tradition while

²⁶ A term from Panikkar's lexicon; a key element in his cosmotheandric vision of an emerging new myth.

proposing illuminating, hopeful and intelligible visions of plausibility on a universal scale which may nourish contemporary spirituality.

Above all, these spiritualities are spiritualities of love. It is the energy of love which inspires action in and for the sake of the world. It is love that also willingly undergoes the passivities of life. It is love which both attaches us to the world and yet detaches us from the world in its present evolving and hence unfinished form. It is love which unites and simultaneously personalizes. These mystical writers offer spiritualities which are centered on Christ and open-ended, running towards a high destiny at the “Omega Point”—the Kingdom of God.

We now turn to the first of our trajectories, *reclaiming Christian wisdom*, as we prepare to consider these prescient writers.

II. RE-CLAIMING CHRISTIAN WISDOM CONSCIOUSNESS

Sapiential or wisdom consciousness, central to the New Testament writings, remained the predominant Christian theological understanding in both the Eastern and Western traditions for more than twelve centuries. The contemporary retrieval of an authentic experiential relationship to the Christ event involves the rediscovery of sapiential understanding and a theology with new scope and vitality. Advancing this endeavor on the tides of a globalization of consciousness, we are approaching what appears to be a tipping point of sapiential good news.

Christian intellectual history reads like a series of awakenings, forgetfulness and stagnation. The Second Vatican Council was a time of revival and innovation for Western Christianity. Early visions of unitary theology with profound depth were exposed by liturgical and biblical movements and by restoring patristic studies. Currently, we find ourselves in a global milieu surrounded by spiritual wisdoms derived mainly from the ancient Asian traditions. Contemporary Christianity needs to revitalize a “community of the adequate” that experiences and validates a specific sapiential self-consciousness. Can this consciousness be discerned as endowed in our sapiential tradition?

During the twentieth century, equipped with new methodologies and perspectives, the church gained new clarity about its origins. At the same time, theological acumen was being challenged to be more dynamic, nimble and unitive by a modern desire for relevance and post modern appetite to deconstruct.

A wisdom consciousness and theological perspective are vital to the inner meaning of Christian mystery rooted in its organic beginnings and development over the centuries. This approach will renew contemporary Christianity in the global climate now and into the future. It

offers the greatest hope for radical spiritual metamorphosis. There is evidence the chrysalis is incrementally opening to reveal new life. Thomas Merton and Bede Griffiths, among others, are luminary trailblazers for a universal wisdom.

Contemporary Christian wisdom is pulsing at the start of the third millennium embedded in a postmodern global world which includes a Western personal bias and unprecedented interaction with Asian belief systems and technologies.

A sapiential renewal of the mystery of Christ requires an expansion out of its present confining container and toward intrinsic fullness. Areas to be considered here are: 1) cultivating Christian awakening, 2) re-centering spirituality and theology in baptismal identity imaged in non-duality, 3) integrating Christianity's dynamism and creativity toward personal liberation and realization, 4) engaging in the global movement toward a unified humanity in communion with earth and cosmos.

Deepening and broadening consciousness will be the central focus and foundation for a new Christian wisdom. This consciousness will take on a unitive quality, that is, it will be deepened by a non-dual approach as we engage with Asian traditions. It will stress the personal rather than the general; the subjective rather than the objective (including the institutional) perspective. The intrinsic sapiential fullness of the mystery of Christ in its presence and action interpenetrates all of these.

In a climate of scientific rationality and overconfident even dangerous literalism, another level of reality belonging to the sapiential world is conveyed by the literary talents of mystical and ascetic writers. Aldous Huxley encapsulates his idea of the perennial philosophy in the introduction of his book, *The Perennial Philosophy*:

. . . . the thing—the metaphysic that recognizes a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds; the psychology that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with, divine Reality; the ethic that places man’s final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being—the thing is immemorial and universal.²⁷

Thomas Merton’s corpus of sapiential literature includes this from his *Contemplative Prayer*:

The character of emptiness, at least for a Christian contemplative, is pure love, pure freedom. Love that is free of everything, not determined by any thing, or held down by any special relationship. It is love for love’s sake. It is sharing, through the Holy Spirit, in the infinite charity of God. And so when Jesus told his disciples to love, he told them to love as universally as the Father who sends his rain alike on the just and the unjust. “Be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect.” This purity, freedom and indeterminateness of love is the very essence of Christianity.²⁸

Bede Griffiths, the English Benedictine influenced by the Hindu Vedanta like Huxley, states:

It is the Ground of consciousness just as it is the Ground of existence. It is that from which all thought springs but which cannot be thought. Yet there is a point beyond thought, where this becomes known, not as an object of thought, nor even as a subject as distinct from an object, but in an identity of subject and object, of being and knowing. This is the experience of the Self, the Atman, beyond being in so far as being is an object of thought, beyond thought in so far as thought is a reflection, a concept of being. It is pure awareness of being, pure delight in being—saccidananda, being, knowledge, bliss. It is Nirvana, the ultimate State, the supreme Wisdom, beyond which it is impossible to go.²⁹

Other fragments from the body of perpetual wisdom literature include the following:

Behold but One in all things; it is the second that leads you astray. (Kabir)³⁰

²⁷ Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1944), vii.

²⁸ Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Doubleday, 1996, 119. Published also as *The Climate of Monastic Prayer* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1969).

²⁹ Bede Griffiths, *Return to the Center* (Springfield, IL: Templegate, 1976), 25.

³⁰ Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy*, 10.

Man as he now is has ceased to be the All. But when he ceases to be an individual, he raises himself again and penetrates the whole world. (Plotinus)³¹

Sell your cleverness and buy bewilderment; Cleverness is mere opinion, bewilderment is intuition. (Rumi)³²

To gauge the soul we must gauge it with God, for the Ground of God and the Ground of the Soul are one and the same. (Eckhart)³³

When the Ten Thousand things are viewed in their oneness, we return to the Origin and remain where we have always been. (Sen T'sen)³⁴

This experiential knowing is steeped in the Christian tradition and surrounds us today in myriad ways and places outside of our tradition. Contemplative consciousness is personal, experiential and leads toward union with that which is known. That is to say, ultimately it is a knowing by, and centered on, *identity* at the most interior level in which a personal commitment and way of life ensues. This is an implied ingredient in what may be formed into an explicit theology built around this mode of consciousness.

In Christian tradition, the Gospel *recognition* scenes where someone is awakened to one's true being and are able, in that moment, to affirm divine reality in Jesus, faith is the mode of knowing. This singular affirmative realization is inseparable from the person. Bruno Barnhart states:

Faith, the fundamental mode of sapiential knowing, is a knowing in darkness, an affirmative cognition of mystery. What is known is "mystery," and the knowing is consequently obscure even as it is certain. Sapiential knowing ranges from a dark awareness in faith through various forms of symbolic understand-

³¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

³² *Ibid.*, 141.

³³ *Ibid.*, 12.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

ing to the pure nondual experience of contemplation, a simple awakening to the unitive light.³⁵

Wisdom, mystic and even *contemplative* are terms that easily conjure up notions of elitism and specialization. However that may be, *wisdom* as both consciousness and as theology is possessed of intentionality that opens to the full range of consciousness. It offers a superior modality of experience, expression and understanding, an understanding which intuits the continuity of Christianity's legacy of depth awareness and the intrinsic truths it holds for our world's traditions.

To propose a study of Wisdom may seem like planning a dig into a long-forsaken ruin of antiquity. The sapiential quest, on the contrary, may open a way into the future. A sapiential approach can offer a superior way of understanding the theological continuity of the history of Christianity over the many centuries and as it unfolds going forward. This heritage is the repository of concealed intrinsic spiritual wealth gratuitously available to the intent seeker.

A. The Path of Wisdom

The personal spiritual quest many have set out on today is a search for wisdom. This path was prominent in the classical cultures of antiquity and currently in Asian cultures. In early Christian centuries, wisdom was the path of one's life. Christ, for St. Augustine, is preeminently *Wisdom*.³⁶ This is not a recognized way in contemporary Christian life, rather, it is manifestly absent.

A brief look at the four yogas of Hinduism as a template of spiritual life helps make the point. *Raja yoga* is contemplative practice with meditation at its center. *Jnana yoga* is the path

³⁵ Bruno Barnhart, *The Future of Wisdom* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 86; hereafter FW.

³⁶ Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 40-42.

of intellect, of wisdom. *Bhakti yoga* is the path of devotion. *Karma yoga* is the path of active service. *Raja, bhakti* and *karma* Christianity have manifested in the meditation, charismatic and social justice movements of our time. *Jnana* Christianity, the path of wisdom beyond the confinement of individual spiritual life has not awakened and developed as a movement in our day.

It should not be surprising that sapiential theology today is scantily present. The overlays of so many controversies over the centuries including even the authoritative revelation of the tradition itself has become an impediment of sapiential development. Institutional orthodoxy, scientific rationalism, dogmatic entrenchment, fundamentalism and reductionist historical criticism have played huge roles as obstacles to sapiential trajectories. Western modern rationalism has been very adequate in suppressing sapiential consciousness.

Our postmodern era seems to be opening the imperceptible container accommodating the capacity for contemplation, reflection and new opportunities for wisdom to thrive. The church epochally converted from fortified immobility, defensive and superior withdrawal from the world, rejection of modern individualism and unhesitating opposition to historical trends in the modern west in the time of Vatican II, to a church turned toward the world, the human person, human activity and historical progress. This raises many obvious debates beyond this paper's scope. However, the council represents crossing a threshold of limited consciousness into maturity. This movement into maturity must not be squandered. Depths enjoyed in the ancient past and experiences of the expansive freedom of new perspectives appear to be ripe and ready for resurgence. Christian contemporary *jnanas* like Merton, Abhishiktananda and Griffiths have blazed new ways of wisdom for the twenty-first century.

B. Ways Wisdom Unfolds

The journey of sapiential awakening begins with the opening of our consciousness to the wider and deeper dimensions of the wisdom traditions. Centuries of institutionalized and rationalized Christianity has blurred a basic wisdom perspective centered on the mystery of Christ. This basic perspective needs to be recovered. It is fundamental to the expansion of the mystery of Christ from a confinement within a logos container to its intrinsic fullness.

The meeting of Asian religions helps Christian sapiential theology to discover non-dual reality and the non-dual Self. A new approach within Christian tradition, centered and interpreted in non-dual or unitive identity becomes possible.

Sapiential theology has the opportunity to understand and affirm a continuity between the mystery of Christ and the secular and critical rationality emblematic of modernity. The dramatic mutation of wisdom consciousness can begin to integrate its dynamic and creative elements expressed in the liberation and realization of the person and the positive transfiguration of society and nature.

While postmodernity questions, relativizes and radically deconstructs traditional affirmations, globalization converges humanity. A new Christian wisdom will assist in verifying our ground in simplicity and unity, help in comprehending an evolving humanity, and imply an active participation in advancing a united, flourishing humanity in communion with earth and the cosmos.

We focus on three individuals whose contributions to Christian wisdom do just that. Teilhard de Chardin, possessed of a sapiential perspective, offers a mystical, contemplative, cosmic vision. Merton's sophianic approach is more than a metaphor for the universal presence

of God, a kind of “anonymous Christology” in a feminine key. We will see it as a real symbol of “divinization,” that is, it reveals the fullness of participation in the life of God. Raimon Panikkar charts out a mystical course of original scholarship of world religions with a challenge to think out the implications of globalization for faith. The challenge is to present a vision of the universe in which Christ finds its place.

We turn now to *recovering tradition through models and spirituality*, the second trajectory of our sapientially based perspective onto which we will incorporate the mythic visions of Teilhard, Merton and Panikkar.

III. RECOVERING TRADITION THROUGH MODELS AND SPIRITUALITY

A. The Task of Contemporary Theology

The task of Christian theology early in the third millennium is enlarging the horizons of traditional religious consciousness. This effort is multi dimensional. Christian identity must be established by recovering the depth of its belief and spirituality, its primordial doctrine and its classical spiritual wisdom. At the same time, we need to openly relate to other cultures and religions in a fast changing multi dimensional global environment. The very structure of our human experience is being transformed by mass media and the acceleration of the electronic influence. The ongoing process of rapid and radical cultural change alters our social institutions, affects our mores and our religious symbols. These challenges are frightening because we are taken out of the comfort zone of limited experience and now challenged by the responsibility for our destiny in a new world which calls for us to enlarge our consciousness.

With the exposure to a variety of transcultural human experiences converging, and so newly available to us, novel possibilities are on the horizon. To encompass the fullness of this experience, we must expand our consciousness and be in command of our psychic potential.

Ewert Cousins notes that we:

must be scientific and technological, mystical and mytho-poetic, intensely individual and autonomous, and at the same time deeply related to all humans and the cosmos Those levels of the psyche that moderns had previously stifled to develop science, industrialization, and technology must be opened once again It is only with the full resources of our psychic life that we can move into the future.³⁷

³⁷ Ewert H. Cousins, *Christ of the 21st Century* (New York: Continuum, 1998), 42; hereafter, C21.

B. The Convergence of Religious Cultures

The convergence of religious cultures is having and will continue to have enormous effects on our religious experience as we learn different ways to live in a complex religious milieu. We will need to find ways to be responsive not only to the varieties of religious expression within one's own tradition, but also the radically different experiences of other traditions. Ecumenical movements and dialogues of world religions have taken place, in earnest at times, opening to varieties of experience world wide. In meeting other religions, the agenda for the missionary of the future, it seems, will be less conversion than convergence, i.e. deep listening to the other as key ingredient, even unto death.³⁸ "Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity," Simone Weil once wrote.

Modern and post modern trends have marked off theologians and religious thinkers' undertakings by secular culture. Their task has been hampered by biased criticism in favor of social forms and convention limiting religious views to fit the limits of secular experience thus enabling religion to be meaningful to the modern person. Converging toward a new matrix, theologians will be called upon to deepen appreciation of the richness of their tradition. Ironically, technologies that have led to demythologizing have led us back to an environment in which multi level experience is possible. Cousins states:

Having long been alienated from the mystical, cosmic, and mythic levels of consciousness, contemporary persons must now open themselves to the depth and power of these levels and integrate these resources into their full conscious life. It is in this process of rediscovery, reintegration and expansion that theologians can make a special contribution.³⁹

³⁸ See below: *The Monks of Tibhirine* as illustrative.

³⁹ C21, 43.

Aware of the complexity of the subject matter, those doing theology now must know the forms of their own religious tradition, and the ideas and symbols in which they are expressed. Appropriating the resources and wisdom of their own tradition and bringing them to self-consciousness will provide an expanded epistemology offering broader and deeper levels of meaning than an exclusively empirical model. The latter, having limitations and distortions in examining the wide range of religious experience, necessarily excluding or reducing levels of consciousness on which person's may function. Cousins' description of a mystic's level of consciousness aptly expresses this:

. . . . each level of consciousness has its own distinctive epistemology. . . .the psyche has capacities for grasping the mystery that are intuitive, and that function according to the connaturality of faith, and that can be had with brilliant luminosity in the ecstatic mystical experience. . . .the great mystics have a privileged place in bringing to light the cognitive content, the form, dynamism, and affectivity that are part of the experience of the mystery.⁴⁰

C. Spirituality and Experiential Models

Through spirituality, we are more adequately capable to both recover the depth dimension of religious experience and assimilate spiritual wisdom. To know the experiential model behind any particular expressive model is important especially because religious language is often extracted from and influenced by social, economic and cultural structures. To fail to take into account the experiential model is always a danger in theology. To get caught up in the complexity of a science of verbalizations of ideas and remain on the expressive level of theology would lack the vitality and depth of the experiential level. Catechetical methods, scholasticism and theological manuals are historical examples. Throughout the history of theology, there has

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 48.

been an inevitable return from the jeopardy of lifeless abstractions and elaborations of a disengaged reductionism. When the expressive is extricated from experience or conveys the wrong level of experience, the attempt is to return to roots, that is to say, to early Christian experience. The milieu of the Reformation and the thinking leading up to and surrounding Vatican II prompted the recovery of experiential models as expressed in Scripture.

Theologians who emphasize aspects of a scientific approach as normative may not consider the experiential-cognitive core of religion. Thus, various levels of depth and modes of perceiving spiritual structures of reality may not be accounted for. Any theological method, then, must take religious experience seriously. This includes dealing adequately with its varieties in the past and in the future. This variety comes from two sources: “the vastness of the divine reality from which the experience emanates; and the complexity of human beings and of the human situation in which the revelation is made.”⁴¹

Therefore, theological epistemology must be able to accommodate religious experience, especially mystical experience which can attain immediate knowledge of God. This also includes some symbols so closely related to the object of religious experience that there can be “interpenetration of expressive and experiential models.”⁴²

D. Cosmological Models

Expressive modes both reflect and express religious experience. This is true, in particular, of cosmological models. These models have been immeshed with experience and belief ever since primitive times. Ever since the Copernican revolution in the West, cosmological models have

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 47

⁴² *Ibid.*, 46.

been raising religious controversy. Since they are fundamental to one's meaning system, a deviation in cosmology can profoundly affect one's belief structure. The Copernican shift from a Ptolemaic universe affected the Christian's self image and challenged their ideas. From the Renaissance to the nineteenth century, there was great debate over Genesis and scientific cosmological models. Theologians began to accept an evolution in cosmological models as expressions of a human's religious experience. New biblical scholarship provided insights to indicate the Genesis narrative wasn't being undermined. That is, they could now see in the Genesis cosmology the expressive model of a religious experience that transcends the primitive cosmology.

Experiential models change, too. We are entering a radical change on the experiential level. As human beings view the earth from outer space, they grasp more vividly the meaning of their traditional earth symbolism. The future person will be earth dweller and space traveler. The more human beings persist in space exploration the more their experience of space will take on new dimensions. A complex cosmology will emerge with multiple experiences of space and an enlarged spatial symbolism ushering new varieties of religious experience.

Our sense of being related to the entire cosmos is already undertaking massive alterations. Being related to the whole has long been submerged in the West. Continuously rapid changes in global infrastructures have evoked a rising sense of solidarity throughout the world.

The cosmic sense is emerging on a deeper level as a matrix of the experience of the future. From the time of primitive humans, the cosmic sense has been intimately related to religious experience. It was important in the Bible, the theology of the Greek Fathers and played a key role in the medieval west. Our Christian doctrinal categories (e.g. christology, redemption,

and sacraments) also work on both individual and cosmic levels. It is often on the cosmic level that is expressed in religious symbols and ideas. Traditional models of expression can only be understood within the context of the experience of the cosmic sense. The extraordinary reacquaintance with the cosmic sense in our time helps us understand a significant level of our past tradition. A historical awareness can provide a deeper sensitivity to the religious dimension of the cosmic sense.

We turn now to the first of three mystics we are focusing on who have made extraordinary contributions to our understanding of globality and wisdom consciousness. Like Merton and Panikkar, Teilhard de Chardin offered his own unique version of unconditioned universality. Another converging point for all three of these visionary pioneers, is their willingness to embrace the tensions inherent in the effort to remain faithful to a continuity of their beloved tradition and the novelties of their discoveries. Teilhard situates the current phenomenon of globalization within a broad evolutionary context.

Teilhard de Chardin's evolutionary vision is a remarkable example of the cosmic sense.

IV. TEILHARD DE CHARDIN

The Meaning of Life is to SEE

—Hui-neng, 7th Century Sage

With the cosmic sense as a matrix and the cosmic Christ as a focus, Teilhard gave a cosmic interpretation to other doctrines.⁴³ While Teilhard's Christology is unique in its cosmic dimension, "It is not unlike the christologies found in the New Testament, in the Greek Fathers and in the medieval Franciscans. All of these christologies are built on the experiential model of the cosmic sense."⁴⁴ If they are not rooted in the cosmic sense, they seem highly abstract rather than experiential models.

A. Introduction

Teilhard was born into a Catholic family in France and later became a Jesuit. He studied paleontology, the study of early life forms. He began to question the Genesis cosmology as he furthered his reading in evolutionary biology and field studies of fossils. His desire was to reconcile his understanding of an emerging universe changing over time with his religious faith. He wanted to bring Christianity and evolution into a reciprocally enhancing relationship with each other. He explains, "For our age, to have become conscious of evolution means something very different from and much more than having discovered one further fact. . . . It means (as happens with a child when he acquires the sense of perspective) that we have become alive to a new dimension."⁴⁵

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Science and Christ* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 193; cited by John Grim and Mary Evelyn Tucker in *Teilhard in the 21st Century*, 2003), 2; hereafter, T21.

While mechanistic models of the cosmos lose their explanatory power as we enter the third millennium, the organic relationship of emergent matter and consciousness continues to challenge human understanding. Despite the limits of his vision and the historical constraints of his knowledge, Teilhard still reflects one of the most inspired examinations of these evolutionary questions. His significance extends into current debate around the relationship of religion, science, evolution, spirit and matter.

Secular and religious thinkers of the twentieth century have considered the relationship of human consciousness to matter. Religious inquiry often shapes these questions in the context of divine and human interactions. Religious revelations are seen as divine mediation breaking into the separate realities of human and created matter. Human consciousness is imagined as extending from the divine realm directly animating human psychic vitality from the beginning.

The significance of human interactions with other humans was highlighted by secular humanists emphasizing a human mediation. Humans operating among humans was considered primary, discounting divine agency. Within this perspective, matter and all nonhuman life was subservient, occupying a secondary utilitarian position. Empirical sciences advanced this bias, attributing the appearance of consciousness as emerging from inert, non-conscious matter from the universe.

Teilhard took a different approach from both the religious thinkers and the secular humanists including the empirical sciences of the twentieth century. He proposed a more holistic vision saying consciousness is integral to the emerging universe. He states that the increasing complexity and consciousness of humans is directly related to the evolution of the universe. This complexity-consciousness is an emergent property of matter itself. He focused on the quantum

of matter that successively evolves into the layered envelopes encircling the planet. Using scientific categories, he labeled the layers as the lithosphere of rock, the hydrosphere of water, and the biosphere of life. This evolves, he said, subsequently into the consciousness humankind now displays in the thought sphere or noosphere surrounding the globe. His understanding was that matter and spirit were linked spheres different but interrelated vistas on the same emergent reality. The plural, diverse matter of the universe in the process of evolutionary change is ultimately pulled forward by the unifying dynamics of spirit.

Teilhard's life work was devoted to fostering an active realization by humans of their evolutionary roles with emergent matter-spirit. His objective was to cultivate mindfulness to imagine an organically developed universe. This mindfulness he expressed as the challenge of *seeing*. This *seeing* was aided by Teilhard's phenomenology of the involution of matter. This was a metaphysics of union with spirit and a mysticism of centration of person.⁴⁶

B. Teilhard's Quest to See

Teilhard struggled to articulate an unfolding vision of what he saw as a vast creative universe. His quest was hampered by the Modernist controversy. This involved an ongoing conflict in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries between the Vatican and several modern ideas that were perceived threats to orthodox Catholic thinking. Teilhard was caught in these tensions which included the Darwinian theory of evolution and critical methods for interpreting the Bible. His inner tension was to remain loyal to the teachings of the Catholic Church while articulating his vision of a deep unitive quality of the universe. Teilhard attempted to extend contemporary

⁴⁶ T21, 2 citing Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, "My Fundamental Vision," in *Toward the Future* (London: Collins, 1974), 205; hereafter TF.

science to become a means of *seeing* the depth dimensions of space and time in the evolutionary process. In *The Human Phenomenon*, Teilhard lays out the challenge to *see* into the deep unity of evolution:

Seeing. One could say that the whole of life lies in *seeing*--if not ultimately, at least essentially. To be more is to be more united—and this sums up and is the very conclusion of the work to follow. But unity grows, and we will affirm this again, only if it is supported by an increase of consciousness of vision. That is probably why the history of the living world can be reduced to the elaboration of ever more perfect eyes at the heart of a cosmos where it is always possible to discern more. Are not the perfection of an animal and the supremacy of the thinking being measured by the penetration and power of synthesis of their glance? To try to *see* more and to *see* better is not, therefore, just a fantasy, curiosity, or a luxury. *See* or perish. This is the situation imposed on every element of the universe by the mysterious gift of existence. And, thus, to a higher degree, this is the human condition.⁴⁷

A perceived separation between matter and spirit was a central problem, for Teilhard, in *seeing* the unity of evolution. The mechanistic science of his time viewed matter as inert, dead. Religious dualistic world views saw God as transcendent and apart from matter. He boldly stated his affirmation of the world and the divine within it:⁴⁸

If, as the result of some interior revolution, I were to lose in succession my faith in Christ, my faith in a personal God, and my faith in spirit, I feel that I should continue *to believe* invincibly *in the world*. The world (its value, its infallibility and its goodness)—that, when all is said and done, is the first, the last, and the only thing in which I believe. It is by this faith that I live. And it is to this faith, I feel, that at the moment of death, rising above all doubts, I shall surrender myself.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Human Phenomenon* (Bristol: Sussex Academic Press, 1999), 3; hereafter, HP. This work is a new translation by Sarah Appleton Weber of the original French manuscript of *The Phenomenon of Man*.

⁴⁸ See Henri de Lubac, *Teilhard de Chardin: The Man and His Meaning* (New York: New American Library, 1967), 129-43; T21 cited, 3.

⁴⁹ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, "How I Believe," in *Christianity and Evolution* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), 99; T21 cited, 3.

Teilhard's argument was that scientific inquiry of evolution would lead toward Christianity and a profound sense of a Cosmic Christ in the universe. He saw the Cosmic Christ as drawing evolution toward a greater personalization and deepening of the spirit.⁵⁰ Science and religion missed the deep unitive quality of the universe because of the separation of matter and spirit so prevalent in their disciplines.

Evolution displays dynamic, self-organizing processes from the atom to the galaxies. Atoms eventually form into cells that eventually evolve into multicellular organisms and eventually into the higher forms of life. Teilhard implied this in saying that with the greater complexity of life comes greater consciousness until self-reflection emerges in humans. Science after Darwin reveals the universe is in a state of continual development but Teilhard's narration of grand evolutionary vision goes beyond limited Darwinism. It is certainly a departure from the unchanging creation story in the Bible and a contrast from the Neoplatonic view of degeneration from a once perfect cosmos.⁵¹

Suffering, change and disintegration are inevitably included in the evolutionary process as the plurality of matter resists unity with spirit.⁵² The advance to higher states of complexity and consciousness seems to require a deficit as the flow of energy decays to unusable entropy. Individual personal suffering has a redemptive role to play in the larger transformations of creative universal processes.

⁵⁰ Grim and Tucker note (T21, 222,6) that Teilhard coined the term "christic" as an expression of his experience of the Cosmic Christ of evolution, that is, the "omnipresence of transformation" that is centered in complexity-consciousness drawing it forward. See Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, "The Christic," in *The Heart of the Matter* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 94; hereafter, HM.

⁵¹ See T21, 3.

⁵² See T21, 222, note 7: "Christ is he," Teilhard writes in *Christianity and Evolution*, "who structurally in himself, and for all of us, overcomes the resistance to unification offered by the multiple, resistance to the rise of spirit inherent in matter," 85.

Persons can realize how we are involved in larger evolutionary dynamics and contribute to the flourishing of our Earth “community” as they *see* into the unity of evolution. This was Teilhard’s consummate human adventure: to enfold personal energy with evolution and to unite one’s personhood with the animating center of creation moving forward.

C. Complexity-Consciousness in Teilhard’s Phenomenology

Teilhard struggled to articulate an unfolding vision of what he saw as a vast creative universe. He comprehensively synthesized a full telling of the story of evolutionary processes in *The Human Phenomenon*.⁵³ He details what he thinks is involved in the physical mass of the universe: “three infinities.” The first two “infinities” involve the realms of the infinitely small and infinitely large. Beyond scientific inquiries emphasizing the cosmos and atom, Teilhard proposed a “third axis of biological complexity that provided a link to consciousness.”⁵⁴ This axis moves through matter acting as a basis for organization. The evolution of matter in this perspective “proceeds as an involuting or inward-turning progression that moves from a single cellular stage toward greater complexity and conscious reflection. From particles and atoms, from single cells to multicellular organisms, from plants and trees to invertebrates and vertebrates, evolution displays a movement toward more complex organisms and toward sentience.”⁵⁵

⁵³ See above, note 10.

⁵⁴ See T21, 4.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

His understanding of evolutionary time and scientific facts contradicted the biblical literalist view of the seven-day creation story in Genesis. Teilhard could not accept this explanation. He did, however, accept the idea of the initial creation.

All matter, for Teilhard, is evolving toward higher forms of complexity-consciousness. From his perspective, matter is “inexorably associated with spirit, in which both work as a vital instrument for the growth of consciousness. This process culminates in the personalizing force of hominization—that is, the conscious reflection of the universe in the human.”⁵⁶

Teilhard used the language of the psychic and physical dimension of things in explaining the internal and external dimensions of spirit and matter. He justified this view considering inductive observation in which human consciousness is positioned as the defining emergent quality of matter itself, as opposed to some sort of aberration or addendum. He writes:

Indisputably, deep within ourselves, through a rent, an “interior” appears at the heart of beings. This is enough to establish the existence of this interior in some degree or other everywhere forever in nature. Since the stuff of the universe has an internal face at one point in itself, its structure is necessarily *bifacial*; that is, in every region of time and space, as well, for example, as being granular, *coextensive with its outside, everything has an inside*.⁵⁷

Matter, then, has its within and without; evolution is a psychic and physical process. Teilhard explains two kinds of energy operative evolution: *tangential*, which links similar elements, and *radial* which draws the element “toward ever greater complexity and centrality, in other words forwards.”⁵⁸ There are self-organizing principles, that is, tendencies evident in matter resulting in a more intricate system:

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ HP, 24.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 30.

Left long enough to itself, under the prolonged and universal play of chance, matter manifests the property of arranging itself in more and more complex groupings and at the same time, in ever deepening layers of consciousness; this double and combined movement of physical unfolding and psychic interiorisation (or centration) once started, continuing, accelerating and growing to its utmost extent.⁵⁹

The evolution of spirit and matter are two phases of a single trajectory. Teilhard asserts: “Spiritual perfection (or conscious ‘centricity’) and material synthesis (or complexity) are merely the two connected faces of a single phenomenon.”⁶⁰

From early formations of the universe to the emergence of life on Earth into the appearance of the human, Teilhard assumes vast spans of time for this creation process. While Teilhard wasn’t privy to the latest estimates of the age of the Earth being around 13.7 billion years, he was well aware of the scientific community’s thinking regarding evolutionary theory.

Teilhard outlined the thresholds of the evolutionary as: first, *cosmogenesis*--the rise of the inorganic world. The second phase is *biogenesis*--organic life appears with an eventual increase in a more complex nervous system. The third phase, *anthropogenesis*--an increasingly complex brain ushers in this phase with the implied birth of human thought. For the first time, evolution is able to reflect upon itself. “Humans become the heirs of the evolutionary process capable of determining its further progression or retrogression.”⁶¹

Obviously, this has enormous implications for human responsibility. Teilhard, in his later works explicates the human endeavor of effectively participating in the ongoing creativity of the

⁵⁹ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Appearance of Man* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 139. See T21, 5.

⁶⁰ HP, 27.

⁶¹ C21, 6.

evolutionary process. Writers, devotees, scientists and theologians, inspired by Teilhard, continue to consider the most urgent spiritual challenges of our time.

Humans, at the present stage, participate in advancing all of evolution with the interior pull of complexity-consciousness. The resulting greater spiritualization of the universe is generated. Teilhard called this the *amorization* of things. As this transforming power of love and personalization increased in the person, a collective spirit of human consciousness encompassing the globe arises. Teilhard named this: *noogenesis*. The highest form of personalization and spiritualization moves toward its highest and final threshold in the Cosmic Christ of the universe, arriving at the starting point to which evolution's movement of spirit-matter was drawn--Omega point.

Teilhard's vision for human action in this process is inventoried in *Toward the Future*: The essential phenomenon in the world is life since life is interiorized; the essential phenomenon in the living world is the human since humans are reflective; the essential phenomenon of humans is gradual totalization of humankind in which individuals super-reflect upon themselves.⁶² The human thus plays a vital part in evolution through reflection, socialization and planetization equipped with a consciousness of self that is also able to look back on an unfolding universe in process.

⁶² TF, 175; also cited in T21, 7.

V. TEILHARD'S IDEA OF RELIGION IN AN AGE OF RELIGIOUS TRANSFORMATION

A. The Transformation of Human Consciousness

The human community is undergoing a paradigmatic mutation. Teilhard de Chardin called it a transformation of consciousness evolving from a state of tribal-national awareness to global consciousness. The forces of evolution have shifted from a divergent to a convergent movement Teilhard defined as *planetization*.⁶³ When human's first appeared, they diverged into distinct tribal groups. Recently, human consciousness is converging and intensifying due, not least, to the spherical shape of the earth, an increase in population, and rapid communication development. Global consciousness is approaching a common center point as we arrive in the third millennium.

Preliminary questions regarding this unprecedented global shift abound. Here we will briefly raise a few of these which carry wide ranging implications. What effect will this global dynamic have on religion? What role does a contemplative or mystical vision play in this planetary pattern? Is the current turn in religion and spirituality a specific indication of a larger human shift Teilhard describes as a process of planetization?

Two trends characterizing this prodigious turn of events are the meeting of the world religions and the secularization of modern culture. Churches have official agencies to dialogue with other religions. Diverse religious groups are meeting harmoniously. Past alienation, suspicion and persecution have yielded to more mutual respect, collaboration and enrichment.

⁶³ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Human Phenomenon*. New translation by Sarah Appleton-Weber. (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 1999) Original translation: *The Phenomenon of Man* (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), 238-239; hereafter HP.

Inter-religious conferences east and west conducted today are unprecedented. Sacred texts and spiritual treatises of the world's religions are being translated and broadly distributed.

Most notably, this convergence is less engrossed in dogmatic beliefs, moral prescriptions or ritual than it is primarily engaged with spiritual experience. There is a thirst worldwide for spiritual values, a focus on the inner human dimension, a spiritual core, the deepest center of the person. Once this is awakened, one can be open to the transcendent and experience ultimate reality. This spiritual dimension, cultivated and sustained takes the form of a spiritual journey. Some seek wisdom or religious teachers, some practice meditation even a semi monastic lifestyle and others develop hybrid practices of all sorts. We are witnessing a convergence of spiritual energies started by a planetization process.

Our post modern milieu is being secularized at the same time. Material concerns grip the energies of millions of people. The poor clutch for bare necessities. Industrial nations multiply their affluence. Secular humanists dedicated to developing a better future for humanity have seen tools they invented for progress turn into implements of destruction. Science, technology and industrialization have brought affluence to some nations. When mindful, we are put in pause regarding these instruments threatening and causing holocaust, pollution and depletion of natural resources. Secular enterprises threaten biological support systems sustaining human consciousness. We are challenged to harness and direct human energies at this critical historical point so that the secular will reach fruition in the spiritual and the spiritual will include and energize the secular.

B. Teilhard's Idea of Religion

Teilhard's idea of religion helps us contextualize and understand the present momentum. His ideas of the convergence and complexification of consciousness give clarity to the meeting of religions. His understanding of the spiritual power of matter assists us in seeing this in a spiritual light. The key to understanding Teilhard's idea of religion is his concept of the universe. Specifically, Teilhard understood God's presence in the universe through the mystery of the cosmic Christ as "the synthesis of Christ and the universe."⁶⁴ This presence is dynamic not static. The center of the evolutionary process he calls Omega is also its energizing goal. He identifies this center as the Christ of revelation which is present yet transcendent to the process.⁶⁵ Evolution continues through the spheres of matter, life and consciousness. Teilhard has intimately related the divine to the physical universe and human endeavor thus religion primarily operates on the level of human consciousness and action rather than in institutions or belief systems. Regarding experience, religion implies cosmic mystical awareness of Divine Presence acting through the universe. For Teilhard, the religions of the world represent the highest development of human consciousness vis à vis direct concern for the universe and its evolution toward the divine.

C. The Convergence of Religions

Throughout Teilhard's evolution of consciousness is a single dynamic at work he refers to as the law of "complexity-consciousness" and "union differentiates." He says, "In any domain, whether it be the cells of the body, the members of society or the elements of a spiritual synthesis

⁶⁴ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, "Comment je crois" in *Comment je crois (How I Believe)*, trans, 126; hereafter, HB.

⁶⁵ HP, 268-69.

—union differentiates.⁶⁶ Whatever sphere, individual elements unite in a center to center union releasing creative energy leading to more complex entities. Greater complexity leads to increased interiority, making possible more intimate creative unions. The elements do not lose their identity rather they are intensified by the union. “Regarded along its axis of complexity the universe is both on the whole and at each of its points, in a continual tension of organic doubling back upon itself, and thus of interiorization.”⁶⁷

At this time, the forces of planetization are issuing an unprecedented complexification of consciousness (“noosphere”) through the convergence of cultures and religions. In the conclusion of his small book, *How I Believe*, written in 1944, Teilhard sees three courses flowing together. “In the great river of mankind, the three currents [Eastern, human and Christian] are still at cross-purposes. Nevertheless there are sure indications which make it clear that they are coming to run together. A general convergence of religions upon a universal Christ who fundamentally satisfies them all: that seems to me the only possible conversion of the world, and the only form in which a religion of the future can be conceived.”⁶⁸

A new generation has arrived with a much more informed and rich understanding of Oriental religions and the convergence of spiritualities. Engaging in dialogue, technical knowledge and sympathetic firsthand experience has resulted in a deeper entrance into their ethos which is currently necessary in the meeting of religions. Indeed, sympathy or empathy is apparently the central element in this new complexified religious consciousness. One may enter the structure of consciousness of another religion and grasp its distinctive values from its own

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 262.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 302.

⁶⁸ HB, 130.

perspective. Then return to one's own religious consciousness. As a result, one can view one's own tradition, both sympathetically and critically. Returning, now enriched by expanded horizons with spiritual energies made active by a center to center union with the other mode of consciousness.

Raimon Panikkar describes this dynamic empathetic consciousness as "dialogic dialogue," a deliberate departure from agendas that defend oneself and refute claims of other religions in dialectical dialogue. He has established a dialogic dialogue between the Christian understanding of the Trinity and the religious experience of Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism and Islam.⁶⁹ Similarly, he explored the doctrine of Christ in his book, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*.⁷⁰ Others empathize with the Buddhist notion of absolute nothingness finding a converging point with apophatic statements of Christian mystics and theologians.⁷¹

The dawn of a new theological and spiritual consciousness no longer allows us to ignore the religious experience of the majority of humankind. Creative interaction with Greco-Roman culture forged Christian consciousness into shape out of its Jewish heritage. We are now challenged again to seriously, empathetically meet with the religions of the world. A theology of redemption can now seriously consider the Hindu and Buddhist experience of liberation it hadn't taken into account over years of its development. The contemporary global milieu invites the Christian theologian to draw into a new complexified consciousness the whole of religious experience of humankind.

⁶⁹ Raimon Panikkar, *The Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man* (New York: Orbis, 1973).

⁷⁰ Raimon Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1981).

⁷¹ Hans Waldenfels, *Absolute Nothingness: Foundations for a Buddhist-Christian Dialogue* (New York: Paulist, 1980).

How this effects Christian, Hindu, or Buddhist identities is impossible to predict. We can say that Panikkar and others who engage in dialogic dialogue do not abandon their identities whether Christian, Buddhist or otherwise. Teilhard's dynamic of differentiating union apparently is operating here. The Christian is intensified in his identity by the center to center empathetic meeting with the Buddhist and a more complexified consciousness ensues. In this enriched matrix, the Christian may perceive the mystery of Christ in Buddhism and the Buddhist may perceive Buddha nature in Christianity. Within this religious complexified consciousness, Teilhard's perception of the universal Christ might appear more dialogic and less dialectic. Thus, his theory of the convergence of religions can be more universalistic than intended. Teilhard charted the course for dialogical dialogue and "passing-over" into another's religious consciousness but never personally experienced this realm.

D. The Spiritual Meaning of the Secular

While the meeting of religions intensifies the spiritual, the secular trend today eliminates the transcendent from life focusing on material values, finite goals, human effort and performance while criticizing traditional religion for being other worldly and unconcerned about human development. Teilhard affirms the value of this world and sees the transcendent embodied within matter. He affirms God's immanence. He cogently discerns spiritual power in matter. Matter is a sacramental reflection of the divine throughout the universe and human endeavor, with the entire evolutionary process moving toward greater union with the cosmic Christ.

Teilhard was criticized by Christian theologians who construed his strong affirmation of divine immanence as being pantheistic. Ewert Cousins believes this is unwarranted. He says that Teilhard's vision harmonizes with major strands of Christian tradition, citing the theophanic

universe of the Greek Fathers and the Franciscan awareness of God's presence in material creation.

Pantheism is a form of theism; a more recent term distinguished from pantheism. While pantheism affirms "All things are in God," however, God is not exhausted by them. Another way to articulate this is to say that God is more, not less, than "all things." Pantheism is related to Thomas Berry's vision of eco-spirituality and is an essential principle of creation, an understanding that stresses the sacramental character of the natural world. This seems to more accurately locate Teilhard. "Pantheism is. . . .theophanic awareness. All things reveal the divine because all things are in God, in the divine consciousness; they exist in him, and he is likewise in them. . . .Pantheism is simply a capacity to perceive the divine in everything."⁷² The divine is not limited to the cosmos or to our perception. Panikkar sees the term *pantheism* as crude in its limited theistic expression.

Teilhard sings a hymn to matter, "I acclaim you as the divine milieu, charged with creative power, as the ocean stirred by the Spirit, as the clay moulded and infused with life by the incarnate Word."⁷³ He speaks of the significance of secular enterprises for building the earth and its ultimate religious meaning. "Religion and science are the two conjugated faces or phases of one and the same complete act of knowledge—the only one which can embrace the past and future of evolution so as to contemplate, measure and fulfill them."⁷⁴

⁷² Wayne Teasdale, *The Mystic Heart* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2001), 198-199.

⁷³ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, "The Spiritual Power of Matter" in *Hymn of the Universe* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 47.

⁷⁴ HP, 285.

Teilhard sees “a Christ who is no longer master of the world solely because he has been proclaimed to be such, but because he animates the whole range of things from top to bottom.”⁷⁵ This universal Christ energizes the human community to its fulfillment.

Teilhard’s contribution is not simply a religious recovery of secular values. It is more complex, rooted in his notion of planetization. Cousins draws from Karl Jaspers’ theory of the Axial Period⁷⁶ and Teilhard’s theory of the noosphere to synthesize his approach to the evolution of religious consciousness. He nuances Jaspers’ description of the transformation of consciousness that occurred in the first millennium B.C.E. Jaspers discovered an axis at a point in history that gave birth to everything which, since then, man has been able to be. “This axis is to be found in the period around 500 B.C., in the spiritual process that occurred between 800 and 200 B.C.”⁷⁷ It is there that we meet with the most deep cut dividing line in history. Man as we know him today, came into being. For short we may style this the ‘Axial Period.’⁷⁸

Consciousness was transformed without discernible influence of one area on another. This was the time of Confucius and Lao-tze in China, the Upanishads and the Buddha in India, Zoroaster in Persia, the prophets in Israel and Socrates, Plato and Aristotle in Greece.

The great religions of the world are a product of that transformation of consciousness. Zoroaster, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism and Judaism were formed at this time. The transformation of Jewish consciousness was foundational for the later emergence of

⁷⁵ HB, 89. “Christology and Evolution,” 89.

⁷⁶ Karl Jaspers, translated by Michael Bullock, *The Origin and Goal of History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953); originally *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte* (Zurich: Artemis, 1949), 19-43.

⁷⁷ Since Jasper’s formulation of the dating of the First Axial Period, it has been established that the proper dating for Zoroaster is c. 1500 B.C./1800 B.C. not 500 B.C./800 B.C.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.

Christianity and Islam. In the Axial Period, consciousness evolved from mythic awareness to critical reflection and individual self-reflective consciousness was born. In this Axial Period, philosophers and spiritual teachers invited the public to use intellect to free themselves from collective consciousness, from the physical world and from myth and ritual. The characteristic consciousness of the Axial Period was non-mythic, critical, self-reflective and individualistic. The awakening of reflective subjectivity equipped the individual to stand against the collectivity, become a distinct moral and spiritual self and embark on an individual spiritual journey.

The spirituality of the great religions presupposes this Axial consciousness. Monasticism is a striking example. It is one of the most distinctive forms of spirituality developed in the Axial Period in Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism and emerged later in Christianity. The spirituality of primitive peoples was rich and sophisticated. It took shape within the horizons of cosmic consciousness transmitting itself in rituals and myths. The monk emerged; a marginal person who separated himself from the community, from material goods and from fertility cycles, practicing poverty and celibacy as a wandering beggar or member of a monastic community sharing a radical lifestyle.

This Axial Period produced a form of consciousness that released enormous energies shaping the world religions. It freed the human spirit from nature, allowed individuals to discover the image of God, made possible an individual spiritual journey leading to personal enlightenment. It awakened the individual moral conscience and brought forth philosophical reason. It also alienated man from the earth, from his rootedness in the geosphere and biosphere and ultimately led to secularization of the West.

Cousins believes we are currently in a Second Axial Period. Like the first, it has been developing for centuries and reaching a critical point. It is also effecting a radical transformation of consciousness. It is global in two ways: 1) it encompasses the entire human community on the planet in all of its historical experience; 2) in recovering its rootedness in the earth. Here, the religions of the world must cultivate an awareness of our rootedness in the earth, as Teilhard intuited that the noosphere was rooted in the geosphere and biosphere. We must recognize the value of the secular whose energy must be grounded against running amok and destroying life on our planet.

Teilhard's profile of the saint in this phase of history is one who makes active all the energies of the earth and human sphere directing them to fulfillment of the total cosmic process:

The saint, the Christian saint, as we now understand him and look for him, will not be the man who is the most successful in escaping from matter and mastering it completely; he will be the man who seeks to make all his powers—gold, love, or freedom—transcend themselves and cooperate in the consummation of Christ, and who so realizes for us the ideal of the faithful servant of evolution.⁷⁹

Teilhard thought religion should energize and animate human creative potential in building the earth and developing human community while respecting the earth and the total environment. Cousins says it is here that Pre-Axial and Axial consciousness should be integrated. Primitive peoples have a sense of belonging to nature, are in harmony with natural processes and respect the earth as sacred and consider the total environment as a divine gift. A synthesis of the consciousness of both is essential as we face our ecological crises.

The Second Axial Period challenges us to advance a new integration of spiritual and material, sacred and secular, into a global human energy. Spiritually, we must recover the Pre-

⁷⁹ HB, 170.

Axial modes of cosmic and collective consciousness without relinquishing the subjective, reflective critical awareness of the Axial Period. This integration will usher an extraordinarily complex form of consciousness. The spiritual energies of religion will be assimilated with the physical energies of the secular.

Because he was a Christian, Teilhard approached the integration of matter and spirit from the doctrine of the cosmic Christ. In the Second Axial Period, all the world religions will face this issue in a new way. All religions will be confronted with the common problems that menace our planet. Each religion will face these issues from their own perspectives and with their own resources. They may discover in their own traditions what Teilhard meant by the universal Christ. The way religions relate to these concrete problems must be through the complexified religious consciousness that is emerging in the dialogue of religions.

In the Second Axial milieu, Teilhard's thought has special meaning for the religious phenomenon today. He implores us to wake up, to take collective responsibility for the future, for the survival of life and for the evolutionary process. He shows us the way by highlighting the stages of the spiritual journey. The spiritual journey is neither embedded in the cosmic processes nor is it a journey away from the cosmos. The cosmos itself is on the spiritual journey. In Teilhardian language, geogenesis, biogenesis and noogenesis are stages of a single cosmic-spiritual journey. Cousins states that the present religious mutation and transformation of consciousness represents a stage of enlightenment along this spiritual journey when it becomes truly global by encompassing the planet and embracing its roots in the earth.

E. In sum:

Teilhard's vision has led us, with the help of nuances from Cousins, through the spheres of cosmic evolution, universal human history, the history of the Catholic Church specifically and religion generally. His vision is dynamic, not static, advancing toward a new humanity with its implications of a new relationship between humans and earth.

Teilhard's vision is an expression, partly, of an awakening to the mutation we are undergoing in our era. His interpretation of this anomaly is characterized as a dramatic acceleration of the process of divine incarnation. The commencement of this global era is a prime feature of the milieu in which a new sapiential Christianity will ensue.

Our dominant forms of consciousness, originating from a first and a second Axial period must be integrated as we shift from a divergent to a convergent course acquiring a "twofold global consciousness." The new union of human convergence occurs through the realization of a new degree of *love*. This will entail "a shift from an emerging 'global brain' to a 'global heart' not yet discovered. The release of this unitive power is contingent on the emergence of a unifying personal *center*: the Christ-Omega."⁸⁰

Under the great and irresistible forces of the cosmic dimension "there is only one way in which the tide can flow: the way of ever increasing unification. . . . The last day of Man will coincide for Mankind with the maximum of its tightening and in-folding upon itself."⁸¹

Teilhard introduces us to a bold christocentric synthesis of planetary evolution, a human history of convergence, and a transformation of humanity unified and assembled around an emerging personal center.

⁸⁰ FW, 154.

⁸¹ FM, 124.

Teilhard expands our field of human meaning. The scope of our intelligibility now includes earth as well as an entire evolutionary narrative. Cousins' gloss contributes texture and refinement to our understanding of epochal shifts within Teilhard's narrative.

Teilhard found in his vision an "indestructible meaning."⁸² His spirituality is that of a visionary. "That is both its appeal, because we find ourselves fascinated by the wise man and his wisdom, and its peril, because our ordinary modes of consciousness are ill-adapted to understanding visionary utterance."⁸³

⁸² Donald P. Gray, "A New Creation Story," in T21, 27. First published in *Teilhard Studies* 2 (spring 1979).

⁸³ *Ibid.*

VI. THOMAS MERTON

A. Background and Introduction

Thomas Merton will continue to play an important role as a new Christian wisdom unfolds. Most of his canon can be called sapiential. He can only really be met in his own words so it is impossible to break down and extract the sapiential Merton briefly. He has become part of an American inheritance who brought spiritual tradition to life for this culture in our own language with our own sensibility. He was the lamp stand upon which spiritual realization burned most brightly. *Silent Lamp* is the name Chinese philosopher John Wu gave to Merton two years before he died. Later, in honor of Merton, he wrote:

Silent Lamp! Silent Lamp!
I only see its radiance,
But hear not its voice!
Spring beyond the world!⁸⁴

It is an apt metaphor for the healing light that still spreads from his life and work to people everywhere. Merton is the contemporary Christian sapiential writer who played a crucial role in many people's spiritual awakening.

In Thomas Merton and his writings, we engage in sapiential thought for we meet a creative sapiential mind. Through him the patristic and medieval tradition and contemporary sapiential mystique come together. "We encounter 'the love of learning and the desire for God' in a new and ever-evolving realization."⁸⁵ Jean Leclercq recognized in Merton, his friend, a further development of the tradition that he had helped to bring to light. Recalling the letters that

⁸⁴ William H. Shannon, *The Silent Lamp* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 4; hereafter, SL.

⁸⁵ Bruno Barnhart, *The Future of Wisdom* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 35; hereafter, FW.

he had received from Merton, he wrote,

From the very first one of those I had kept, dated 1950, he expressed his hope of seeing formed in his country's monasteries men capable of "cultivating in their souls the grain that is the Word of God" and of bearing fruit in the field of spiritual theology. He himself never ceased to work toward this goal.⁸⁶

In the same introduction, Leclercq ranks Merton "with the Fathers of the early Church and those of the Middle Ages. . . . Just as they drew from the cultures of their own times in order to make it a part of their inner experience, so did Merton work in our times toward bringing 'the good news' to the world, less by converting individuals than by christianizing cultures."⁸⁷

Merton has enjoyed wide and enduring popularity. Three major reasons for this are: the pivotal moment of history in which he lived, his personal spiritual experience, and his singular power as a writer through which this experience was able to reach millions of people. The voice in Merton's writings is subjective, first person. He is, thus, in the tradition of the White Monks before him who developed the tropological (or moral, personal, subjective) sense of Scriptures. Merton speaks not only out of the medieval tradition but out of the highly developed individuality of a modern Western person. This modern subjectivity is intensified by his artistic personality and sensibility. He is a musical instrument vibrating with what he experiences, discovers and ponders.

Marked by the experience of unitive contemplation, Merton continually readapts himself to the essence of his contemplative vocation, the True Self. This non-dual Self he transmitted

⁸⁶ Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (New York: Doubleday, 1973), ix; hereafter CWA.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, xx.

through the modern Western sensibilities of his personal self, a subjectivity in this world. This is diversely expressed in dual forms for Merton, the monk and poet, represented by his correlated monastic contemplative and secular humanistic mind and thought.

Distinguishing the writer from the contemplative in Merton is not always easy. At times, he experienced a strong tension between the two. The particular power of his writing thrives on the boundary of these two spheres. Merton's writing quality is ever sapiential in its delicacy and tinge. His prose sometimes converts into poetry. His poetry reflects a luminous contemplative spirit. In his explicitly spiritual writings, it is often impossible to discern the boundary between idealized imaginative writing and actual contemplative experience.

In whatever genre he chooses, Merton appears autobiographical. William Shannon says, "It is a fact that a book of undisguised autobiography [speaking here of *The Seven Storey Mountain*] established once and for all his reputation as a writer. . . .and turned him to a form of writing that was clearly more congenial to his talent. Merton is at his best in self-revelatory writing."⁸⁸

His intense subjectivity and supple intelligence vibrates with every expression. The tone ranges from clear, poignant, luminous transparency, to obscure, acidic, veiled implication and indelibly evocative. Clearly, Merton thinks and feels as he writes and communicates this feeling as well as hints of the significance. Merton's subjectivity does not customarily provide clear structures and sharp dividers except for one patently obvious line through the center of his frequently antithetical vision, that is, between real and unreal, light and darkness, secular⁸⁹ and

⁸⁸ SL, 18-19.

⁸⁹ See CWA, 143-56 where Merton places a neutral value on "secular"; see *The Inner Experience* for its negative value; cited in FW, 195.

sacred, surface and depth. The syntax distinguishing Merton's thought is the very pronounced straight line between false self and true self, and between the other pairs of opposing terms that cohere with these two.⁹⁰ Reality is seen vitally and organically within an open and undefined space of mystery rather than a rational framework.⁹¹

"Merton's theology is elusive, implicit and rarely precisely objectified. Beyond the basic dual nature with its shifting terms,"⁹² says Barnhart, there is no Mertonian blueprint. The universal person is the nucleus of this vision where theology disappears. After his death, fellow Cistercian Armand Viellieux wrote,

Merton did not elaborate a new system of spirituality. There is nothing particularly new in the things he thought. My impression is that he will remain known in history not so much by the things he wrote as by what he was. His gift seems to have been the ability to integrate into a unified personal experience not only the different currents of tradition, but also the deep spiritual movements of our time, and to share that experience in a unique manner.⁹³

Merton often plays the quasi-observer and commentator who borrows everything from someone else. His method is sometimes loose and relaxed as if he is a contemplative journalist, with noted effect. Instead of a structured, objective vision, Merton entrusted his readers with the light of his sensitive subjectivity. He opened for his students and wider audience the things of this world to share with him the beauty, depth, and simplicity within them. In 1963, in the first of a series of "circular letters," Merton writes: "There are three gifts I have received for which I can never be grateful enough: first, my Catholic faith; second, my monastic vocation; third, my

⁹⁰ See Anne E. Carr, *A Search for Wisdom and Spirit: Thomas Merton's Theology of the Self*, especially "The Story of the Self," 121-40; cited in FW, 195.

⁹¹ The clear exception was Merton's *Ascent to Truth*; Merton later said this book was one of his worst.

⁹² FW, 36.

⁹³ Armand Viellieux, OCSO, "Monk on a Journey," 263.

calling to be a writer and share my beliefs with others.”⁹⁴ Recipients of Merton’s bequeathed gifts of communicated experience have been edified, savoring his musical transmission of the inner journey.

B. Early Merton: A Contemplative Gospel

In his early years of monastic life, Merton must have been favored with extraordinary graces of contemplative experience. From these heights, he proclaimed his probably impossible gospel of pure contemplation. The vision is of a perfectionist, radically polarized; between the true self and the false self no place is left for the ordinary, mortal human being; we feel little compassion in this rigorous young contemplative. Yet his writing is luminous, powerful, deeply evocative, and drew hundreds of young Americans into monasteries.

While contemplation will continue to be Merton’s central preoccupation, his doctrine of *pure* contemplation will gradually shed its exclusivity. A different spirit and rhythm, a new freedom and humanity in his writing shall emerge. Tracking Merton’s writings over the years from youthful zeal to sober maturity, we are apparently following the evolution of his own spiritual experience as well.

C. Broadening: A Sapiential Humanism

During his late years, Merton started to habitually use the word “sapiential” with a broad and inclusive application seemingly unrelated to the classical Christian wisdom tradition. In an essay on William Faulkner, he wrote:

⁹⁴ Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends*. Edited by Robert E. Daggy. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989), 89.

I might say at once that creative writing and imaginative criticism provide a privileged area for wisdom in the modern world. At times one feels they do so even more than current philosophy and theology. The literary and creative current of thought that has been enriched and stimulated by depth psychology, comparative religion, social anthropology, existentialism, and the renewal of classical, patristic, Biblical, and mystical studies has brought in a sapiential harvest which is not to be despised. Let me mention some of the more obvious examples: T.S. Eliot both as critic and poet, Boris Pasternak, St.-John Perse, D.H. Lawrence, and William Butler Yeats. Jacques Maritain's *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* illustrates what I mean, as do D.T. Suzuki's *Zen and Japanese Culture* and William Carlos Williams's *In the American Grain*. A great deal of what I call "sapiential" thinking has come out in studies of Melville and of the American novel in general, as well as in some of the recent Milton and Shakespeare criticism. I was fortunate to study in college under "sapiential" teachers like Mark Van Doren and Koseph Wood Krutch. In the classics Jane Harrison, Werner Jaeger, and F.M. Cornford have left us "sapiential" material.⁹⁵

In this essay, Merton departs from the explicit sapiential language of the Christian tradition, adopting a language of symbol, myth, "efficacious sign-situations," and such archetypal realities as initiation, and presenting Faulkner as a contemporary wisdom writer. He crosses two boundary lines at once: from explicit to implicit sapiential writing and from Christian to secular.⁹⁶

Wisdom is now a human, a *personal* thing for Merton: it is not simply unitive experience. He insists that wisdom is *creative*, expressive: it is in the imaginative literature that he finds the richest deposits of sapiential thought and writing today. Merton's characteristic personalism and his acknowledged existentialism are clearly visible. He continues: "The wisdom approach to man seeks to apprehend man's value and destiny in their global and even ultimate

⁹⁵ Thomas Merton, "Baptism in the Forest," 99; also cited in FW, 37.

⁹⁶ See Merton's "The Bear" on *Credence Cassettes* (Kansas City, MO: National Catholic Reporter, 198?); also James Finley in *Christian Meditation* (Boulder, CO: Sounds True, 2003) for Merton insights from Christian symbols in William Faulkner's short story, *The Bear*.

significance. . . . sapiential thought resorts to poetic myth and to religious or archetypal symbol. . . ."⁹⁷ Merton distinguishes two aspects of wisdom:

. . . metaphysical and speculative, an apprehension of the radical structure of human life, an intellectual appreciation of man in his human potentialities and in their fruition, (2) . . . moral, practical, and religious, an awareness of man's life as a task to be undertaken at great risk, in which tragic failure and creative transcendence are both possible. . . . a peculiar understanding of conflict, of the drama of human existence, and especially of the typical causes and signs of moral disaster. . . . beyond the conscious and systematic moral principles which may be embodied in an ethical doctrine and guide our conscious activity. Wisdom presupposes a certain intuitive grasp of unconscious motivations as these are embodied in archetypes and symbolic aspects of the psyche.⁹⁸

Two dimensions of Merton's expanding spiritual universe have been identified: his quest for pure contemplative experience or union with God and his sapiential breadth extending to everything of truly human significance.

D. The Emerging Direction

Merton's story is a double movement detected in the evolution of his writing: (1) from pure spirit to embodied spirit, from pure contemplation to a divine immanence in human existence; (2) from rational clarity and translucent prose into deliberately elliptical, obscure, and ironic forms of writing.

The rhythm of Merton's life can be seen with the polarity of monk and poet or contemplative and creative artist. Drawn first to the wisdom poetry of William Blake, after his conversion and entry in to monastic life, he pored over the writings of the church fathers and the medieval monks. "Contemplation" had become his engrossed center of interest and quest. He

⁹⁷ Thomas Merton, "Baptism in the Forest," 99.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 100.

further explored this contemplative direction as he studied the Asian traditions. During approximately the last decade of his life, he moved back toward the world he had left behind, particularly through thinkers and writers with whom he felt a great affinity. He was moving further into the imagination at the same time apparently finding the wide ecumenical territory of the sapiential, in which he was able to rediscover everything he loved. His newly conceived sense of the sapiential world included the mystery of Christ and the archetypal contemplative East. It also included everything of value that had been left outside the walls of his earlier theological enclosure he earlier perceived as secularly toxic. Merton was coming to realize the immanent force in a new Christian wisdom of incarnation to awakened divinity within the human person in the active, creative mode.

The early ascent of Merton's Catholic and monastic triumphalism, the subtle self-contentment of the favored contemplative and celebrated author, gradually yielded to a more mature, sober experience of the life of faith and deeper awareness of solidarity in the human condition and in collective guilt. At the threshold of postmodernity, of global consciousness and global participation on every level, his passionate intuitive mind, his continual struggling toward truth and his expressive genius are ingredient in his elevating prophetic voice. At this stage, he began to write often in the language of paradox and enigma, arriving at a poetry of such high acidity that it becomes anti-poetry. In this sarcastic inversion of his earlier romantic exaltation, few of his readers are inclined to follow him. Perhaps he is "faithfully reproducing from his own subjectivity, the corresponding 'evening' phase of the life of Jesus in the Gospels, of every human life, and of his own Western world at this global threshold."

On his way from explicit conceptual theology to embedded meanings which is modern imaginative literature, Merton seems both to be finding his own most natural voice and to be learning the universal *language of the person*, which he calls “existentialism” or “sapiential writing.”

Merton could often seem to be descending into a gathering darkness as well as to be experiencing the discovery and excitement of an approaching dawn. He shares his exhilaration at the sudden new hope of a current liberation of the Christian spirit as when he appeals to his readers one of his favorite poets of the sapiential world.

All really valid poetry (poetry that is fully alive and asserts its reality by its power to generate imaginative life) is a kind of recovery of paradise. Not that the poet comes up with a report that he, an unusual man, has found his own way back to Eden; but the living line and the generative association, the new sound, the music, the structure, are somehow grounded in a renewal of vision and hearing so that he who reads and understands recognizes that here is a new start, a new creation. Here the world gets another chance. Here . . . the reader discovers himself getting another start in life, in hope, in imagination. . . .⁹⁹

Merton endures as expounder of the unitive divine light within the individual self, the personal subject. This light is now a transformative spark. He is a prophet of the new, creative wisdom that is reviving from centuries of slumber and the violence of revolution.

Considering Merton’s charisma, Armand Viellieux imagines him as a spiritual dancer who gradually moves from stiffness to grace and freedom, finally, no longer “teaching,” he is able to embrace every person from every horizon and carry them away in the whirlwinds of a dance that can be increasingly daring, yet sure and peaceful, for the dancer was solidly rooted in the Source of the Dance.

⁹⁹ Thomas Merton, “Louis Zukofsky: The Paradise Ear,” 128.

Except for the point, the still point,
There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.¹⁰⁰

This sentiment of Merton the dancer was dramatized to close the first International Thomas Merton Society general meeting at Bellarmine College in 1989. Within this well chosen image of the wildly whirling dancer rooted steadfastly in the Ground, the invisible Source, is the hidden truth of Merton's era and his own personal unfolding. "In his development, we can feel the liberating expansive energy of the epochal event of Vatican II in the world of Catholicism."¹⁰¹ Bruno Barnhart uses the language of east and west to speak of the inward and outward dynamic breaking out of "the container of absolutized institutional and doctrinal structure":

The Christian spirit was simultaneously freed to move eastward, that is, *inward*, to the Source, the naked divine mystery and west-ward, that is *outward*, toward the formerly forbidden "other," into the world and its religious traditions, into the depths of the modern and postmodern secular. As in few other figures, we can observe in Merton both directions of this expansive movement: inward, eastward to the absolute pole of nondual experience, and outward, westward to the unconfined dynamism of the modern and postmodern person and world. If we have not found the structure of a new spiritual theology in Merton, it may be because he prefers to invite us to grow into these two dimensions of Christian freedom: inward, as it were, to the depths of the Father, outward in the unbounded movement of the Holy Spirit. "Merton opens to us a sapiential space beyond the *apparent* boundaries of Christian faith in both these directions."¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ Armand Viellieux, in *Thomas Merton Monk*, 263. The final two lines of verse are from T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, "Burnt Norton," I, 191.

¹⁰¹ Thomas Merton, "Louis Zukofsky: The Paradise Ear," 41.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 41.

VII. THOMAS MERTON'S HIDDEN CHRIST

*The helpless one, abandoned to sweet sleep,
him the gentle one will awake: Sophia.*

—Thomas Merton, 1962

A. *Sapiential Humanism: A turn toward the world*¹⁰³

How do we speak of Christ in an age of pluralism and increasing violence between cultures and nations? The role of imagination is pivotal. A theological method must not narrowly consider the rational or empirical mind but must also take into account the whole person to successfully communicate faith or foster interfaith dialogue. If imagination governs our relationship with God assembling and making sense of the whole, then, what does a christology employing this feature look like? It can be difficult to specify a christology that includes spiritual theology and mystical poetry. If one adds the practice of Zen as an influence, a systematic presentation becomes apparently more dubious. One can argue it is not the real thing usually debated in the class room. It can be perceived as misguided, perplexingly formless and clumsy. The types of christology usually formulated are intellectual puzzles to be solved. A symbolic christology intent on the inner experience, breaks through the intellectual framework for the larger intention of “realization.”

One movement does not preclude the other. In other words, contemplative experience and the intellectual struggle are two movements informing each other. The aim is to structure, support and free the living experience of God. The inner dynamism of faith, the contemplative

¹⁰³ Merton's sapiential world in his mature years included everything of value that he had once left behind and considered the “toxic-secular.” His earlier subtle contentment behind the walls of his theological enclosure awakened to a new wisdom of faith and depth of love in solidarity with the human condition. Thus, Merton became a transformative spark in the world, a prophet of new, creative wisdom that continues, segueing through the threshold of postmodernity, of global consciousness and global participation on every level.

dimension, must not be impinged or closed off by an academic or speculative mode but, on the contrary, must be enhanced. As Thomas Merton's life demonstrated, to do christology is to "become fully impregnated in our mystical tradition,"¹⁰⁴ and to "bring out clearly the mystical dimensions of our theology, hence to help us to do what we must really do: live our theology . . . fully, deeply, in its totality."¹⁰⁵

The Wisdom tradition seems the most vivid means of expressing Love and Presence that breaks into the world; "a *living experience* of unity in Christ which far transcends all conceptual formulations."¹⁰⁶ This tradition includes sources in the Judeo-Christian tradition as well as from non-Christian sources. A mystical theology construed under the light of Wisdom with an engaged Eastern and Western spirituality, appealing to the theological dignity of humans and creation, and calling for awakening opens to an integral spirituality of engagement in the world.

1. A Mystical-Prophetic Theology Emerges

What warrants a sustained consideration of a sapiential approach to contemporary theology? The argument is that without "a poetic dimension of theological thinking or even a theological literature in search of a poetic form and voice,"¹⁰⁷ theology will remain largely impoverished. Merton's life and corpus of capacious imagination, the strategies of Abraham Joshua Heschel's "depth theology" as philosopher-poet as well as John Henry Newman's "balanced appeal to the

¹⁰⁴ Thomas Merton, *An Introduction to Christian Mysticism: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition 3*, edited by Patrick F. O'Connell (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian, 2008), 35; hereafter, ICM.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*; also Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (New York: Doubleday, 1971), 175-76 where Merton cites Vatican II's *Dei Verbum* 8 to accent the same point; hereafter, CWA.

¹⁰⁶ Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968), 39; hereafter ZBA.

¹⁰⁷ Mark S. Burrows, "Raiding the Inarticulate: Mysticism, Poetics, and the Unlanguageable" in *Minding the Spirit: The Study of Christian Spirituality* edited by Elizabeth A. Dreyer and Mark S. Burrows. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2005), 341-61 at 348.

imagination as the dynamic faculty that aids and enlarges reason, give considerable sanction to the tradition of monastic theology in which Merton stands.”¹⁰⁸

Crucial to any understanding of a mature integral spirituality is its increasing prophetic and global turn; an ever deepening sensitivity and compassion ensues formed not only by living relationships of family, friends and community but also a more deeply rooted awareness and compassion for the global milieu, creation and cosmos. This unfolding inner experience spawns an ever expanding and expansive animated religious imagination imbued with new vitality and a basic confidence in the power of *symbolic* language.

In archeological terms, locating the tell and pursuing the personal spiritual dig elicits a parallel process of ever widening the range of language best suited to express the inner experience. In responding to awakening as well as attempting to frame the breakthroughs of consciousness and naming the experience of God anew, is it possible or even desirable to translate mystical language into systematic or fundamental theology?

Sapiential theology represents a distinctive response to the profound challenges of modernity and the massive violence of the past century. It can potentially break open and potentially revitalize theology and spirituality in the areas of theological anthropology, cosmic theology, environmental theology and sexual theology. This is because it is a theology of crisis of sorts attempting to recover a biblical vision of both the primordial unity of the human community and the whole of creation from the beginning. This recognition of human unity was succinctly put by Merton in his famous last public talk, “My brothers and sisters, we are already one.”

¹⁰⁸ Christopher Pramuk, *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Merton* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009), xxiv; hereafter STM.

Contemplative spirituality, it must be emphasized, is an everyday way of life—a commitment to tested means of practices in the Christian tradition which cultivate simplicity, purity and poverty of heart and a wider love for the world. It is the praxis refining the “a priori disposition required for realizing, in a holistic and transformative way, the sacramental presence of God in all people and things; it is the prayerful ground of sanity, of peace.”¹⁰⁹

Sapiential spirituality’s method is a process of growing into the truth about the mystery of God while growing also into the truth of the mystery of the human person.¹¹⁰ If Wisdom is the unifying thread in one’s religious imagination, this would include “crossing over” to other traditions fostering a more all-embracing and comprehensive approach to christology. A more feminine nurturing image of Christ, for instance, might be imagined. O’Collin’s asks, “At the end of three millennia of a strongly masculine consciousness reflected in the Bible, what might this feminine, nurturing image convey about Christ’s salvific function for all people?”¹¹¹

Both a christocentric and theocentric dynamic is at play in Christian spirituality. Thomas Merton, for example, shifted his lens from a descending to a more historically conscious ascending christology from below as he opened his heart to the world.¹¹² Some would regard his a “universalist, theocentric spirituality.” Pramuk suggests a more fluid reading of the mature

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, xxvi.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, xxviii. See note on this insight vis. the heart of Russian sophiology’s “positive Chalcedonianism”: the idea that through open, mutually enriching dialogue with other disciplines, theology must continually “fill out” the content of christology in both its divine and its fully human dimensions.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, xxix. Citing Gerald O’Collins who, citing Elizabeth Johnson, concludes his survey of contemporary christology by gesturing toward a “Christology of presence,” a variation on Karl Rahner’s anonymously graced world but proceeding from “the image of Lady Wisdom.” (*Christology: A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Study of Jesus* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1995], 304; citing Elizabeth Johnson, “Jesus the Wisdom of God: A Biblical Basis for a Non-androcentric Christology,” *Ephemerides theologicae Lovanienses* 41 [1985], 261-94).

¹¹² *Ibid.*, xxix.

Merton which can be applied generally to contemporary sapiential spirituality: “not too quick to reject a theocentric or universalist metaphysic...It is important not to draw too sharp a dichotomy between a christocentric and theocentric spirituality, as if the latter term can *only* mean a spirituality ‘sans Christ.’”¹¹³

The christocentric and theocentric dynamic ingredient in Christian spirituality is especially the case in a contemporary Christian integral contemplative spirituality. It would be apt to advance this spirituality’s extraordinary catholicity as paradigmatic revealing the mysterious hidden presence of Christ.

In our contemporary world, (perhaps especially for those who pause in wonder before the recovering encounter of theology and the mystical), there is a need for a compelling method of doing theology in a contemplative, mystical manner in which to live into the rich matrix of faith drawing from it living wisdom made luminous by engagement in manifold wisdom traditions west and east (both Asian and Orthodox), and kataphatic and apophatic modes of knowing within the Christian tradition. The global pressures in so many spheres including the mutations witnessed in recent church history affirms the need for a bold theological imagination and a faith intensely aware of the divine presence alive in the world.

A mature Christian faith continues to deepen an understanding of Christ as the heart of tradition and continually renews commitment not to compromise adherence to faith, prayer and praxis. This faith in the hidden Christ, the Wisdom of God in who the cosmos is created and sustained, is the catalyst of a constructive explosion of heart and consciousness that moves the person to say, “yes” to the world/*other*. Merton refers to his “yes” experience, in *Conjectures of a*

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, xxx.

Guilty Bystander: “The more I am able to affirm others, to say, ‘yes’ to them in myself, by discovering them in myself and myself in them, the more real I am. I am fully real if my own heart says, “yes” to *everyone*.”¹¹⁴

2. *Christ is Center*

We can truly be universal, “catholic,” in our inclusive vision of others if we hold our center which is Christ.¹¹⁵ Contemplative awareness of this center organically moves one to seek communion with other seekers to explore the commonalities that those who pursued truth found.¹¹⁶ Attention to religious *experience*, the divine indwelling, personal transformation rather than revealed names, doctrinal formulas and conceptual frameworks gives us the opportunity to connect in a deep way with others of varied backgrounds.¹¹⁷ On this personal level, faith transmission takes place in real and meaningful ways within and without ones tradition. In his autobiography, after meeting Merton, the Dalai Lama said, “ This was the first time that I had been struck by such a feeling of spirituality in anyone who professed Christianity. . .It was Merton who introduced me to the real meaning of the word ‘Christian.’”¹¹⁸

While dogmatic rigor is not necessarily the criteria of Christian authenticity, this does not imply a marginalization of theology, religious indifferentism or a vague theism. On the contrary, mystical experience and contemplative vision must be grounded in traditional categories and

¹¹⁴ CGB, 144.

¹¹⁵ See STM note on “inclusivism,” 2.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 3. Citing Lawrence Cunningham in *Monastic Vision*, 63, “[One simply cannot understand Thomas Merton if one does not understand him as a monk.], 17.

¹¹⁷ A.M. Allchin, “Worship of the Whole Creation,” in MHPH, 118, cited STM, 3.

¹¹⁸ See *Freedom in Exile: The Autobiography of the Dalai Lama* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990), 189. Also cited STM, 3.

scripture.¹¹⁹ Again, we turn to our modern “Father of the Church,” Thomas Merton. His approach described by William Shannon is deeply Christ centered.¹²⁰

It is this theological but more deeply personal faith in Christ that allows him the uncanny ability to connect deeply and to “cross over” to other cultures and traditions. Lawrence Cunningham notes the “Christian mantras” punctuating Merton’s *Asian Journal* written during his final journey and sojourn into the world of Asian religions.¹²¹ Like Merton, the contemporary Christian contemplative must disavow indifferentism as we engage a world of cultural and religious plurality. Again, in the midst of his pivotal and pioneering years, Merton was Christ centered, highly trinitarian and drew from “a constellation of biblical, patristic, monastic and modern sources.”¹²² The intention, here, is not to defend Merton’s or any Christian contemplative’s orthodoxy but to suggest that there is an inherent risk in a theological, very personal, imaginative and inclusive posture toward others in a secular, pluralistic and historically conscious world. It is obvious, that those without a contemplative bent are more inclined to hold on to the historical Jesus and less inclined toward the Christ of faith. The experience of the monk, mystic, contemplative is to “taste and see” the hidden Christ as *real* and a *fact* of

¹¹⁹ William Shannon, “Christology,” in TME, 51-54, at 51. Cited in STM, 3: See also Harvey Egan, “Negative Way,” in Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality, edited by Michael Downey (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1993), 700-704; and idem, “Affirmative Way,” *ibid.*, 14-17.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.* In STM, Pramuk notes that the apophatic or negative way is a way of approaching and speaking about God that stresses God’s radical dissimilarity from creation, God’s ineffability and unknowability, and thus is characterized by leaving behind all concepts, thoughts, images, and symbols. The cataphatic or affirmative way emphasizes the similarity between God and creation, or more precisely, the conviction that God truly manifests Godself in the world and can really be experienced and known, at least analogically, in and through concepts, images, and symbols. Both the apophatic and cataphatic ways are firmly rooted in biblical spirituality and the Christian mystical tradition, and both come to play more or less in any authentically Christian spiritual path and in Catholic theology.

¹²¹ Lawrence S. Cunningham, “Crossing Over in the Late Writings of Thomas Merton,” in *Toward an Integrated Humanity: Thomas Merton’s Journey*, edited by M. Basil Pennington (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian, 1988), 192-201, at 198.

¹²² STM, 4. On Merton’s disavowal of indifferentism see DWL, 259; CGB, 144.

imagination. Whether creeping in “from above” or “from below” there is danger in fashioning Christ or Jesus into a projection of our own “consciously fabricated self.” Merton would call this idolatry “fatal.”¹²³ Merton describes his Christ as the “Christ of the ikons,” “the Christ of immediate experience all down through the mystical tradition.”¹²⁴ While many considerable ambiguities, provisional thinking, and revising make up this basic disposition, it is this disposition of refining the reflection of real experience that distinguishes the method of the mystic orientation from that of modern theology’s focus on the historical Jesus.¹²⁵ For the contemplative, we *know* Jesus because he *is risen* and comes to us experientially and transformatively in us. For the Christian contemplative, to do christology without substantive immersion into the mystical tradition would seriously cripple any chance at a mature and maturing notion of christology. This reference to the mystical would include the liturgical dimension, creed and praxis.

3. Contemplative Experience, Reflection and Intelligibility

The hidden Christ is not abstract or ahistorical. Mysticism and contemplation is not for a few. As Merton wrote to D.T. Suzuki, “The Christ we seek is within us, in our inmost self, *is* our inmost, and yet infinitely transcends ourselves.”¹²⁶ It is largely the function of our awareness

¹²³ Ibid., 5. See also Roger Haight’s *Jesus, Symbol of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999); idem, *The Future of Christology* (New York: Continuum, 2005). Pramuk cites Haight’s cogent analysis of the *lack* of intelligibility of traditional dogmatic language in a postmodern cultural milieu, stressing that it is not enough to simply describe Merton’s vision as “christocentric” or “trinitarian” and be done with it, as if such descriptions could secure the viability or even orthodoxy of a particular approach today.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 643.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 7. Citing John Henry Newman in the year he was made a cardinal: “Theology makes progress by being always alive to its own fundamental uncertainties” (cited in John Coulson, “Belief and Imagination,” *The Downside Review* 90 [1972]: 1-14, at 14).

¹²⁶ HGL, 564.

that the hidden Christ is revealed or, better put, realized. The contemplative becomes experientially aware of the inheritance of every Christian living in the space between the “present and the future, moving back and forth between them, tasting here and now ‘in the body. . .in the vessel’ some piece of heaven, a foretaste, ‘a pledge.’”¹²⁷

In *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, Merton remarks sadly that the “obsession with doctrinal formulas, juridical order and ritual exactitude has often made people forget that the heart of Catholicism is a *living experience* of unity in Christ which far transcends all conceptual formulations. What too often has been overlooked, in consequence, is that Catholicism is the taste and experience of eternal life.”¹²⁸

The seismic shifts in human consciousness amidst the radical cultural changes bring challenge and pressure to bear on doctrinal development. Theologians like Raimon Panikkar, Edward Schillebeeckx, Roger Haight and Jacques Dupuis, are engaged in discerning and searching for right theological forms to express faith anew today. These efforts are to insure that central theological symbols and images are stretched and challenged to purify their tradition safeguarding against corrupt, inelastic or intractable systems.

The space between theological reflection and contemplative experience is the problem of intelligibility. How to clearly communicate to the living experience and imagination of people so that they may embrace a spirituality with robust vitality has been a concern through the ages

¹²⁷ William Harmless, *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 392. The influence of Cassian on Merton, Pramuk remarks, (STM, 9), probably cannot be overstated. Cassian’s whole program is directed toward the “divinization” (*theosis*) of the individual monk, with “purity of heart” as the proximate goal (*skopos*) to the ultimate joy (*telos*) of the kingdom of heaven, Merton’s theology dramatically broadens the contemplative way to include all Christians, potentially all human beings in the world community. See ZBA, 130-33; also Thomas Merton, *Cassian and the Fathers: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition*, edited by Patrick F. O’Connell (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian, 2005).

¹²⁸ ZBA, 39.

no less so today. This problem of how to communicate the Christian faith “in such a way that it can find real purchase in the experience and imagination of people today,”¹²⁹ was a major concern of Merton. For Merton, the “critical tipping point occurs when Christian spirituality and the christology supporting it, loses ‘its truly kenotic and eschatological character.’”¹³⁰ The vitality of Christian spirituality historically was also threatened by triumphalism’s inflation, imperialism, and more recently, the contemporary despairing of real contact with God. The question of intelligibility will be at least implicitly addressed in this paper.

Imagine an experiential theology refusing to regard dogma as a finished thing or privileging “special historical and cultural residues,”¹³¹ breaking itself open repeatedly to the wisdom and presence of God wherever it may be found. This would include the possibility of “crossing over” into other cultures and traditions (dialoguing and converging with Zen, for instance).

4. Wisdom: The Theological Continuum

Wisdom, for the contemplative, is the theo-poetic nexus that becomes an integral way of life, a spirituality deeply woven in Western monasticism and Eastern Orthodoxy, going back to the ancient Christian tradition of “bridal mysticism.” The contemplative’s experience of already resting in the utterly gratuitous and unexpected embrace of God’s loving mercy are easily

¹²⁹ STM, 10.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, where Pramuk suspects one of the qualities that drew Merton intuitively to the Russian Sophia tradition is its role as a “mediating discipline,” a “both/and” conceptuality that respects both the high and low elements of the gospels, which takes Chalcedon as a revered starting point but also refuses to regard christological dogma as a finished thing (see Paul Valliere, “Sophiology as the Dialogue of Orthodoxy with the Modern World,” in *Russian Religious Thought*, edited by Judith Kornblatt and Richard Gustafson [Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996], 172-92, at 187).

discerned echoes of the mystical biblical interpretation of the Song of Songs that Bernard of Clairvaux, and other early Church Fathers have written.

For the contemplative, the discovery or rediscovery of the true self moves her to now *realize* she regards her encounter with the world an epiphany of God. This love of God seeking understanding is less interested in doctrinal precision than exploring the deep terrain of religious experience. The contemplative's "sapiential" theology is like Karl Rahner's in the sense that he "resolutely refused to divorce theology and spirituality into separate disciplines because of his conviction that one cannot exist without the other."¹³²

This mysticism (personal experience) and theology (common revelation of the mystery) of *experience*, while steeped in the monastic tradition, is available to all Christians. Theology keeps spirituality connected to community; without this grounding, spirituality can become the victim of psychological solipsism.

To *live our theology* requires and always involves a living and creative component which searches for vibrant theological forms. These inform the faith community, animate hope and are responsive to the times, so that we don't merely retrieve or import an inept, inadequate theological vision for the present historical context. This is the distinction between *what* the tradition says and *how* it is said.

When the mystical tradition is properly understood, that is to say, when it is integrally *lived*, it is far from being abstract or ahistorical. To do theology under the light of Wisdom is to affect the whole person opening to the whole world. The sapiential way offers a unique and

¹³² Harvey D. Egan, "Theology and Spirituality," in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner*, edited by Declan Marmion and Mary E. Hines (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 13-28, at 14. Also cited STM, 21.

compelling response to the epistemological dilemma of our time. It offers a kind of rationality, *seeing* and knowledge accessible to all through contemplation.

B. Theology and Symbolic Imagination

With the guidance of preeminent Wisdom teachers possessed of extraordinary facility with words and images, we have markers indicating truth and intelligibility. Through the transforming power of the imagination, we have mediating images and symbols that lead us into the realms of mercy and presence.

“For the religious or self-reflective person, regardless of religious tradition, an inner sense of God becomes the ‘true key’ for understanding the way things ‘really’ are in the world, for grasping the hidden harmony of ‘that maze of vast complicated disorder’ coming to us through the senses.”¹³³ Lacking the element of God’s realness can lead people to an empirical mentality with no interior sense of God in their imaginations. Symbols of religion can then seem to be mere notions.

There is a hidden wholeness to be found in the world despite its complexity and apparent fragmentation. There is a sense of unity despite difference that can be held together by the willing contemplative heart. The inner experience of God is trustworthy because it is real and so is its transformative effect on the mind’s grasp of reality. This contemplative wisdom culminates in a more perfect sense of the whole of things and their mutual relations.

Sapientia is the religious truths, not upon the surface of things, but hidden in a fractured world. This is truly the case for the contemplative imagination’s encounter with God in the

¹³³ See Markus, *Signs and Meanings*, 34. STM, 42 cites Markus as following on Augustine’s sign-theory where he conceives of a wider “interpretive community” (i.e., beyond the Jewish and Christian communities) formed by “those who are able to see the world of creatures as pointing beyond themselves to a Creator,” those “who hear [creation’s] outward voice and compare it with the truth within themselves.”

person of Jesus, mysteriously the source and center of reality. There is nothing abstract about this revelation; it meets us with history—facts and actions—Jesus and Resurrection.¹³⁴

1. Christ and the Sacramental Principle

“Christianity is a history supernatural, and almost scenic: it tells us what its Author is, by telling us what He has done.”¹³⁵ Pramuk says that, “Throughout his writings Newman is clear in his belief that behind Christianity and the diverse religions—“wild plants indeed but living”¹³⁶ there is a living *Someone*, not an impersonal or abstract “What” but an active and objective “Who,” to whom human beings owe their submission.”¹³⁷ There is a concreteness and intensity impressed upon the whole person that Newman names the *sacramental principle*: “The doctrine of the Incarnation is the announcement of a divine gift conveyed in a material and visible medium, it being thus that heaven and earth are in the Incarnation united. That is, it establishes in the very idea of Christianity the *sacramental principle* as its characteristic.”¹³⁸

The heart of Christian revelation is the story of God’s love “drawn out into action in accommodation to our weakness”—yet it is to be found—“not upon the surface” of things. This

¹³⁴ See John 1:14; 1 John 1:1; cited in Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 324; *Fifteen Sermons Preached Before the University of Oxford* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 216, 26; hereafter OUS.

¹³⁵ STM, 46 citing Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Ascent*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), 91-92.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 46.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ Newman, OUS, 27. Cited STM, 47.

“paradoxical attunement of both theophany and hiddenness” resonates deeply with the sapiential theologian and consciousness of the mystic.¹³⁹

A holistic kind of knowing penetrated by love is the hallmark of the mystic. This knowing is believing in the hidden Christ at the center of our being, in the world and in the mystery of the other because we love only because we have been loved by Christ. To move from faith to wisdom is to see with gratitude and wonder ever expecting to discover in new ways the presence of God.

“Religion is what man does with the presence of God. And the spirit of God is present whenever we are willing to accept it. True, God is hiding His face in our time, but He is hiding because we are evading Him.”¹⁴⁰

2. The Numinous on the Edge of Words/Prayer Meets Reality

Heschel and Merton share what Kaplan calls the “fertile paradox.” Kaplan states, “It is precisely the challenge involved in using inadequate words that drives the mind beyond words”. . . At the borders of speech we open ourselves to the positive value of silence. . . Literary reading, through its complexity, its music, its suggestiveness, points to a fuller realm of being.”¹⁴¹

¹³⁹ See Merton, *ESF*, 69; where Merton’s Hagia Sophia closes with the image of a “homeless God, lost in the night, without papers, without identification, without even a number”; (*STM*, 48) citing McCaslin (*MHPH*, 241): “Hiddenness” was a favorite theme of Soloviev in his reflections on Sophia.

¹⁴⁰ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man’s Quest for God: Studies in Prayer and Symbolism* (New York: Scribner’s, 1954), xiv; *STM*, 54.

¹⁴¹ Edward K. Kaplan, citing Heschel (*The Prophets*, 276) in *Holiness in Words: Abraham Joshua Heschel’s Poetics of Piety* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 10; hereafter HW. See also *STM*, 60.

In Christian monasticism, “Prayer is the fullest realization of responsive reading, the window of presence: ‘It is the spiritual power of the praying person that makes manifest what is dormant in the text. The aim of prayer ‘is not to find Him as an object in our minds but to find ourselves in Him’ . . . ultimately it is not the words we say but the consciousness of our poverty, of ‘speaking under His eyes,’ that makes our prayers into hyphens between heaven and earth.”¹⁴²

The heart of prayer is the existential and semantic paradox. Heschel’s account of the praying person in *Man’s Quest for God*, encapsulates his depth theology and is a beautifully penetrating description of faith:

In no other act does man experience so often the disparity between the desire for expression and the means of expression as in prayer. The inadequacy of the means at our disposal appears so tangible, so tragic, that one feels it a grace to be able to give oneself up to music, to a tone, to a song, to a chant. The wave of a song carries the soul to heights which utterable meanings can never reach. Such abandonment is no escape, nor an act of being unfaithful to the mind. For the world of unutterable meanings is the nursery of the soul, the cradle of all our ideas. It is not an escape but a return to one’s origins.

What the word can no longer yield, man achieves through the fullness of his powerlessness. The deeper the need in which one is placed through this powerlessness, the more does man reveal himself in his essence, and himself becomes expression. Prayer is more than communication, and man is more than the word. Should we feel ashamed by our inability to utter what we bear in our hearts? God loves what is left over at the bottom of the heart and cannot be expressed in words. . . .The unutterable surplus of what we feel, the sentiments that we are unable to put into words are our payment in kind to God.”¹⁴³

Heschel concisely illustrates the paradoxical and transformative experience at the heart of religious consciousness, piety and/or mysticism. He advances the use of the language of tradition, as does Merton. Importantly, he also refers to “a return to one’s origins” infused with

¹⁴² Heschel, *Man’s Quest for God*, 27; Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone*, 127, 128; STM, 64.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 39-40; STM, 65.

prayerful receptivity. Is there the spiritual aptitude and intellectual flexibility in theology to accommodate this kind of sapiential, depth mode of imaginative expression?

3. Shattering Illusion/Discerning Reality

To grasp things as they really are, there abides in the contemplative the conviction “that deeply entrenched cultural patterns of seeing must be interrupted, critically questioned, and sometimes dismantled to make way for an integrally religious way of discerning the heart of reality.” Many westerners, including Merton, have been attracted to Zen “not least for its capacity to shatter illusory, idolatrous, or solipsistic notions of ‘self,’ ‘God,’ and ‘reality.’”¹⁴⁴

While religion cultivates a habit of being, sapiential thinkers, going beyond the view of a closed reality, defend revelation as the breakthrough of the Word of God into human experience that has the capacity to liberate the modern person. Merton says that in the act of faith this breakthrough can liberate the person from “inordinate self-consciousness,...monumental self-awareness....[and] obsession with self-affirmation.”¹⁴⁵

The mystical tradition of east and west models an experiential approach that by “re-centering subjectivity from self to God, such a theology is able to, “realize” or “actualize” [the] non-symbolic content of religious discourse, electrifying “concepts frozen by ideologies, using them to surpass themselves.”¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ STM, 66.

¹⁴⁵ ZBA, 31; STM, 67.

¹⁴⁶ Kaplan, HW, 50, 49. Cited in STM, 67 where Pramuk also later considers how Merton “electrifies” and “actualizes” the “nonsymbolic content” of Christian doctrines such as the incarnation.

4. *“Raiding the Inarticulate”: Restoring a Supreme Vision*

The experience of a great mystic is always paradoxical, even disquieting, to any system. . . . Over the centuries the “friends” of Job have polished and honed their concepts until they possess an amazing perfection of logical clarity. “In this system. . . widespread everywhere today, God is not killed. He is assimilated.” In such “organized reality,” the Gospel paradox, with its explosive truth, is conjured away.¹⁴⁷

In *Minding the Spirit*, Mark Burrows speaks of the “margins where, “language reaches for an utterance that finally eludes our voice.”¹⁴⁸ To do theology “under the light of Wisdom is to do it in a mode of prayerful, sometimes painful, expectation. *Stay awake, the bridegroom is coming!*” Reflecting on the “eschatological secret” pervading the writings of Julian of Norwich, this is for Merton “the heart of theology: not solving the contradiction, but remaining in the midst of it, in peace, knowing that it is fully solved, but that the solution is secret, and will never be guessed until it is revealed. . . . The wise heart lives in Christ.”¹⁴⁹ Theology must not lose its depth dimension in confronting the irreducible numinous. The “complexity” and “paradox”¹⁵⁰ is fertile. This applies not only to “our confrontation with the unlanguageable mystery of God, but also to our encounter with the deepest mysteries of human being” and even more, the mystery of Jesus. A christology of experiential theology must break itself open to Wisdom everywhere

¹⁴⁷ Paul Evdokimov, *Women and the Salvation of the World: A Christian Anthropology on the Charisms of Women*, trans. Anthony P. Gythiel (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1994), 206-7, citing Henri de Lubac, *Meditation sur l’Église* (1954). Cited in STM, 67.

¹⁴⁸ Burrows, “Raiding the Inarticulate,” in *Minding the Spirit*, 241-61, at 349. Citing Burrows (STM, 67,34), Pramuk clarifies that by “dialectic structure” Burrows means the saying (cataphasis) and unsaying (apophasis) characteristic of mystical texts, a semantic strategy is shared by Merton, Newman and Heschel.

¹⁴⁹ CGB, 212, reflecting on the “eschatological secret” pervading the writings of Julian of Norwich, “a true theologian,” (STM, 72) citing Merton.

¹⁵⁰ See Coulson, “Belief and Imagination,” 14 as cited in STM, 73.

abiding in the natural and human landscape and finding us. This initiative is the world of revelation, heightened expectation and presence.

C. Merton's Poetic Sacramental Imagination

Poetic theology has the capacity to resonate deeply and ring true with basic human sensibilities. God is already *present*. The poetics can be a vehicle of presence for believer and nonbeliever. Edward Kaplan, Heschel's biographer, explains this convergence: "It is at the gates of poetic participation. . .that the believer and the faithless meet."¹⁵¹ This or any other theological form (iconography, Scripture, liturgy, for example) can facilitate re-centering subjectivity from self or community to God.

"The transformative dynamic unites the poet, mystic with every human being who has experienced that paradoxical moment in which one 'dies' or 'loses oneself' in the immediacy of something (some One) infinitely greater."¹⁵² Contemplatives remind us not to reclaim the subjective center too quickly for ourselves (thus becoming forgetful even contemptuous of God) by interrupting this act, interjecting the divine perspective into an imaginative casement.¹⁵³ The mystic is disquieting to the degree her theology and her very life pose an implicit challenge to any catholic worldview that has become too opaque or sure of itself.

Merton, the mystical poet par excellence, had transformed his understanding of the role of contemplation late in his life. He wrote with urgency, infused with biblical eschatological imagination, a new religious consciousness corresponding to the Vatican council's radical

¹⁵¹ Edward K. Kaplan, "Language and Reality in Abraham J. Heschel's Philosophy of Religion," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 41, no.1 (1973): 94-113, at 95. Cited in STM, 79.

¹⁵² STM, 79.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

reevaluation of Christianity's relationship with the Jewish people. In *Contemplation in a World of Action*, written in 1967, Merton said:

Today a new and more Biblical understanding of the contemplative life is called for: we must see it as a response to the dynamic Word of God in history, we must see it in light of Biblical eschatology. The contemplative finds God not only in the embrace of "pure love" alone but in the prophetic ardor of response to the Word of the Lord": not in love considered as essential good but in love that breaks through into the world of sinful men in the fire of judgement and mercy. The contemplative must see love not only as the highest and purest experience of the human heart transformed by grace, but as God's unflinching fidelity to unfaithful man.¹⁵⁴

Edward Kaplan makes a remarkable statement regarding one's responsive engagement in the Bible bringing the believer to a paradoxical inversion. He says, "Instead of remaining the object of human consciousness, God becomes experienced as the Subject of which the person is the object. The Bible is God's anthropology, not human theology."¹⁵⁵ This metaphor poignantly captures a disarming intimacy into which God invites humanity from the beginning. It is the prophecy of the mature contemplative, at the crossroads of God and community, whose love breaks through into his world, calling humankind back to itself and the primordial activity of God's love, mercy and justice.

1. Merton's Way of Seeing

The ways of wisdom cut different paths within the Christian tradition. One is more biblically and sapientially based within the construct of language. Another is broadly mystical and

¹⁵⁴ CWA, 133.

¹⁵⁵ Edward K. Kaplan, "Contemplative Inwardness and Prophetic Action: Thomas Merton's Dialogue with Abraham Joshua Heschel," in *Merton and Judaism: Holiness in Words: Recognition, Repentance, and Renewal*, edited by Beatrice Bruteau (Louisville, KY: FonsVitae, 2003), 253-68, at 259. Cited in STM, 80.

metaphysical more easily situated in unsaying and silence. In *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, Merton says:

Tao is obscured when men understand only one of a pair of opposites, or concentrate only on a part of being. Then clear expression also becomes muddled by mere wordplay, affirming this one aspect and denying all the rest.¹⁵⁶

Nicolas of Cusa was the great Western advancer of the *coincidentia oppositorum*.

Nugent says he considered it “the least imperfect definition of God.”¹⁵⁷ Nugent also believes it is “one of the oldest and best kept secrets of human experience.”¹⁵⁸ To be sure, the “best things in life are expressions of the coincidence of opposites: the rainbow, an admixture of rain in shine; great emotion, as with ‘tears’ of joy; the implosions of love; the ‘travail’ and ‘joy’ of birthing, as observed in the Gospel of John (16:21) . . . music with its alteration of sound and silence . . . the universe . . . with its simultaneity of expansion and contraction.”¹⁵⁹ For Christians, this refers to Jesus, “Son of God” and “Son of Man,” “the first and last.”¹⁶⁰ Christian spirituality is patterned after this understanding of the conjunction of Jesus’ bodiliness (humanity) and transcendence (divinity). The tradition holds these opposite poles in balance without letting go of the tension.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁶ Thomas Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (New York: New Directions, 1965), 42; hereafter, WCT.

¹⁵⁷ Christopher Nugent, “Merton, the Coincidence of Opposites and the Archeology of Catholicity,” *Cistercian Studies* 26 (1991): 257-70; idem, “*Pax Heraclitus: A Perspective on Merton’s Healing Wholeness*” (unpublished manuscript, 2005); Cited in STM, 81-82.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 260.

¹⁵⁹ Nugent, “*Pax Heraclitus*,” 5. Cited in STM, 82.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 264.

¹⁶¹ Lawrence Cunningham, “*Extra Arcam Noe: Criteria for Christian Spirituality*,” in *Minding the Spirit: The Study of Christian Spirituality*, edited by Elizabeth A. Dreyer and Mark S. Burrows (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2005), 171-78, at 173. Cited STM, 82.

This fundamental symbol, memory and experience at the heart of Christianity is expressed classically in mystical theology going beyond logic and language to realization. Nugent puts it this way: “It is existentialist more than intellectualist. A composite, the ‘opposites’ of the construct implies its disposition for the apophatic, the *via negativa*; on the other hand, the ‘coincidence’ would relate it more to the cataphatic, the *via positiva*.”¹⁶²

The point is that the capacity for *realization* of these ‘opposites,’ through the power of imagination, taking the discourse beyond language and logic into experience of communion, into truth-in-wholeness otherwise obscured by a fixation on one aspect of reality. Nugent notes, when theology fixes on the apophatic way, it “can issue in the esoteric”; when it fixes on the cataphatic way, it “issues in the mundane.”¹⁶³ Employing a contemplatively imaginative approach, by contrast, would be “the proper attunement of positive and negative theology, of saying and unsaying, the mark of symbolic, sacramental [and catholic] imagination. It is marked by “plentitude” of imagination, by contrast to “partiality” and “sectarianism”: it is “inclusive, paradoxical and ironic, and, when truest to itself, ascetic.”¹⁶⁴

2. Explosive Liberation and Hopeful Imminence

Two references Merton makes to the coincidence of opposites are in the context of personal breakthrough and expectation. It is illuminating and instructive to read and compare each of these.

¹⁶² Nugent, “Coincidence of Opposites,” 260.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 260.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

In an essay written for a program at Columbia University in 1968, Merton speaks of the divine “spark” and its “realization.” He writes, “This realization at the apex is a coincidence of opposites (as Nicolas of Cusa might say), a fusion of freedom and unfreedom, being and unbeing, life and death, self and non-self, man and God. The ‘spark’ is not so much a stable entity which one finds but an event, and explosion which happens as all opposites clash within oneself.”¹⁶⁵ For Merton, this is an event—a breakthrough—a mystical experience. It is not just an idea or theological construct. Merton writes, “The two (‘absence’) and (‘presence’) merge in loving knowledge that, ‘knows by unknowing’ (a traditional term of mysticism)” [This] “sense of absence is not a one-sided thing: it is dialectical, and it includes its opposite, namely presence.”¹⁶⁶

In *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, Merton writes an account of Zen realization written about the same time: “Zen implies a *breakthrough*, an explosive liberation from one-dimensional conformism, a recovery of unity which is not the suppression of opposites but a simplicity beyond opposites. . . This means a totally different perspective than that which dominates our society—and enables it to dominate us.”¹⁶⁷

Merton vividly situates the vocation of the Christian contemplative, whether monastic or outside the walls, in manifesting the coincidence of opposites eschatologically. He reflects the “tensive insertion of the monk ‘between present and future, moving back and forth between

¹⁶⁵ Thomas Merton, *Love and Living*, edited by Naomi Burton Stone and Patrick Hart (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), 9; hereafter LL. Pramuk’s citing (STM, 83) notes that it is illuminating to compare this passage to Merton’s account of Zen realization, written around the same time; see next paragraph and note 65 below.

¹⁶⁶ CWA, 159. Cited STM, 83.

¹⁶⁷ ZBA, 140; See note 55 above.

them, tasting here and now ‘in this body. . .in this vessel’ some piece of heaven.”¹⁶⁸ Will it come like this, the moment of my death? Will you open a door upon the great forest and set my feet upon a ladder under the moon, and take me out among the stars?”¹⁶⁹

It is curious and telling that Merton refers to John Cassian and the gospel image of “the wise virgins who wait with lighted lamps” toward the end of his dialogue with D.T. Suzuki. The emphasis focused on Cassian’s reassurance of the solitary “that help is always and everywhere present.” Cassian’s teaching on purity of heart is only the preparation “for the real work of God which is revealed in the Bible: the work of the *new creation*, the resurrection from the dead, the restoration of all things in Christ. *Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.*”¹⁷⁰

3. *Eschatology and Illogical Mercy*

“This is the real dimension of Christianity, the eschatological dimension which is particular to it, and which has no parallel in Buddhism.”¹⁷¹ For Cassian, Merton, Bernard, et al., the “living symbols” of the Bible—prayed, meditated and integrally experienced by the whole person—are crucial for interiorizing, what Julian of Norwich coined, the “eschatological secret” of Christian faith: the real (not merely notional) experience of Christ’s living presence within us, the promise of resurrection.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁸ William Harmless, *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 392.

¹⁶⁹ Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1953; New York: Octagon, 1983), 360; hereafter SJ.

¹⁷⁰ See STM, 85 citing ZBA, 133; see also NM, 227-29.

¹⁷¹ ZBA, 130-32; STM, 85.

¹⁷² STM, 85 citing CGB, 211-12; the influence of Julian of Norwich on Merton was considerable.

Merton's focus amidst the great chaos, suffering and cultural fissures of the 1960s was on the fulfillment of Christian hope in the present. That is, hope for the "realization" of eschatology not only in the future but in and for the here and now intensified.¹⁷³

I am coming to see clearly the great importance of the concept of "realized eschatology"—the transformation of life and of human relations by Christ *now* (rather than an eschatology focused on future cosmic events. . .). Realized eschatology is the heart of genuine Christian humanism and hence its tremendous importance for the Christian peace effort, for example. . . . The preaching of peace by a remnant in an age of war and violence is one of the eschatological characteristics of the life of the Church. By this activity of the Church the work of God is mysteriously accomplished in the world.¹⁷⁴

Merton's hope was both mystical and obviously political. The "'spark' in which the attunement of opposites is 'realized' is not," for Merton, "a beautiful abstraction of a beautiful mind."¹⁷⁵ For Merton, observes Nugent, "The reconciliation of opposites is an 'event' that is intra-historical and open to engagement in human affairs."¹⁷⁶ The consequence of "failing to recognize common humanity" is "millions of carcasses under a common headstone, inscribed, 'OTHER'"¹⁷⁷ as a result, Merton writes, of the "mass suspension of conscience in a quasi-mystical 'game' of life and death."¹⁷⁸ For Merton, "Only mercy—a free, unexpected, and

¹⁷³ See STM, 86.

¹⁷⁴ DWL, 87.

¹⁷⁵ CGB, 228.

¹⁷⁶ Nugent, "*Pax Heraclitus*," 6 as cited in STM, 87.

¹⁷⁷ Nugent, "*Pax Heraclitus*," 8 as cited in STM, 87.

¹⁷⁸ CGB, 228.

illogical gift of grace—can liberate us from the self-perpetuating hatred that feeds the demon of violence.”¹⁷⁹

4. The Consciousness of our Age versus Contemplative Awareness

How does the post modern Christian person reconcile scientific, secular and global consciousness of western society with one’s faith perspective?

The new consciousness which isolates man in his own knowing mind because it severs the communion between subject and object, man and nature, upon which wisdom depends. In the new consciousness man is . . . radically cut off from the ground of his own being, which is also the ground of all being.¹⁸⁰

Two models of the “middle way” are manifest in the writings of John Henry Newman and later Merton. Newman’s approach sought middle ground between rationalist empiricism and Christian “evidentialism.”¹⁸¹ Merton’s appeal was invested in the contemplative middle way between vague indifferentism and dogmatic triumphalism. Each of these great figures of Catholic imagination, in their own right, give us samplings of how to contend within a paradox toward truth and wisdom.

Merton is an icon of today’s contemplative, pressed to the limit of discursive communication on vexing theological issues. The committed Christian contemplative who genuinely immerses self in serious interfaith dialogue and within his tradition with all the inherent challenges and risks, including being tagged with caricatures of being less liberal or less

¹⁷⁹ STM, 87 citing Thomas Merton, *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, edited by Patrick Hart (New York: New Directions, 1981), 10; hereafter, LE. Pramuk notes Merton describes eschatology as “the vision of a totally new and final reality, a cosmic reversal” that brings unity to “concrete and communal Mankind . . . not by politics but by mercy.”

¹⁸⁰ LE, 108.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, see STM, 91.

conservative than is the case depending on whose perspective is cited. The tendency for Merton generally appears to be in the other direction.¹⁸²

The mid twentieth century was a time of suspicion in theological circles around all mystical and metaphysical religion both within and outside of Western Christianity. The milieu was strongly historical not classical in its consciousness and therefore activist, secular and anti-mystical. The new, post conciliar movements spawned the tendency to reject mysticism as “Medieval” Christian, moreover, non-Christian.¹⁸³

What impact would this mutation have on “the Christian’s experience of himself in relation to Christ and to the Church?”¹⁸⁴ Conceiving faith this way, invites the Christian “to repudiate all aspiration to personal contemplative union with God and to deep mystical experience, because this is an infidelity to the true Christian revelation, a human substitution for God’s saving word, a pagan evasion, an individualistic escape from community. . . .this new and fluid consciousness preaches the “return to a more dynamic and charismatic Christianity—claimed to be that of the first Christians.”¹⁸⁵

This notion of new consciousness is disavowed by Merton. The concern was around the mystical moorings of faith and praxis through the ages being cut from tradition. Moreover, this new approach fostered an overriding anthropology—a certain attitude and notion of the self as “thinking, observing, measuring and estimating ‘self.’”

¹⁸² ZBA, 15, 17 as cited in STM, 91-92.

¹⁸³ STM, 92.

¹⁸⁴ ZBA, 19.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 20.

This “self” is:

the one indubitable ‘reality,’ and all truth starts here. The more he is able to develop his consciousness as a subject over against objects. . . .the more he can manipulate these objects for his own interests, but also, at the same time, the more he tends to isolate himself in his own subjective prison, to become a detached observer cut off from everything else in a kind of. . .bubble which contains all reality in the form of purely subjective experience. Modern consciousness then tends to create this solipsistic bubble of awareness--an ego-self imprisoned in its own consciousness, isolated and out of touch with other such selves in so far as they are all ‘things’ rather than persons.”¹⁸⁶

5. Flight from Grace: Fighting Addiction & Commodification

This current dilemma of alienation, sense of isolation and of being cut off from others and the natural world which is exponentially subjugated to utilitarian means globally “becomes a projection of the modern mind’s own loneliness in an infinitely receding universe.” A substantial existential void is desperately attempted to be filled by drugs, sex, over identification with party, state, race, capital; with a turn to work, buying, consuming, communication technology, nonstop news and entertainment and many other means of escaping the “ego-self imprisoned by its own consciousness.”

Still, the individual and community remains “cut off from the ground of [its] own being while pursuing substitutes of a self-aware consciousness trying to extend its awareness while seemingly getting out of itself, in what Merton in the 1960s wondered might be replacements for metaphysical and mystical transcendence and perhaps love.”¹⁸⁷

The proliferation of the ever present internet and other high tech gadgets serves to encourage a certain brand of narcissism, promotes a continuance of a subject-object split and co-

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 28.

opts a fertile connection with the earth and other human beings in a more intimate, bodily, face-to-face relationship. Emphasis on speed, seamless efficiency, and nimble prompting, virtual communities accommodate anonymity of self, detached enjoyment of others without real self disclosure or the price of commitment.

In *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, Merton records words of Lao Tzu:

“A moment ago
 I looked into your eyes.
 I saw you were hemmed in
 By contradictions. Your words
 Confirm this.
 You are scared to death,
 Like a child who has lost
 Father and mother.
 You are trying to sound
 The middle of the ocean
 With a six-foot pole.
 You have got lost, and are trying
 To find your way back
 To your own true self.
 You find nothing
 But illegible signposts
 Pointing in all directions.
 I pity you.¹⁸⁸

These words were originally spoken to a distraught student. For us, this is the tragedy: we run after “illegible signposts pointing in all directions.” What we seek, however, rests deep within us; deeper than we could ever fathom “with a six-foot pole.” Seeing nature, sex, religion and even spirituality, and people everywhere radically commodified, Merton will interject the

¹⁸⁸ WCT, 130.

gentle voice of Sophia, “At once my own being, my own nature, and the Gift of my Creator’s Thought and Art within me.”¹⁸⁹

In *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, Merton repeats the ironic theme of the Western spiritual predicament in which believers and unbelievers alike, while secretly congratulating themselves on their liberation from institutional religion and an alienating God-object, nevertheless find themselves seeking “a deeper dimension of consciousness than that of a horizontal movement across the surface of life.

This yearning for the “deeper dimension,” impels many Westerners to Eastern spirituality; it also suggests why so many people today describe themselves as “spiritual but not religious.” Many are “attracted by the mystical consciousness,” as Merton observes, “but repelled by the triumphalist institution of the Church and by the activist and aggressive noisiness of some progressives.”¹⁹⁰ How does Christian mysticism reply?

Merton’s entire corpus may be seen as a response correlating to this question. In “The New Consciousness,” Merton frames his reply in largely metaphysical terms that he believed had strong parallels in Zen practice, terms like “Being” and “Presence.” In *Disputed Questions*, he gives his account of mystical intuition in “The New Consciousness.”

6. *Consciousness as The Intuition of Being*

Merton suggests another kind of consciousness available to the modern person. He says it “starts not from the thinking and self-aware subject but from Being, ontologically seen to be beyond and

¹⁸⁹ ESF, 63.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

prior to the subject-object division.¹⁹¹ This experience of Being is “totally different from an experience of self-consciousness. . . . It has in it none of the split and alienation that occurs when the subject becomes aware of itself as a quasi-object.” The consciousness of Being, says Merton, is “an immediate experience that goes beyond reflexive awareness. It is not ‘consciousness of’ but pure consciousness, in which the subject ‘disappears’.”¹⁹²

Man’s loneliness is, in fact, the loneliness of God. That is why it is such a great thing for a man to discover his solitude and learn to live in it. For there he finds that he and God are one: that God is alone as he himself is alone. That God wills to be alone with him.¹⁹³

Contemplation cultivates a sublimely different way of experiencing reality, closer to deep truth and unity in difference. Mystical consciousness is re-centering subjectivity from self to God. The self is not its own center and does not orbit around itself. Instead, it is centered on the one center of all which is ‘everywhere and nowhere.’ In whom “all are encountered, from whom all proceed. Thus from the very start this consciousness is disposed to encounter ‘the other’ with whom it is already united anyway in God.”¹⁹⁴

The contemplative who is steeped in this experience of “no-self” or “non-dualism” insists it is a real, fundamental concrete intuition directly apprehended and springs from a “totally different kind of self-awareness from that of the Cartesian thinking-self.”¹⁹⁵ Therefore, he does not expect patience or understanding of it from modern “men of action.”¹⁹⁶

¹⁹¹ ZBA, 23. Cited STM, 98.

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Thomas Merton, *Disputed Questions* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1985), 190; hereafter DQ. Cited STM, 98.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 27.

¹⁹⁵ DQ, 26.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 24, 29.

While dynamics of Christian revelation come to bear, that is to say, “from above” and “from below,” so that dualistic conceptions of God (Christ, Spirit, self) are unavoidable to some degree; still:

The self-centered awareness of the ego is of course a pragmatic psychological reality, but once there has been an inner illumination of pure reality, an awareness of the Divine, the empirical self is seen by comparison to be “nothing,” that is to say contingent, evanescent, relatively unreal, real only in relation to its source and end in God, considered not as object but a free ontological source of one’s own existence and subjectivity.¹⁹⁷

This is represented in the difference between pantheism (God in the world) and panentheism (All in God) which comes closer to the Christian mystical tradition. There is the ultimately personal character in Christian metaphysics. This distinctive symbolic quality of the inbreaking Wisdom and Word of God is where Christianity parts with Judaism, Islam, Buddhism and other non theistic philosophies.

The divine presence and radical union with God is shaped by the faith community’s “memory and experience” of God’s “incarnational union with the world in the person of Jesus Christ.” It is an “‘identification,’¹⁹⁸ a transcendent union of consciousness in which man and God become ‘one in spirit.’”¹⁹⁹

The intuition of the gift of radical love may be in the roots of being, but innocence has been lost and must be recovered, requiring a spiritual discipline that will interrupt our illusory patterns of thinking and cultivate an awareness of our original blood ties with the “hidden ground of Love.”²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁹⁸ Thomas Merton, *Bread in the Wilderness* (New York: New Directions, 1953), 122; hereafter, BW.

¹⁹⁹ Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence*, 222; hereafter, FV.

²⁰⁰ See “Wisdom and Emptiness,” ZBA, 99-141 for Suzuki-Merton dialogue.

Zen realization and biblical-mystical faith share the disarming experience of “a breakthrough. . . a recovery of unity which is not the suppression of opposites but a *simplicity beyond opposites*. . . This means a totally different perspective than that which dominates our society—and enables it to dominate us.” [Also, see this note on Merton’s, “The Zen Koan,” Merton’s best study of the similarities-in-difference between Zen realization and Christian mysticism]²⁰¹

The mystical-prophetic sensibilities of these twentieth century contemporaries from different cultures en flesh what otherwise might seem abstract. Mahatma Gandhi, the “Indian mind that was awakening” (Merton’s description), approximately parallels Martin Luther King’s core belief in the “interrelated structure of all reality” rooted in the biblical conviction that a loving presence binds all life “in an inescapable network of mutuality” a “single garment of destiny.”²⁰² In his moments of darkest despair and doubt, King was reassured forward in his vocation to unity giving himself over to the loving presence of the divine.

The words of Merton portray the sapientially hearted, stridently nonviolent prophet:

The way of wisdom is no dream, no temptation and no evasion, for it is on the contrary a return to reality in its very root. . . It does not withdraw from the fire. It is in the very heart of the fire, yet remains cool, because it has the gentleness

²⁰¹ ZBA, 140; Cited in STM: Merton’s “The Zen Koan” (Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* [New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1967], 235-54; hereafter MZM), is his best study of the similarities-in-difference between Zen realization and Christian mysticism. He draws parallels “on the psychological level” between the “dark night” mysticism of John of the Cross and the “pure consciousness” of Zen--both involve “death” of “a calculating and desiring ego”--even while drawing a crucial distinction between the two: “The difference is theological: the night of St. John opens into a divine and personal freedom and is a gift of ‘grace.’ The void of Zen is the natural ground of Being--for which no theological explanation is either offered or desired.” The essay includes a fascinating riff on Paleolithic cave art as a celebration of “the act of *seeing* as a holy and transcendent discovery” (248), as well as a discussion of Rilke’s poetic consciousness, or “in-seeing.”

²⁰² Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strength to Love* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), 72.

and humility that come from self-abandonment, and hence does not seek to assert the illusion of the exterior self.²⁰³

7. Hospitality Toward Wisdom of “Other”

Merton’s life and theology was remarkable for his willingness to be open to the wisdom of people he met from other traditions outside his religious and cultural boundary. While there is a clear distinctiveness of the Catholic milieu’s identity engaging in its own creed, codes, cultural narratives and symbols to awake presence and hope, Merton increasingly realized being part of the human family excluded no one. He recorded this reflection in the fall of 1960 in his journal:

Importance of being able to rethink thoughts that were fundamental to men of other ages, or *are* fundamental to men in other countries. For me, especially—contemporary Latin America—Greek Patristic period—Mt. Athos—Confucian China—T’ang dynasty—Pre-Socratic Greece. Despair of ever beginning truly to know and understand, to communicate with these pasts and these distances, yet sense of obligation to do so, to live them and combine them in myself, to absorb, to digest, to “remember.” *Memoria*. Have not yet begun.²⁰⁴

Merton is praying for the ancient past ancestral grace of the *memoria* of God in humanity to break through. How far are we today from a more divine perspective of humanity with its histories, cultures and religions to breakthrough? How do we absorb, digest and recall our humanity across myriad pasts and distance? Do we even have the desire or sense of obligation to remember earth and its peoples from the divine perspective?²⁰⁵

²⁰³ FV, 218; Cited (STM, 101) where Merton’s reflections in FV on the historical and paschal dimensions of Christian wisdom call to mind both King and Gandhi, not to mention Jesus: “The way of wisdom is no dream, no temptation and no evasion, for it is on the contrary a return to reality in its very root. . . . It does not withdraw from the fire. It is in the very heart of the fire, yet remains cool, because it has the gentleness and humility that come from self-abandonment, and hence does not seek to assert the illusion of the exterior self.”

²⁰⁴ Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years*. Vol. 6. Edited by Christine M. Bochen. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997); cited STM, 119.

²⁰⁵ See STM, 118-19 on Merton against closed systems.

The experience of a mystic offers a paradoxical and disquieting implicit challenge to any worldview that has become opaque and/or too sure of itself. This includes the system too jealous of the “truth” it claims to guard in fullness with too much to prove and too much to lose; systems that are closed while harboring explanations for how the universe began and what rewards await the virtuous providing a sense of confidence and security in its own correctness. This tends toward idolatry and magic.

Dogmatic formulations are not ends in themselves. They are, at their best, windows to facilitate faith in the transcendent presence of the Ultimate. This highlights the reason tradition and mysticism have a reciprocal relationship in church history. Merton says: To experience the mystery of Christ mystically or otherwise is always to transcend the merely individual psychological level and to ‘experience theologically with the Church.’²⁰⁶ Paul Valliere, in *Modern Russian Theology*, puts it this way: “Tradition comprises mysticism and exceeds it.”²⁰⁷

A person who opens himself to wisdom in other traditions puts himself at considerable theological and personal risk vis à vis his own tradition. Paradoxically, Merton later states, “God speaks, and God is to be heard, not only on Sinai, not only in my own heart, but in the *voice of the stranger*. . . . We must, then, see the truth in the stranger, and the truth we see must be a newly living truth, not just a projection of a dead conventional idea of our own—a projection of our own self upon the stranger.”²⁰⁸

²⁰⁶ ZBA, 46.

²⁰⁷ MRT, 170.

²⁰⁸ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), 384-85.

8. A Sacred Synthesis of Wisdom

The point is that the more we are engaged in the revelatory circle of sapiential wisdom, the more we may discover that the movement is both expansive and centripetal. Insofar as we “bring out clearly the mystical dimensions of our theology,”²⁰⁹ fear or complacent assuming can be replaced with experiencing that our lives in Christ share much more with non-Christians.

There is a relationship between all wisdoms that extends out and beyond wisdom trajectories within Christianity and non-Christian to nonwestern cultures, to literary and scientific spheres. To set up opposing ways of one trumping the other is fruitless and would perpetuate violence. As we move forward, in the modern and post modern environment, it is crucial to retain biblical and eschatological cognizance in a way that isn't seen in false contradiction to scientific and historical consciousness.

Today there are many opportunities in our global situation, however, there is also the threat of western industrial capitalism destroying significant memories of the ancient and holistic sapiential ways dictating the shape of planet wide homogenization. Scientific rationality is not completely to blame for personhood becoming more hidden; alienation and depersonalization more rampant.

We need to cultivate a more balanced and holistic spirituality that revives humankind out of despair. In an archetypal complex of questionable science and theology, new possibilities are now open for Christian consciousness.²¹⁰ Ways of knowing that transcend and unite, dwelling in the body and soul together by means of practice can assist an individual to be found in society and in the cosmos by reaching the hidden ground of Love.

²⁰⁹ ICM, 16.

²¹⁰ ZBA, 30.

In a nuclear world bent on violence, fractured and reduced to pseudo-communication, how do we communicate the Wisdom of God “whose light transfigures all creation with love and resurrection hope, and whose presence shines in the face of every human being?”²¹¹ How do we interrupt an opaque, complacent, despairing worldview of modern consciousness and cultivate mindfulness and peace? With a new global consciousness, what do we do with anxiety around crossing boundaries with too much dialogue with other religions or the secular culture for fear our center of faith will not hold but be co-opted by indifferentism or moral relativism?

These questions are couched in an increasingly secularized world close to fifty years after the council that Karl Rahner described as “the first act in a history in which the world-Church first began to act as such,” forecasting the pastoral and theological significance of this self-realization.²¹²

There is a way of doing theology, of giving oneself over, a way of knowing, by way of identity, poetics, peace and catholicity—a way not afraid to reach deeply within and without the boundaries of dogmatic tradition to find Presence in all of reality. It is a model of complex synthesis which holds in tension a unity of apparently opposite tendencies and concerns revealing a remarkable simplicity that coheres in pursuit of a larger pattern. The task is to listen, read and discern, with focus and penetration, and hopefully, break through the signs of Loving Presence (Wisdom) in reality (in whatever form) before us.

Our own faith conceptions can change as we allow deep encounters with another tradition to question our faith, often leading to what Buddhists call Great Doubt. The dynamic of

²¹¹ STM, 124.

²¹² “The Abiding Significance of Vatican II,” in Karl Rahner, *Concern for the Church*, translated by Edward Quinn (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 91-102.

breakthrough, discernment, struggle and growth is the process of growing into the truth about the mystery of God. It is the intuitive process of internalizing a sapiential worldview, a way of seeing, we claim as our own. It is authenticating, for ourselves, the bringing together of humankind, nature and God in a living and sacred synthesis.²¹³

D. The Ensuing Breakthrough of Sophia

1. Pivotal Influences in the Way of Wisdom

a) D. T. Suzuki: The Roshi

In one of his first letters opening to the Buddhist, Suzuki, in what would become an intimate relationship of correspondence over a half dozen years, Merton reflects on the mystery of Christ experienced in prayer:

The Christ we seek is within us, in our inmost self, *is* our inmost self and yet infinitely transcends ourselves. We have to be “found in Him” and yet perfectly ourselves and free from the domination of any image of Him other than Himself. You see, that is the trouble with the Christian world. It is not dominated by Christ (which would be perfect freedom), it is enslaved by images and ideas of Christ that are creations and projections of men and stand in the way of God’s freedom. But Christ Himself is in us as unknown and unseen. We follow Him, we find Him . . . and then, He must vanish and we must go along without Him at our side. Why? Because He is even closer than that. *He is ourself*. Oh my dear Dr. Suzuki, I know you will understand this so well, and so many people do not, even though they are “doctors of Israel.”²¹⁴

Here, Merton illustrates that, what even many Christian theologians do not understand, he presumes a Zen teacher would. A major part of the problem is writing direct and sincere intuitions of the paradoxical inner experience of Christ unseen and unknown. If we mean a real and not only notional relationship with the Divine Indwelling, how can we get beyond what

²¹³ LL, 60.

²¹⁴ HGL, 564.

appear to be dogmatic and epistemological barriers? How do we come to authentic faith in our age of scientific rationality and historical consciousness?

In a later letter to Suzuki, he writes of his struggle around “emptiness” as he brings forth the dilemma of knowing:

I am much happier with “emptiness” when I don’t have to talk about it. . . .As soon as I say something, then that is “not it” right away. Obviously the conclusion is to say nothing, and that for a great deal of the time is what I manage to do. Yet one must speak of it. Obviously one must speak and not speak. . . .But at any rate, I thought you would be happy to know that I struggle with. . . .not [the] problem, but [the] *koan*. It is not really for me a serious intellectual problem at all, but a problem of “realization”—something that has to break through. Every once in a while it breaks through a little. One of these days it will burst out.²¹⁵

This quote describes faith in a post-Christian environment and the problem of Christ among religions. It is a koan—a problem of realization—“something has to break through.” This experience is just what the Zen teacher’s aim is: to awaken a breakthrough so the student sees reality purely. This experience, inevitably becomes confusing for the western mind because it tends to be dualistic and object oriented. “For the West consciousness is always ‘consciousness of.’ In the East, this not necessarily so: it can be simply ‘consciousness.’”²¹⁶ The “Western caricature of Zen as feeding into quietist or escapist tranquility”²¹⁷ may be an unwitting projection of itself for Zen is demanding forcing an active response to life.

The language of Zen is pure subjectivity “that needs no object.” Breaking the koan leads to a gradual deepening of consciousness “in which one experiences reality not indirectly or

²¹⁵ HGL, 569.

²¹⁶ MZM, 238.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 135.

mediately but directly, in which clinging to no experience and to no awareness as such, one is simply 'aware.'²¹⁸

What the Roshi wants is not a correct answer or a clever reaction but the *living and authentic* response of the student to the *koan*. If he finally responds directly and immediately to the *koan*, he shows that he is now able to respond fully, directly, and immediately to life itself. . .What is required is not the ability to repeat some esoteric formula learned from a book. . .but actually to *respond* in a full and living manner to any "thing," a tree, a flower, a bird, or even an inanimate object, perhaps a very lowly one. . .When one attains to pure consciousness, everything has infinite value.²¹⁹

Christopher Pramuk suggests that if we substitute the word "Christ," "Spirit," or "Sophia" for the word *koan* in the above quote, we begin to "hear resonances Merton perceived between the Zen mind and Christian mystical experience, a mysticism which sees the whole cosmos transfigure in Christ, or as he writes in *New Seeds of Contemplation*, bursting forth in 'the General Dance' of Sophia."²²⁰ Zen and Christian faith involve a living and direct response both with a posture grounded in openness and waiting expectation to be grasped, attending directly to the suchness of reality. I no longer am conscious of 'self' as a separate thing in my "willingness to be swept along by the 'more' of reality."²²¹

This liberation is the "dawning awareness of our true selves living in Christ, which is to say, resting in the womb of God, creation, and in one another,"²²² akin to Merton's reflection of his famous breakthrough in Louisville, "like waking up from a dream of separateness"²²³ when

²¹⁸ Ibid., 237.

²¹⁹ Ibid., 249-50.

²²⁰ STM, 137.

²²¹ Jon Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation*, translated by Robert Barr (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988), 19.

²²² STM, 136.

²²³ CGB, 156; cf. SFS, 182.

his Christology (or *christophany*)²²⁴ became real for him in the stranger. This experience he described as “holding the winning ticket in a cosmic sweepstake.”²²⁵ The key to this epiphany of human life is love—ordinary people doing every day activities in the middle of town—each of them “the child so dear to God.” Love, Merton writes, “is the work not of states, not of organizations, not of institutions, but of persons.”²²⁶

What is required is to allow Wisdom to break through our consciousness so the Divine Indwelling is restored in us. The liberation associated with this restoration permits us to be renewed from exhaustion in maintaining the false self and socially constructed identities. Whether this comes through a lifetime effort of discipline or we are instantly catapulted into the event of realization, there is no need to construct new formulas or repeat old ones, but to consent to the grace to be free to respond “in a full and living manner” for everything has infinite value.

The experience of creation transfigured in divine presence is not to be construed as esoteric or abstract. It is an intuition of creation’s radical goodness. It is the seedbed of a critique against any dehumanizing decisions seething agitation in the world. Contemplation, for Merton, is a living reservoir cultivating a prophetic worldview which passionately seeks to “guard the image of man for it is the image of God.”²²⁷

²²⁴ A Raimon Panikkar term used to emphasize negatively “the limits of christology” and positively the experiential manifestation of Christ; see *Christophany, The Fullness of Man* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004).

²²⁵ CGB, 157.

²²⁶ DQ, 65.

²²⁷ Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966), 6 cites Berdyaev; hereafter RU.

The Zen koan becomes the mediating language to speak *in* “Christ as center by whom we are illuminated,”²²⁸ the Wisdom indwelling within us that we experience in our prayer, contemplation, life; as opposed to language that can tend to be easily exploited with auxiliary agendas when speaking about Christ “out there” as object. The language of direct experience allows living Divine Wisdom within us to be present from time to time and sometimes vanish ever hopeful of something breaking through again.

b) Herakleitos the Obscure: The Sage

In his final piece of *The Behavior of Titans*, “Herakleitos the Obscure,” Merton blends literary genres with a cryptic style to question the present using ancient symbols, myths and archetypes. The protagonist, Herakleitos, was “one of those rare spirits whose prophetic insight enabled them to see far beyond the limited horizons of their society” a society that, “feared all that was not ‘ordinary.’” He rose up to speak for the “mysterious, the unutterable, and the excellent.”²²⁹ Mostly, he spoke for “the true law of all being—not a static and rigid form, but a dynamic principle of harmony-in-conflict,” the “primary substance of the universe.” The logos (“true law”) and fire (symbol for “primary substance”) in this mythical essay Merton says has “much in common with the Tao of Lao-tse as well as with the Word of St. John.” Herakleitos “comes before Aristotle’s principle of identity and contradiction. He does not look at things with the eyes of Aristotelian logic, and consequently he can say that opposites can be, from a certain point of view, the same.”²³⁰

²²⁸ Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1985), 643; hereafter HGL.

²²⁹ Thomas Merton, *The Behavior of Titans* (New York: New Directions, 1961), 76; hereafter, BT.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, 78.

Further, Herakleitos “looks on the world not as an abstractionist, but from the viewpoint of experience”:

Our spiritual and mystical destiny is to “awaken” to the fire that is within us, and our happiness depends on the harmony-in-conflict that results from this awakening. Our vocation is a call to spiritual oneness in and with the logos. But this interior fulfillment is not to be attained by a false peace resulting from artificial compulsion—a static and changeless “state” imposed by force of will upon the dynamic, conflicting forces within us. True peace is the “hidden attunement of opposite tensions” a paradox and a mystery transcending both sense and will, like the ecstasy of the mystic.²³¹

Experience here, “Is not merely the uninterpreted datum of sense. His philosophical viewpoint is that of a mystic whose intuition cuts through apparent multiplicity to grasp underlying reality as *one*.”²³² Fire is divine energy, Wisdom at play energizing, showing itself and hiding in nature. “Wisdom is one thing—” says Herakleitos, “it is to know the thought by which all things are steered through all things.”²³³

For she is a vapour of the power of God, and a certain pure emanation of the glory of the almighty God: and therefore no defiled thing cometh into her. For she is the brightness of eternal light, and the unspotted mirror of God’s majesty, and the image of his goodness.²³⁴

Beyond Merton’s interweaving and elucidating of these ancient myths, implying underlying experiential continuity between biblical kerygmatic memory and experience in the

²³¹ *Ibid.*, 76.

²³² *Ibid.*, 79.

²³³ *Ibid.*, 32 where Merton juxtaposes Wisdom 7:21-26 as cited in STM.

²³⁴ BT, 81.

style of monastic exegesis, “largely an exegesis through reminiscence”;²³⁵ and the intuitions of Herakleitos:

Here in the inspired language of the sacred writer we find the Scriptural development which perfects and completes the fragmentary intuitions of Herakleitos, elevating them to the sublime level of contemplative theology and inserting them in the economy of those great truths of which Herakleitos could not have dreamt: the Incarnation of the Logos and man’s Redemption and Divinization as the supreme manifestation of wisdom and of the “attunement of conflicting opposites.”²³⁶

These ancient mystical texts share a power to awaken the mind and see, to “awaken the mind of” the “disciple to a reality that is right before his eyes.” Like the blind men claiming to know elephantness by touching only a part of the body, human wisdom is incapable of seeing by itself seizing on only one aspect of manifold reality or turning it upon itself. This mythical tale from BCE implies the lack of man’s wisdom to grasp the conflicting opposites—the concrete reality of unity-in-multiplicity and harmony-in-conflict building on one aspect of reality which becomes the shaky soil of ungrounded fiction.

“The wisdom of man cannot follow the divine wisdom ‘one and manifold’ . . . In order to ‘see’ our minds seize upon the movement around them and within them, and reduce it to immobility.” Merton sees the central tragedy concerns: “the facts that the majority of men think they see, and do not. They believe they listen but they do not hear. They are ‘absent when present’ because. . .they substitute the clichés of familiar prejudice for the new and unexpected truth that is being offered to them.”²³⁷

²³⁵ Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*, translated by Catharine Misrahi (New York: Fordham University Press, 1961), 75; Cited in STM, 140 where Pramuk notes Leclercq’s description of monastic exegesis.

²³⁶ BT, 81-82.

²³⁷ BT, 85.

“The life and thought of ‘the many’ is,” therefore, “a conspiracy of sleep, a refusal to struggle for the excellence of wisdom which is hard to find. . .to be deluded with ‘polymathy’ . . .the constant succession of novel ‘truths,’ new opinions. . .fresh observations and tabulations of phenomena,” seemingly infinite varieties that “beguiles the popular mind with a vain appearance of wisdom.”

Herakleitos, “wielding the sharp weapon of paradox without mercy,” confronts and challenges “the sleep of individualism” and “willfulness, blindness, and caprice” of the masses; Pramuk says, “by interjecting the divine perspective, the truth of unity-in-multiplicity, the One that is common to all: Logos (Spirit, Sophia).”²³⁸ Merton continues, “But each individual loses contact with the One Fire and falls back into the ‘coldness and moisture and sleep’ of his little subjective world.”²³⁹

This essay marks a move for Merton toward theological anthropology and his emerging “philosophy of peace,” suggests Christopher Nugent.²⁴⁰ In the myth of Prometheus, Merton questions man’s desire for a life doomed for punishment and acting “as if our longing to ‘see good days’ were something God did not desire, when He Himself told us to seek them.”²⁴¹

“Herakleitian epistemology counters with the liberating realization of our own identity in God, breaking through Promethean despair and Olympian formalism. We do not have to steal

²³⁸ STM, 141.

²³⁹ BT, 83-84.

²⁴⁰ Christopher Nugent, “*Pax Heraclitus: A Perspective on Merton’s Healing Wholeness.*” Unpublished manuscript (2005), 11; Cited in STM, 141.

²⁴¹ BT, 22.

fire from heaven; the divine fire, nothing less than our spiritual freedom, is already ours ‘for the asking, a gift of the true God, the Living God.’”²⁴²

Merton’s take on Herakleitos’s vision is a kind of “desert spirituality, a place of wide-open spaces, exodus from our captivity to the ego, self-emptying. Its goal is harmony, its way is friction; demands effort, integrity, struggle, sacrifice. It is incompatible with the complacent security” mistaken for “peace.”²⁴³

The disarming wisdom of Herakleitos is not unlike the New Testament’s wherein the “Word that enlightens every man coming into the world is made flesh, enters the darkness which receives Him not: where one must be born again without reentering the womb; where the Spirit is as the wind, blowing where it pleases.”²⁴⁴

In sum, the “supreme manifestation of wisdom and of the ‘attunement of conflicting opposites’ is realized not only by the incarnation but by our participation in it.”²⁴⁵

c) Maximus Confessor: The Theologian

Another important turn for Merton was his deep interest in the mystical theology of Maximus Confessor (d. 662). Of particular interest was Maximus’s treatise of *theoria physike* (“natural contemplation”). In a conference given to the monks at his Abbey of Gethsemani in the spring of 1961, Merton’s eighth lecture, “Contemplation of the Cosmos,” explores the doctrine of the

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 14.

²⁴³ Nugent, “*Pax Heraclitus*,” 11; Cited STM, 141 noting Nugent acknowledges the darker legacy of Herakleitos, whose fire “would warm the hearts of philosophers of will such as Friedrich Nietzsche or philosophers of war such as Heinrich von Treitsche.” Yet Merton “was undaunted” by the moral ambivalence of the *Fragments*; following the tradition of “Catholic recapitulation of the classics that goes back to Irenaeus,” he “had to contain the fire, not douse it: to render it ‘Brother Fire’” (*ibid.*, 2-3).

²⁴⁴ BT, 45.

²⁴⁵ STM, 141.

divine *logoi* hidden in all things.²⁴⁶ Here, Merton describes tradition as “a collective memory and experience of Christ” that, “forms and affects the whole man.”²⁴⁷

Merton speaks of Maximus as “the Father of Byzantine mysticism”. . . and “one of the greatest of the Greek Fathers” who “corrected” and “went beyond. . . the Origenist idea that the world is in itself imperfect, being made up of fallen spiritual realities.”²⁴⁸ Largely, he did this through his teaching of *theoria physike*, “The mysterious, silent revelation of God in His cosmos and in the *oikonomia*, as well as in our own lives.”²⁴⁹

In this teaching, Merton suggests that God “hands over to man, when he is thus purified and enlightened, a certain creative initiative of his own, in political life, in art, in spiritual life, in worship: man is then endowed with a causality of his own.”²⁵⁰ “*theoria physike* is actually a dynamic unity of contemplation and action, a loving knowledge that comes along with *use* and *work*.”²⁵¹ Patrick O’Connell says this is why Merton considered *theoria physike* “the heart of a genuine theology of creativity.” It is for this reason that these are “among the most evocative and fully realized sections” also “not surprisingly the section that has attracted the most attention from scholars.”²⁵²

²⁴⁶ STM, 143; here Pramuk cites Merton (“An Introduction to Christian Mysticism”), 121-36: hereafter, ICM.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, ICM, 35-36.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 123-24.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 124.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 126.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 129.

²⁵² STM, 143 citing Patrick O’Connell, “Introduction,” in ICM, xxx; Pramuk also notes A.M. Allchin offers wonderful commentary on Merton’s exposition of *theoria physike* in “The Prayer of the Heart and Natural Contemplation,” in MHPH, 419-29; and “The Worship of the Whole Creation,” in MHPH, 103-20.

Merton expands on the definition of *theoria physike* as the multiform wisdom of God which includes an apprehension of a spiritual sense of Scripture. His focus is on the natural world as a manifestation of divine presence:

- in the spirit of Scripture and not in the letter;
- in the logoi of created things, not in their materiality;
- in our own inmost spirit and true self, rather than in our ego;
- in the inner meaning of history and not in its externals (history of salvation, victory in Christ);
- in the inner sense of the divine judgements and mercies (not in superstitious and pseudo-apocalyptic interpretations of events).²⁵³

In his notes, he quotes Maximus: “We must not believe that sin caused this unique masterpiece which is this visible world in which God manifests Himself by a *silent revelation*.”²⁵⁴ In the long entry below, we can see Merton’s creative religious imagination, his deep belief “in the spiritualization and restoration of the cosmos,” as well as the accent on grace at work through human freedom and creativity in history:

The vision of *theoria physike* is essentially *sophianic*. Man by *theoria* is able to unite the hidden wisdom of God in things with the hidden light of wisdom in himself. The meeting and marriage of these two brings about a *resplendent clarity* within man himself, and this clarity is the Divine Wisdom fully recognized and active in him. Thus man becomes a mirror of the divine glory, and is resplendent with divine truth not only in his *mind* but in his *life*. He is filled with the light of wisdom which shines forth in him, and thus God is glorified in him.

At the same time he exercises a spiritualizing influence in the world by the work of his hands which is in accord with the *creative wisdom of God* in things and in history. Hence we can see the great importance of a *sophianic*, contemplative orientation of man’s life. No longer are we reduced to a *purely negative* attitude toward the world around us, toward history, toward the judgements of God. The world is no longer seen as merely material, hence as an obstacle that has to be grudgingly put up with. It is spiritual through and through.

²⁵³ ICM, 122 as cited in STM, 145.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 123.

But grace has to work in and through us to enable us to carry out this real transformation. . . .

The “will of God” is no longer a blind force plunging through our lives like a cosmic steamroller and demanding to be accepted willy-nilly. On the contrary, we are able to understand the hidden purposes of the creative wisdom and the divine mercy of God, and can cooperate with Him as sons with a loving Father. Not only that, but God Himself.²⁵⁵

Merton gives examples of the Shaker community’s elegant simplicity of craftsmanship and architectural integrity, reverencing landscape issued from their spiritual integrity, continuity and understanding that apprehends the *logoi* of things. This is the main point—it is not abstract. It regards the inscape of things related to the whole.

When this sophianic grasp is not present, the tendency is to move toward a more instrumental, exploitive relationship to nature, “a demonic cult of change and ‘exchange,’—consumption, production, destruction, for their own sakes.”²⁵⁶ O’Connell points out that this is why contemplation “is of tremendous practical importance in a world increasingly tempted by a ‘demonic pseudo-contemplation, mystique of technics and production.’”²⁵⁷ It is even “demanded by the cosmos itself and by history.”²⁵⁸

When we respect the *logoi* of all living and nonliving things we can then be “conscious of their mute appeal to us to find and rescue the glory of God that has been hidden in them and veiled in sin.”²⁵⁹ Merton demonstrates to apprehend Christ in the other, we must liberate the

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 125-26.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 130.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, xxxii, citing Merton, *ibid.*, 130.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 125.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 130.

image in ourselves first. The divine fire in nature and human beings is grasped by *theoria physike* and is central to integral spirituality:

The *logos* of man is therefore something hidden in him, spiritual, simple, profound, unitive, loving, selfless, self-forgetting, oriented to love and to unity with God and other men in Christ. It is not abstract essence, “rationality plus animality.” [It is] the divine image in him. More deeply it is CHRIST in him, either actually or potentially. To love Christ in our brother we must be able to SEE him in our brother, and this demands really the gift of *theoria physike*. Christ in us must be liberated, by purification, so that the ‘image’ in us, clothed anew with light of the divine likeness, is able connaturally to recognize the same likeness in another, the same tendency to love, to simplicity, to unity. Without love this is completely impossible.²⁶⁰

Reviewing Maximus, Merton says Scripture is the imaginative seedbed of *theoria physike* and the “spiritual sense of Scripture. . . is something much more than allegory . . . is a direct contact with the Word hidden in the words of Scripture”²⁶¹ training our spiritual senses to “enter into the movement of all things from God back to God.” He then offers Balthasar’s imagery:

The whole world is a GAME OF GOD. As one amuses children with flowers and bright colored clothes and then gets them later used to more serious games, literary studies, so God raises us up first of all by the great game of nature, then by the Scriptures. Beyond the symbols of Scripture is the Word.²⁶²

2. Wisdom Breaking Through: Toward Sapiential Fullness

The breaking through of “wisdom,” or “Sophia” in Merton’s consciousness, like his friend, Abraham Heschel, reflects a desire to awaken the experience of God in a people for whom, like “a tree torn from the soil” or “a river separated from its source,” the term “God,” and even “Christ,” had become a name, but no Reality. Merton wanted to reinvigorate a biblical and poetic vision of life “in which the individual is not lost in the cosmos and in society but found in

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 128.

²⁶¹ Ibid., 130.

²⁶² Ibid., 131-32.

them.”²⁶³ The mystery of God always exceeds, for Merton, what can be expressed in the Scriptures or in any particular formulations; sources of tradition are meditative starting points for preaching and theological reflection in the present moment.²⁶⁴

By union with God in [Christ] God does not remain in heaven, a dictator and overseer. He becomes man in order that the creation should continue in God’s manhood. . . . The creation in 7 days of the O.T. must come out into the 8th day of the New Adam, the new creation, in which God and man together continue the work done by the Father. . . . It is in the Holy Spirit that man lives up to his true vocation as a Son of God and creator. . . . this is the very heart of the New Testament if by creativity we mean the *power of charity* as a Source of life.²⁶⁵

Merton apprehends the anthropology of Sophia as divine nature and its implications for a spirituality of divinization. “Man’s vocation is to *humanize and clarify* perfectly the potential ‘human’ Sophia of creation which is entrusted to him. To make God shine in its charity.”²⁶⁶ This is Merton’s “cosmotheandric” vision. To “unite” and “subject” ourselves to the wisdom of God in the union of cosmology and anthropology—a spirituality of divinization.

In the recapitulation of his awakening on the corner of Fourth and Walnut, “As if waking from a dream—the dream of my separateness, of the ‘special’ vocation to be different,” Merton was “suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, even though we were total strangers.”²⁶⁷ This event seemed to have emblazoned in Merton a capacity to *see* and to claim in a new way, *le point vierge*, that, “point or spark which belongs entirely to God” new,

²⁶³ Thomas Merton, *Gandhi on Non-Violence: A Selection from the Writings of Mahatma Gandhi* (New York: New Directions, 1965), 1; cited in STM, 147.

²⁶⁴ STM, 154 where Pramuk states that the general principle is taught by Vatican II’s *Dei verbum* 5, 10; *Gaudium et spes* 44.

²⁶⁵ Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk’s Life*. Vol. 3 edited by Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 89 hereafter SFS; cited in STM, 155.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 106.

²⁶⁷ CGB, 156.

shining “like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven.” This was the breakthrough “like news that one holds the winning ticket in a cosmic sweepstake.”²⁶⁸ This pivotal moment marked Merton’s Christian humanism’s outreach to the entire human community: “Thank God! Thank God! I am only another member of the human race, like all the rest of them.”²⁶⁹

In the immediate afterglow of this event, Merton was deeply touched by two books he happened to leisurely come across. One was *The Family of Man*, a book of pictures with no text. The other was *The Indians of America*. He had a poignant reaction to both:

Have we ever yet become Christians? The duty of the Christian[is] to see Christ being born into the whole world and to bring Him to life in all mankind. But we have sought to bring to birth in the world the image of ourselves and of our own society and we have killed the Innocents in doing so, and Christ flees from us into Egypt. Have we ever yet become Christians?²⁷⁰

Merton grew into a sophianic vision of the natural world greatly influenced by his study of Russian Eastern Orthodox theologians (Berdyayev, Bulgakov, Soloviev, Evdokimov and by the Russian writer Pasternak). The poisoning of Western society through the instrumentation of nature and of human bodies became more evident to him. A severe light was cast on this toxicity, with an ever increasing appreciation of eros rooted in the very life of God, not only in society generally but more personally. He records this significant experience on the feast of the Visitation, July 2, 1960, a “literal” and “figurative” “awakening”²⁷¹:

Who is more little than the helpless man, asleep in bed, having entrusted himself gladly to sleep and to night? Him the gentle voice will awake, all that is sweet in

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 158.

²⁶⁹ SFS, 183.

²⁷⁰ SFS, 197; cited in STM, 159.

²⁷¹ See STM, 161.

woman will awaken him. Not for conquest and pleasure, but for the far deeper wisdom of love and joy and communion.

My heart is broken for all my sins and the sins of the whole world, for the rottenness of our spirit of gain that defiles wisdom in all beings—to rob and deflower wisdom as if there were only a little pleasure to be had, only a little joy, and it had to be stolen, violently taken and spoiled. When all the while her warmth, her exuberant silence, her acceptance, are infinite, infinite! Deep is the ocean, boundless sweetness, kindness, humility, silence of wisdom that is not abstract, disconnected, fleshless. Awakening us gently when we have exhausted ourselves to night and to sleep. O Dawn of Wisdom!²⁷²

Merton's deep sense of wonder and gratitude while simultaneously bearing a profound sorrow around his own shortcomings implicating him in the world's sufferings are palpable. Society's commodification of women is ensconced in the objectification and destruction of nature—a primary ecofeminist mantle. Merton had been bitten by Russian Sophiology including a striking insight he internalized: “continence toward women and reverence for creation are intimately connected.”²⁷³ Sophia, the Mother bears and sustains life offering to us the sense and sensibilities of being home in the cosmos. “The Mother of God is the Great Mother—the damp earth(Gen. 2:6).”²⁷⁴

Merton's involvement with Russian archetypes included iconography which drew him into participation in the real presence of God as Sancta Sophia. His prayer before the icon of Holy Wisdom, (as is the hallmark of prayer before an icon), facilitated the re-centering of subjectivity from himself to the divine as Presence and Person, no longer aware of who it is that's praying. He makes this link to his experience with the “summit reached by so many non-

²⁷² Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years*, edited by Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 17-18.

²⁷³ STM, 161 citing Rowan Williams, “Bread in the Wilderness: The Monastic Ideal in Thomas Merton and Paul Evdokimov,” in MHPH, 175-98, at 180.

²⁷⁴ Evdokimov, *Women and the Salvation of the World*, 221; cited in STM, 161 where Pramuk also notes the prayer by means of the icon something breaks through a little, such as Cassian describes mystical prayer, the one praying is no longer aware of who it is that is praying.

Christian contemplatives. . .the summit of Vedanta.” This wordless experience of contemplatives across boundaries of religious persuasion share in manifesting “the invisible visible to ‘the eyes of the mind.’”²⁷⁵ Through his deep reflection of several Russian writers, Merton cultivated an intuition that faith in Sophia, is “the great stabilizer for peace.”

3. *A Bond in the Mystery of Loving Wisdom*

With this intuition, came the conviction that, “Simple human dialogue worth thousands of sermons and speeches,” crossing religious, political and cultural dividers is the real foundation for peace in the world. “It is to me the Kingdom of God, which is still so clearly, and evidently, ‘in the midst of us.’”²⁷⁶

His relationship with Zen teacher, Suzuki, was gaining ground. Merton felt that Suzuki “can speak the same language and indeed that we speak much more of a common language than I can, for instance, share with the average American business man, or indeed with some of the monks. . . .if I tried baldly and bluntly enough to ‘convert’ Suzuki, that is, make him ‘accept’ formulas regarding faith that are accepted by the average American Catholic, I would, in fact, not ‘convert’ him at all, but simply confuse and (in a cultural sense) degrade him.”²⁷⁷

While Merton had his moments of fantasizing Suzuki’s conversion to the Sacraments and participation in the Church, he also pondered “that the visibility of the conversion we demand of others may, perhaps, be demanded not by our charity but by our weakness: as an exterior prop to our own lack of faith.”²⁷⁸

²⁷⁵ Ibid., 163.

²⁷⁶ SFS, 225.

²⁷⁷ SFS, 173; Cited in STM, 163.

²⁷⁸ Ibid., 274.

Merton deduced that, “the most important thing,” is the “simple and human” relationship he enjoyed with him. “I can meet him [Suzuki] on a common ground of spiritual Truth, where we share a real and deep experience of God, and where we know in humility our own deepest selves—and if we can discuss and compare the formulas we use to describe this experience, then I certainly think Christ would be present and glorified in both of us and this would lead to a *conversion of us both*—an elevation, a development, a serious growth in Christ.”²⁷⁹

After corresponding for some time, they met at Columbia University. Merton reflected on how moved he was to meet this extraordinary and simple man and about the understanding between them. Before they departed, Suzuki told Merton: “The most important thing is Love!”—Truly *Prajna* and *Karuna* are one (as the Buddhist says), or *Caritas* (love) is indeed the highest knowledge.”²⁸⁰

Suzuki, for his part, had finally found “a capable, living, Western dialogue partner to whom he and through whom he could communicate his enlightened wisdom to the West.”²⁸¹ Both desired each other’s presence. Their openness to each other grew. “Suzuki’s silence became more relational, less and less a private or ‘exotic’ activity hidden behind the caricatures of Western misunderstanding.”²⁸²

Merton’s mounting openness came largely because he believed, “In his person,” he “could unite Suzuki to God. For at the base of all reality was the wisdom of love (Sophia), a

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 273.

²⁸⁰ ZBA, 62; Cited in STM, 164 where Pramuk notes Merton’s referencing the traditional Cistercian emphasis on love as integral to knowledge and wisdom, or *amor ipse intellectus est* (William of St. Thierry).

²⁸¹ Matthew C. Zyniewicz, “The Interreligious Dialogue Between Thomas Merton and D.T. Suzuki” (PhD dissertation, University of Notre Dame, 2000), 242; Cited in STM, 165.

²⁸² *Ibid.*, 240. Cited STM, 165.

wisdom which deepened when a Christian loved a non-Christian.”²⁸³ This evolving communion was, according to Pramuk, “neither the result of simply a psychological change nor merely a concession of religious diplomacy, a good will gesture of peacemaking. Rather, his growing willingness to accept and engage Suzuki on his own terms had both a contemplative and theological root in Christ/Sophia, the love and mercy of God, whose presence in all things and in all people had become ever more palpable in the eyes of his heart.”²⁸⁴

A month before he died, Merton described the character of this kind of crossing over “impenetrable boundaries” into mutual interdependence:

It is wordless. It is beyond words, and it is beyond speech, and it is beyond concept. Not that we discover a new unity. We discover an older unity. My dear brothers, we are already one. But we imagine that we are not. And what we have to recover is our original unity. What we have to be is what we are.²⁸⁵

Ten years earlier Merton put it differently, “The fact that you are a Zen Buddhist and I am a Christian monk, far from separating us, makes us most like one another. How many centuries is it going to take for people to discover this fact?”²⁸⁶

In *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, is recorded a remarkable statement from Suzuki:

Eschatology is something never realizable and yet realized at every moment of our life. We see it always ahead of us though we are in reality always in it. . . . it is the Great Mystery, intellectually speaking. In Christian terms, it is Divine Wisdom. The strange thing, however, is: when we experience it we cease to ask questions about it, we accept it, we just live it. Theologians, dialecticians and existentialists may go on discussing the matter, but the ordinary people inclusive of all of us who are outsiders live ‘the mystery.’

²⁸³ Ibid., 177. Cited STM, 165.

²⁸⁴ STM, 165.

²⁸⁵ HGL, 566.

²⁸⁶ Ibid.

4. *Emptiness: Reality's Suchness*

Merton's interest in Zen is couched in his belief in shared wisdom or *sapientia* with Christian contemplation centered on a breakthrough and dying of the false self. Suzuki and Merton's central focus in their correspondence was the question of the ground of reality. What is reality's source in its "suchness?" Pramuk suggests that, in discerning the heart of reality, "It is precisely in this realm, specifically, in Suzuki's discussion of 'Emptiness' (*Sunyata*) and Merton's conception of 'God' (Christ/Sophia), that . . . in Russian Sophiology Merton discovered a vital language, both ancient and new, for sacramentalizing the Christian answer to the question of reality's suchness."²⁸⁷

In the Merton-Suzuki dialogue, Suzuki makes a key comparison of the "metaphysical concept of Emptiness" to Jesus' beatitude of poverty of spirit. He says, "Emptiness is convertible in economic terms into poverty, being poor, having nothing: 'Blessed are those who are poor in spirit.'"²⁸⁸

Suzuki amplifies this point further by citing Mahayana Buddhism's teaching of the Six Paramita which are the daily practices of the "moral virtues of perfection." The first and last of the Six start and end the Buddhist life respectively: *Dana* ("giving") and *Prajna* ("transcendental wisdom"). "In reality, the ending is the beginning and the beginning is the ending: the Paramita moves in a circle with no beginning and no ending. The giving is possible only when there is Emptiness, and Emptiness is attainable only when the giving is unconditionally carried out."²⁸⁹ This "intuition of the highest order" regarding self-emptying and unconditional giving resonates

²⁸⁷ STM, 166.

²⁸⁸ ZBA, 108-9.

²⁸⁹ ZBA, 112.

with the New Testament description of Christian kenosis. This area is of central interest for Merton. Narratives of preexistence, kenosis and awakening with a nonlinear understanding and circularity are core texts for Merton's imagination.²⁹⁰

The "crossing over" to the other shore (of perfection), Suzuki says: "consists in not cherishing any thought of anything going out of one's hands and being received by anybody else; that is to say, in the giving there must not be any thought of giver or a receiver, and of an object going through this transaction. . . .Nothing to gain, nothing to lose, nothing to give, nothing to take; to be just so, and yet to be rich in inexhaustible possibilities."²⁹¹

It is not without interest Suzuki reminds us that to imagine true poverty of spirit—self emptying—as related to the Absolute, makes space now for God to *enter* and *occupy it* is mistaken thinking, "a great error."²⁹² Instead, Suzuki turns to the Christian mystic, Eckhart, as coming closest in describing union with God in non-dualistic language, the language of Zen Emptiness and Sambodhi:

In my breaking-through. . . I transcend all creatures and am neither God nor creature: I am that I was and I shall remain now and forever. Then I receive an impulse which carries me above all angels. In this impulse I conceive such passing riches that I am not content with God as being God, as being all his godly works, for in this breaking-through I find that God and I are both the same.²⁹³

Suzuki's translation: "God is at once the place where he works and the work itself."²⁹⁴

²⁹⁰ See NT for the classic formulas of preexistence (John 1:1-18; Col 1:15-20; Rev 1:8), kenosis (Phil 2:6-11; Jn 12:24), and awakening (Rom 8:14-17; 2 Cor 3:17-18; Eph 5:14) as cited in STM, 167.

²⁹¹ ZBA, 109.

²⁹² *Ibid.*

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, 114.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 110.

Suzuki's Zen take on Christian mysticism is that of circular intuition of oneness with God: "God and I are the same." His description of Buddhist realization of Emptiness is very similar:

Zen emptiness is not the emptiness of nothingness, but the emptiness of fullness in which there is "no gain, no loss, no increase, no decrease," in which this equation takes place: zero = infinity. The Godhead is no other than this equation. In other words when God as Creator came out of the Godhead he did not leave the Godhead behind. He has the Godhead with him all along while engaging in the work of creation. Creation is continuous, going on till the end of time, which has really no ending and therefore no beginning. For creation is out of inexhaustible nothingness.²⁹⁵

Merton appreciated Suzuki's insight, including the paradoxical manner Zen views Emptiness as dynamically taking place between being and becoming—a ripening and flowering breakthrough out of self, ego to "no self, no ego, no Atman that will pollute the mind."²⁹⁶

Merton joins Zen insight with a Christian mystical understanding of kenosis, often employing the language he has meditated on from the Eastern Christian Russian theologians, (namely Sophiology): "at once biblical, poetic, and metaphysical, for sacramentalizing this experience of divine Love without limit, of the free and unreserved self-donation of God."²⁹⁷

In Emptying Himself to come into the world, God has not simply kept in reserve, in a safe place, His reality and manifested a kind of shadow or symbol of Himself. He has emptied Himself and is all in Christ. *Invisibilis in suis; visibilis in nostris.* [Invisible in his own; visible in ours.] Christ is not simply the tip of the little finger of the Godhead, moving in the world, easily withdrawn, never threatened, never really risking anything. God has acted and given Himself totally, without division, in the Incarnation. He has become not only one of us but even our very selves.²⁹⁸

²⁹⁵ Ibid., 133-34.

²⁹⁶ Ibid.

²⁹⁷ STM, 169.

²⁹⁸ SFS, 381; Cited in STM, 169 where Pramuk notes that the full entry illustrates not only the influence of the Russian theologians; more broadly, it illuminates Merton's dissatisfaction with the scholastic approach to theology in which he had been formed, and finds him pondering his own theological vocation.

Pramuk's use of "sacramentalizing" is meant to indicate the "speculative language of sophiology," not only that, the very biblical *name*, Sophia, "bears an analogical capacity to awaken in the responsive human community an authentic memory of God, a palpable hope for liberation, and a real Presence in whom we 'live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28).'" This breakthrough of Sophia, in no small way, marked for Merton a "lyrical consummation" of his "Christ-haunted past."²⁹⁹

5. *Sophianic Suchness of the Universe*

The Wisdom texts of Merton's mature years shared the link of his contemplative vision. Classical Christian categories like "Creation," "Incarnation," and "Resurrection" were now living, present realities breaking into human consciousness in mystical experience. The world "is no longer seen as merely material, hence as an obstacle that has to be grudgingly put up with. It is spiritual through and through."³⁰⁰

It is through contemplation and grace that we can "unite the hidden wisdom of God in things with the hidden light of wisdom" within ourselves giving birth to reality in each moment.³⁰¹ Merton's "immanentism" is just where Suzuki and he agree to depart. It is the ongoing rub familiar in Buddhist-Christian dialogue. It is the question of whether the deep structure and dynamism of reality—Sunnyata, God, true self—is experienced and so conceived in personal (biblical, theistic) terms as a gift of grace. Still, Suzuki and Merton share the conviction that persons and cultures everywhere, especially in the West, need urgently to recover the

²⁹⁹ STM, 169.

³⁰⁰ ICM, 126.

³⁰¹ ICM, 126.

contemplative way in the midst of, in Suzuki's words, the "industrialization and the universal propagandism of 'an easy life.'"³⁰²

Merton carefully avoids a pantheistic view of creation by underlining the utter freedom and gratuity of God's love in the ground of all being.³⁰³ His non-dualistic approach to engagement in the divine life is both "sacramental" (Western Catholic) and "iconic" (Eastern Orthodox) compared to the starting point being historical causality and continuity. This appreciation of God's presence in the material world emanates more from "a liturgical sensibility," symbolic, and "meta-historical, or eschatological approach to space and time."³⁰⁴ Another way of describing this worldview is "theophanic" from the Orthodox worship based spirituality (Zizioulas' description citing Yves Congar's description of Orthodox ecclesiology as "embodying the idea of 'showing' or manifestation of invisible heavenly realities on earth").³⁰⁵

Again, Merton amplifies that the *experience* of the Wisdom of God, Christ as Sophia, is not esoteric or abstract: "It is simply opening yourself to receive. The presence of God is like walking out of a door into fresh air. You don't concentrate on the fresh air, you breathe it. And you don't concentrate on the sunlight, you just enjoy it. It is all around."³⁰⁶ Merton, like Suzuki insists that while theologians "may go on discussing the matter," anyone can simply "live the

³⁰² STM, 170 cites ZBA 136-37 and CWA, 175.

³⁰³ Ibid.

³⁰⁴ STM, 170.

³⁰⁵ John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), 171 as cited by Pramuk STM, 170.

³⁰⁶ STM 171, cited in MHPH, 454.

mystery.”³⁰⁷ For this Western monk, Merton’s Eastern Orthodox and Zen hybrid turn shines most vividly in his very life:

Looking at these figures I was suddenly, almost forcibly, jerked clean out of the habitual, half-tied vision of things, and an inner clearness, clarity, as if exploding from the rocks themselves, became evident and obvious. . . . The thing about this is that there is no puzzle, no problem, and really no “mystery.” All problems are resolved and everything is clear, simply because what matters is clear. The rock, all matter, all life, is charged with dharmakaya. . . everything is emptiness and everything is compassion.³⁰⁸ [Merton’s recording of his “illumination” at the Buddhist shrine of Pollanaruwa]

At this juncture in Merton’s spiritual odyssey, Pollanaruwa encapsulates for him the self-emptying love and mercy of God: “all matter, all life, is charged with dharmakaya”—the Sanskrit term for the most sublime or essential reality in the universe—“the cosmical body of the Buddha, the essence of all beings.”³⁰⁹ This experience for Merton, then, was not necessarily a momentary departure from his Christ centered view of reality. It was the entire New Testament ambience summed up in stone. It also harkens back to Merton’s note regarding Maximus on *theoria physike*: “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.”³¹⁰

The following Asian Journal entry records Merton’s reflections on a meeting that took place a few weeks before Pollanaruwa. It reveals his very Christ centered, simply loving human engagement with all sorts of people who were attracted to him, in this case a Nepalese Buddhist

³⁰⁷ ZBA, 134.

³⁰⁸ Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* edited by Naomi Burton, Patrick Hart, and James Laughlin. (New York: New Direction, 1973), 233, 235.

³⁰⁹ AJ, 372 citing Murti.

³¹⁰ ICM, 110.

hermit named Chatral Rimpoche, “the greatest rimpoche I have ever met so far and a very impressive person.”:

Chatral looked like a vigorous old peasant in a Bhutanese jacket tied at the neck with thongs and a red woolen cap on his head. He had a week’s growth of beard, bright eyes, a strong voice, and was very articulate, much more communicative than I expected. We had a fine talk and all through it Jimpa, the interpreter, laughed and said several times, “These are hermit questions. . . this is another hermit question.” . . . We must have talked for two hours or more, covering all sorts of ground. . . but also taking in some points of Christian doctrine compared with Buddhist: dharmakaya. . . the risen Christ, suffering, compassion for all creatures. . . He said he had meditated in solitude for thirty years or more and had not attained to perfect emptiness and I said I hadn’t either.

The unspoken or half-spoken message of the talk was our complete understanding of each other as people who were somehow *on the edge* of great realization and knew it and were trying, somehow or other, to go out and get lost in it—and that it was a grace for us to meet one another. I wish I could see more of Chatral. He burst out and called me a rangjung Sangay (which apparently means “natural Buddha”). . . . I was profoundly moved, because he is so obviously a great man. . . marked by simplicity and freedom. He was surprised at getting on so well with a Christian and at one point laughed and said, “There must be something wrong here!”³¹¹

This is Merton at his Christ-saturated peak, fully immersed in the simple warmth of hospitality, rejoicing in the simplicity and freedom of their presence—two strangers with, perhaps, “realized” eyes, hearts and minds open to each other in the moment. Merton evolved in his mature years with the help of his discovery of sophiological language which allowed him more access, conceptually and imaginatively, to make room to visualize God’s freedom, love and presence to persons and cultures everywhere.

It is instructive to keep in mind that Merton was a monk of the West in a very strict order, whose spirituality evolved dramatically, now with the emergence of a “sophiological turn. . . as the subtext that would both center and crystalize an uncommonly radical openness to

³¹¹ AJ, 143-44.

others during the 1960s.”³¹² Merton’s affirmation of the hidden Christ everywhere was not only daring, his faith in Sophia had become for him “a great stabilizer for peace. . . . even a new kind of theology rooted in forgotten realms of *memoria*, presence and hope.”³¹³

This turn began in Louisville in his experience through strangers on the street where God’s incarnation in Christ became personally real. Earlier, he would have perceived them as outsiders or threats to his monastic vocation. Now pure christology with a human face. To believe that every person offers us “our encounter with that God who is deep down in the heart of each person” is the “sophiological perspective” which is “alive to God’s presence in the world never as ‘abstract essence’ but concretely, sacramentally, more than literally.”³¹⁴ “As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now I realize what we all are.”³¹⁵

Beyond his attuned ability to write in such a balanced fashion on many realms of theology drawing a range of people from diverse backgrounds, it is his “discernment of the profound truth that lies hidden within the dense substance of things”³¹⁶ which most accounts for this deep resonance. In her exegesis of *Hagia Sophia*, Susan McCaslin makes this comment: “While Merton recognizes the limitations of language, he assumes a metaphysical and ontological ground of being beyond language; that is, the ‘real presence’ of Wisdom behind and within the signs.”³¹⁷

³¹² STM, 173.

³¹³ Ibid.

³¹⁴ STM, 174.

³¹⁵ CGB, 157.

³¹⁶ Chenu, *Nature, Man and Society*, 99.

³¹⁷ MHPH, 253 as cited in STM 174.

Merton wrote as a mystical poet and theologian “intuitively receiving and shaping images for the divine.”³¹⁸ The Wisdom of God, Sophia, creates and sustains reality. Merton threads this hidden secret in his theology of engagement with the world. The development of his contemplative theology in his later years has an undercurrent of the converging influences of Zen and Russian Sophiology.

E. Paradox: Being within being

While Merton’s Christology does not stray from a relatively traditional framework, the spacial metaphors of “the twin doctrines of incarnation and deification, which are two sides of the same mystery”³¹⁹ harbor a dualism he finally abandons. For him, the heart of Christian spirituality is to be conveyed “as the Reality within our own reality, the Being within our being, the life of our life.”³²⁰ Merton did not want a “toned down christology”³²¹ or anthropology: “If we believe in the Incarnation of the Son of God there should be no one on earth in whom we are not prepared to see, in mystery, the presence of Christ.”³²² Again, Merton’s primary strategy is to “guard the image of man for it is the image of God.”³²³

³¹⁸ Susan McCaslin, “Merton and ‘Hagia Sophia,’” in MHPH, 235-54, at 253; Cited in STM, 178.

³¹⁹ A.M. Allchin, “The Worship of the Whole Creation.” in MHPH, 103-20 at 107. Cited in STM, 179.

³²⁰ Thomas Merton, *The New Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy, 1961. Reprint, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), 19; Cited STM, 179.

³²¹ STM, 179 citing Donald M. Baillie, *God Was in Christ* (New York: Scribner’s, 1948), 132.

³²² NSC, 296; STM 179, Pramuk cites Merton stating his theological anthropology resonates with that of Karl Rahner.

³²³ RU, 6, citing Berdyaev. See STM, 179.

1. Alpha and Omega: images of the Image

Merton's christological approach is to illuminate Christ as the source, beginning and fulfillment of creation. God already decided "from the beginning" to enter fully into humankind. "The whole character of the creation was determined by the fact that God was to become man and dwell in the midst of His own creation."³²⁴ As recreation of all humanity, Merton makes the point that the New Testament writers clearly indicated Adam's inferiority to Christ, the Wisdom-figure. He cites Paul:

The cosmic mediation of Christ is brought out clearly in St. Paul's Captivity Epistles, especially in the one to the Colossians. Here he says: "(Christ) is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature. For in Him were created all things in the heavens and on the earth. . . .All things have been created through and unto Him, and in Him all things hold together." [Colossians 1:15-17]. In reading words like these, one is astounded that they receive so little attention from Christians today. It is the Man-God, the Redeemer, Who is the "firstborn of every creature" and who is consequently "born" before Adam. . . .[In] Him Adam is created, like everything else in Heaven and on earth. . . .In Him they "hold together." Without Him they would fall apart.³²⁵

His treatment of the doctrines of incarnation and deification are articulated through a cosmic christology and an elevated and sanctified anthropology. Christ is the "Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end"(Rev 21:6) and "He is the uncreated Image of which we are created images. . . .Thus even our natural life is rooted in the divine life of our Creator. . . .Who is the Image 'Who is the Wisdom of God, in Whom God knows His power, His wisdom and His

³²⁴ NM, 137.

³²⁵ Ibid., 136.

goodness.”³²⁶ Our human life is always and in all places “ontologically suspended from the life of God.”³²⁷

A short cut statement regarding Merton’s influences in his evolving christological sensibilities is encapsulated by George Kilcourse: “Put somewhat baldly, for Thomas [Aquinas] and the dominant theology the Incarnation of the Son of God was *necessary* because of sin; for Scotus and the Franciscan school of theology, the Incarnation of the Son of God was *inevitable* because of God’s love!”³²⁸

What Merton says the Incarnation adds to humanity is the sign and ontological agent of spiritual perfection which makes deification conceivable: “And we shall see that the soul of Christ, united to the Word in a union closer than any other union of two natures that ever existed or ever will exist, is not only the model of our existential communion with God, but is the *source by grace by which that union is effected in our souls*.”³²⁹ We know Jesus (historical) because he is the Christ (mystical), real though hidden. Through awareness, moreover, *realization* this knowledge is birthed in ourselves and in the world.

To review: the first part of this study is about the struggle to draw a wide theological context regarding Christian self-identity against the backdrop of the ever-evolving global religious pluralism and inter faith and inter cultural dialogue.

³²⁶ Ibid., 142.

³²⁷ Ibid., 143.

³²⁸ George Kilcourse, *Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton's Christ* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), 32; cf. 9, 30-40; cited STM, 180, note 15.

³²⁹ NM, 143. Cited STM, 181 where Pramuk notes the phrase “existential communion,” the original title of *The New Man*.

“He [Christ] is the uncreated Image of which we are created images. . . . even our natural life is rooted in the divine life of our Creator”—is the “positive foundation for the ontological and spiritual unity of all human beings in Christ.” To say it in the terms of the contemporary theology of religions, our status as ‘images of the divine Image’ is Merton’s basis for an all-encompassing Christian inclusivism, the ground for an openness and dialogue that positively expects to encounter Christ, the light and Wisdom of God, hidden in the stranger.”³³⁰ Merton writes, “*At the center of our souls we meet together*, spiritually in the infinite source of all different created lives.”³³¹ In a letter to Suzuki, he says, “We follow Him, we find Him. . . . and then He must vanish and we must go along without Him at our side. Why? Because He is even closer than that, *He is oneself*.”³³²

2. Restoring Creative Freedom

Merton sees contemplation as “a most important part of man’s cooperation in the spiritualization and restoration of the cosmos.”³³³ Two hindrances Merton describes for persons not realizing the “mysterious com-penetration of Christ with the whole cosmos. The first is because of sin, the second is because Christ is so near *he is ourselves*.”³³⁴

Contemplation obviously plays a significant role in Merton’s stance toward the Christian life (*ad intra*) as well as other religious paths (*ad extra*). To better understand his contemplative

³³⁰ STM, 181-82.

³³¹ NM, 142-43.

³³² HGL, 564.

³³³ ICM, 125.

³³⁴ NM, 138, 160.

sensibilities, it is good to be aware of the central myth in the soteriology from which he operates. That theme is: humanity's loss of an original paradisaic unity.³³⁵

Christ's freedom in His obedience to Truth is the source of restoration, the agent of reintegration, for humans to be united with God in our own freedom. Freedom, Christ's and our own, is central to Merton's "soteriology of recapitulation": In *The New Man*, he writes: "The second Adam, by the perfect use of His freedom in obedience to the Truth, reintegrated man into the reality of the spiritual order. He restored man to his original existential communion with God, the source of life, and thus opened again to him the closed gates of Paradise."³³⁶ Freedom originally shattered the divine image; it also was the means by which creation in Christ was recapitulated coming to cosmic fulfillment in the resurrection.

William Shannon makes a very important point regarding Merton's high Christology. He notes that it is, "the risen Christ (especially the Christ of the Pauline epistles), rather than the Jesus of the Gospels, who is most prominent in Merton's writings"³³⁷ however, Merton does give central importance to Jesus' freedom as means of our redemption. In other words, "Merton's high Christology. . . must never be separated from his high anthropology, his robust doctrine of the 'true self.'"³³⁸ The deepest continuity with Christ is the spiritual freedom we enjoy enlightened by divinity:

As a magnifying glass concentrates the rays of the sun into a little burning knot of heat that can set fire to a dry leaf or a piece of paper, so the mystery of Christ in the Gospel concentrates the rays of God's light and fire to a point that sets fire to the spirit of man . . . Through the glass of His Incarnation He concentrate

³³⁵ STM, 182 cites McCaslin, in MHPH, 246; McCaslin associates Merton on this point with William Blake.

³³⁶ NM, 151 cited STM, 183.

³³⁷ William Shannon, "Christology," in TME, 151-54, at 53. Cited STM, 183.

³³⁸ STM, 183.

the rays of His Divine Truth and Love upon us so that we feel the burn, and all mystical experience is communicated to men through the Man Christ.

For in Christ God is made Man. In Him God and man are no longer separate, remote from one another, but inseparably one, unconfused and yet indivisible. Hence in Christ everything that is divine and supernatural becomes accessible on the human level to every man born of woman, to every son of Adam. What is divine has now become connatural to us in Christ's love so that if we receive Him and are united with Him in friendship, He Who is at the same time God our brother, grants us the divine life that is now able to be ours on our human Christ and His brothers.³³⁹

Merton's emphasis, here, is on "divinization and recapitulation expressed in physical-ontological terms not ethical-legal. The aim is not 'redemption' 'to buy back' or 'to ransom' or even 'salvation' but universal healing and restoration."³⁴⁰

The text underscores that, "We read the Gospels just not merely to get a picture or an idea of Christ but to enter in and pass through the words of revelation to establish, by faith, vital contact with the Christ in our souls as God."³⁴¹ Faith, for Merton is radically personalistic: "Our love and knowledge of Christ do not terminate in His human *nature* or in His divine *nature* but in His *Person*. . . . We do not love Christ for what He was but for *Who He is*." This *Who* is the real power and mystery of Christian agape:

The power of a direct and simple contact with Him, not as with an object only, a 'thing' seen or imagined, but in the transobjective union of love which does not unite an object with a subject but two subjects in one affective union. Hence, in love we can, so to speak, experience in our own hearts the intimate personal secret of the Beloved. . . . Thus He Who is, is present in the depths of our own being as our Friend, and as our other self. Such is the mystery of the Word dwelling in us by virtue of His Incarnation and our incorporation in His Mystical Body, the Church.³⁴²

³³⁹ NSC, 150.

³⁴⁰ STM, 184. See note on Eastern Orthodoxy's emphasis on divinization, 30.

³⁴¹ NSC, 156.

³⁴² *Ibid*, 153-54.

Merton's person centered Christology is "the Christ born in us in poverty, as" in "Eckhart"; "the Christ of Julian of Norwich; the Christ of immediate experience all down through the mystical tradition."³⁴³ He employs the term "God-Man" to emphasize the Person not two Natures in the abstract. The paradoxical Christian formula of "truly human and truly divine" also analogically applies to all human beings.³⁴⁴

He cites Athanasius for a classical take on Christian mysticism: "Divinization is not only 'the result of the Incarnation,'" it is "the very *purpose* of the Incarnation," that is, "divinization and salvation are regarded as one and the same thing. . . . We are called to 'be sons of God in Christ.'"³⁴⁵ While it "is not explicitly concerned with what we would call mystical experience," Athanasius' doctrine "is the theological foundation for all such experience."³⁴⁶

Merton's concept of contemplation implied a radical transformation, "a kind of knowledge by identification, an intersubjective knowledge, a communion in cosmic awareness and in nature. . . . a wisdom based on love."³⁴⁷ It does not imply, because people are naturally joined to God, that they are conscious of it in a way that yields a life of holiness or true happiness. To become fully aware of oneself in God, Merton would say, requires an immersion in a living praxis in relationship to God and community. If most people rarely wonder or see our

³⁴³ HGL, 637, 643.

³⁴⁴ STM, 185, where Pramuk notes in Orthodox doctrine there is a sense in which the gift of deification "has already been planted in human soil" through the incarnation: "A certain ontological reformation or regeneration of human nature was *already* accomplished in Christ, since human nature was given back its essential character of being in the image of God, i.e., of being in communion with God" citing D. Kornblatt and R.F. Gustafson, "Introduction," in *Russian Religious Thought*, edited by idem (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 12, citing Beatrice de Bary.

³⁴⁵ ICM, 61.

³⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 62.

³⁴⁷ LE, 108.

kinship with one another in God “destroying in one another the very image” [of God that we] “ought to love above all things,” this “wisdom based on love” will completely escape us.

He often lamented for the historical enmity between peoples and religions of the world; that we fail to see “[that the image of God] is one and the same in all souls that receive their life in Him. At the center of their souls we meet together, spiritually, in the infinite source of all our different created lives.”³⁴⁸ The existential communion or kinship we share is “ontologically suspended from the life of God.”³⁴⁹ Further, “The capacity for contemplative experience and the fact of its realization. . . are therefore implicit in all the great religious traditions, whether Asian, European, whether Hindu, Buddhist, Moslem, or Christian.”³⁵⁰

The fact that a friendship in wisdom is only potential, for Christians and non-Christians, for the most part since not everyone is engaged in contemplative practice becomes a deep sorrow for Merton. Religions need to advocate and engage in a more contemplative approach to reality, he suggested, if they are going to advance relationships in all spheres of the human marketplace. He was clear about cultural differences and religious boundaries and the difficult work of dialoguing across historical and conceptual divisions. What is necessary is deeper than communication. It is communion, a kind of understanding, in the heart of Love’s “hidden ground.”

³⁴⁸ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), 384-85.

³⁴⁹ MZM. 209.

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

3. Transformation through Contemplation

In his “Second Adam,” Merton’s approach to salvation is understood as transformation through contemplation. This understanding is revealed in his use of dynamic terms such as “realization,” “awakening,” awareness,” and transformation.” Merton’s focus on transformation through contemplation practice suggests that interfaith dialogue center not on the language of “salvation” so much as conversion and holiness.³⁵¹

Merton sees contemplation as a way to become free of the “false self” and the temptation to “domesticate the mystery of God,” and describes it with poetic exuberance as below. The:

experience of contemplation is the experience of God’s life and presence within ourselves not as object but as the transcendent source of our own subjectivity. Contemplation is a mystery in which God reveals Himself to us as the very center of our own most intimate self—*intimior intimo meo* as St. Augustine said. When the realization of His presence bursts upon us, our own self disappears in Him and we pass mystically through the Red Sea of separation to lose ourselves (and thus find our true selves) in Him.³⁵²

While Merton acknowledges the unavoidable dualistic ideas of God and Christ, we are brought to the extreme paradox of non-dualism: which expresses “the distinctive secret of the Christian life,” and “the short comings of theological prose”³⁵³ in expressing it. In the Christian imagination, “We can see Him as object separate from ourselves, as a being from whom we are alienated, even though we believe that He loves us and that we love Him.”³⁵⁴ God seems to dwell “out there,” and “in respecting the metaphysical distinction between Creator and creature

³⁵¹ STM, 191 where Pramuk says Merton’s focus on transformation through contemplative practice suggests that interfaith dialogue center not on the language of “salvation” so much as conversion and holiness.

³⁵² NM, 19.

³⁵³ Donald Baille’s description; see his *God Was in Christ* (New York: Scribner’s, 1948).

³⁵⁴ NM, 18.

we have to emphasize the I-Thou relationship between the soul and God.”³⁵⁵ Yet, “in contemplation this division disappears, for contemplation goes beyond concepts and apprehends God. . .as the Reality within our own reality, the Being within our being, the life of our life.”

Merton speaks of this paradoxical experience of light (“with faces unveiled”; “you are blinded by the light”³⁵⁶; “shines like the sun”) as being both christocentric and apophatic at the same time. In a letter to Suzuki, he describes Christ as unknown and unseen: “We follow Him, we find Him. . .and then He must vanish and we must go along without Him at our side.”³⁵⁷ Liberation is the emerging realization of “who we are in him.” Why must we “go along without Him at our side?” Because “we ourselves are Adam, we ourselves are Christ” and because “we are all dwelling in one another.”³⁵⁸

The way of contemplation implies ascetic struggle, self-purification and love. For Merton, “Mysticism and asceticism form an organic whole—an integral way of life. He bemoans their separation in Christian spirituality as “an unfortunate development.”³⁵⁹ His approach is balanced describing asceticism in both negative (“renunciation”) and positive (“cooperation with the Holy Spirit”) terms with a goal that is wholly positive, that is, to engender “trust in God” and “generosity with no second thought.”³⁶⁰

³⁵⁵ Ibid.

³⁵⁶ Ibid., 159.

³⁵⁷ HGL, 564.

³⁵⁸ NM, 161.

³⁵⁹ ICM, 21-22.

³⁶⁰ Ibid., xxiv-xxv; xxxii-xxxiii.

It is easy to see why Merton saw in Zen discipline and practice above all other religious traditions “a very real quality of existential likeness”³⁶¹ with Christian contemplation. As we noted earlier, he perceived Zen with wisdom: “the true purpose of Zen [is] awakening a deep ontological awareness, a wisdom-intuition (*Prajna*) in the ground of the being of the one awakened.”³⁶² This awareness brought on by its gaze resting with loving attention on the particular and concrete, the intrinsic goodness of things, is a very far distance from a world-denying spirituality. The converse is true, by contemplation “in Christ” we awaken in mystery to our essential unity with the entire cosmos and every creature and particular within it.

In one of his most poignant and popular books, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, we find Merton’s exuberant sophianic vision flowing out onto the last pages. It is the Wisdom-child “playing in the world, playing before Him at all times.”³⁶³ Merton continues:

We do not have to go very far to catch echoes of that game, and of that dancing. When we are alone on a starlit night; when by chance we see the migrating birds in autumn descending on a grove of junipers to rest and eat; when we see children in a moment when they are really children; when we know love in our hearts. . . . if we could let go of our own obsession with what we think is the meaning of it all. . . .forget ourselves on purpose, cast our awful solemnity to the winds and join in the general dance.³⁶⁴

³⁶¹ AJ, 312.

³⁶² ZBA, 48.

³⁶³ NSC, 290.

³⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 296-297.

F. *Hagia Sophia: The Poem*

*Awake, O sleeper,
and arise from the dead,
and Christ will give you light.*

—Ephesians 5:14

The culmination of Merton's sophiological turn was in the spring of 1961 during Pentecost when he composed the prose poem, *Hagia Sophia*, celebrating divine Wisdom as the feminine manifestation of God. Along with the sources already mentioned earlier, this was at a time in his life, when Julian of Norwich's (by his own account) influence on him rivaled that of St. John of the Cross earlier in his life.³⁶⁵ His original prayer composed for Pentecost earlier the same year was, "A Prayer to God My Father."

The poem was inspired by a triptych painted by Merton's friend, Victor Hammer, when he was visiting the artist at his home in 1959. Merton identified the woman in the center panel of the painting as *Hagia Sophia*. The boy Christ is being crowned by a woman.

Merton explains to Hammer in a letter after their visit that Wisdom is the feminine dimension of God, not another "person" but God's *Ousia* (Being or substance), the "pivot (*point le verge*)" of all being and creativity, the mercy of God in and toward the creation, identified particularly with the Virgin Mary, who gives the Word his human nature and sends him forth on his redemptive mission of mercy.³⁶⁶ "These themes and even many phrases of the letter, will reappear in the poem, which draws from Proverbs 8, on reflections of the Russian theologians

³⁶⁵ See SD, 275.

³⁶⁶ Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: The Letters of Thomas Merton in Times of Crisis*, edited by William Shannon (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1995), 4; hereafter WF. Cited STM, 194.

Soloviev and Bulgakov, on the writings of the fourteenth century English recluse Julian of Norwich.”³⁶⁷

Later, to this artist he wrote: “The first thing to be said, of course, is that Hagia Sophia is God Himself. God is not only a Father but a Mother. He is both at the same time....” To “ignore this distinction is to lose touch with the fullness of God. This is a very ancient intuition of reality which goes back to the oldest Oriental thought. . . . For the ‘masculine-feminine relationship’ is basic in all reality—simply because all reality mirrors the reality of God.”³⁶⁸

The composition is a hymn of peace; a realized synthesis of Western and Eastern spirituality. Merton ends his original Pentecost prayer asking for the courage to “be a man of peace and to help bring peace to the world. . . . of truth and nonviolence.”³⁶⁹ It is noteworthy that Merton’s journals in 1961 reflect momentum building in his struggle to confront an odious persona as he takes on more controversial stances dealing with peace and justice issues: “I will stop making any kind of effort to justify myself to anybody. To prepare a place for myself anywhere among any group. . . . Peace is impossible until I fully and totally realize, and embrace the realization, that I am already forgotten. . . . Render unto God the things that are God’s.”³⁷⁰

It was for Merton Holy Wisdom whom Mary represented in bestowing the crown of human nature upon Christ. This “act of feminine power,” subverts traditional depictions of Mary being crowned by Christ. Thus we are reminded, “that all men and women come from a common womb (the earth, the Feminine) and are alike vulnerable, frail, and utterly dependent on the earth

³⁶⁷ TME, 191.

³⁶⁸ WF, 4 cited STM, 194.

³⁶⁹ TTW, 121.

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 143-44; see Herakleitos parallel in BT, 84. Cited STM, 195.

and the feminine matrix.³⁷¹ Merton's *Hagia Sophia* lyrically expresses for him "Christ being born into the whole world; poor, hidden." He powerfully locates the matrix of personal and communal transformation.

Mercy, for Merton, is key to our participation in God. It affirms Jesus' "infinitely mysterious power of pardon"; it "cuts across the divisions and passes beyond every philosophical and religious ideal."³⁷² Sophia/Mercy "is not an ideal, not an abstraction, but the highest reality. . . .that must manifest herself to us not only in power but also in poverty." The letter continues: "In the sense that God is Love, is Mercy, is Humility, is Hiddenness, He shows Himself to us within ourselves as our own poverty, our own nothingness (which Christ took upon Himself, ordained for this by the Incarnation in the womb of the Virgin)(the crowning in your picture), and if we receive the humility of God into our Hearts, we become able to accept and embrace and love this very poverty, which is Himself and His Sophia."

The key to grasping any mystical text is that it needs to be read contemplatively. Mark Burrows expounds this point. It comes "not in criticism of the text, but in the 'performance' of reading, that moment when the mystical text becomes the occasion for a 'merging of the way of knowledge and the way of love."³⁷³ Merton's *Hagia Sophia*, is a case in point. It represents his evolved realization of knowledge and love, ensconced in its "play of images and silences, its haunting evocation of divine-human *memoria*."³⁷⁴ This most daring and secret of Merton's

³⁷¹ McCaslin in MHPH, 250.

³⁷² WF, 5.

³⁷³ STM, 196, citing Mark S. Burrows, "Words That Reach into the Silence: Mystical Languages of Unsayings," in *Minding the Spirit*, edited by Elizabeth Dreyer and Mark S. Burrows (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2005), 213, citing Michael Sells.

³⁷⁴ STM, 196.

works, read by the uninitiated reader or those familiar with the poem, bears repeated readings to enter into and reap the fruits of its revelatory landscape. With his extraordinary sacramental imagination, Merton has written a text which some call a modern Christian mystical classic many scholars see worthy of sustained study.

1. Structure and Interpretation

The prose poem is structured in four parts, based on the canonical hours of prayer. However, it should be noted that Merton does not include the full pattern of seven canonical hours. The hours of *sext*, *none* and *vespers* are omitted. Beyond the fact that these three hours are the shortest, by lyric implication, “Perhaps because Wisdom is understood as less easily recognized in the full light of day, perhaps because the incompleteness of the pattern symbolizes the incompleteness of the human response to the presence of Wisdom.”³⁷⁵

The first section, “*The Hour of Lauds*,” identifies the “hidden wholeness of the visible creation as the presence of Wisdom. Wisdom is also experienced in the depths of the self as both “my own being / my own nature” as divine gift. This experience is successively described as the awakening of humanity from dreams to reality, of a fragmented humanity to the unity of love. Here, Merton summons *le point vierge*, the “blind sweet point when all creation in its innocence asks permission to ‘be’ once again, as it did on the first morning that ever was.”³⁷⁶

Yet, in the next hour, “*The Hour of Prime*,” (the shortest section) is the lament of the usual failure to hear the voice of Wisdom or to recognize in the gentleness, mercy, and yielding

³⁷⁵ TME, 191.

³⁷⁶ CGB, 131.

love, Wisdom's manifestation everywhere. "We do not hear the soft voice, the gentle voice, the merciful and feminine."³⁷⁷

We shun the invitation dazzled by our affinities for modern efficiency: "We face our mornings as men of undaunted purpose. We know the time and we dictate terms. We are in a position to dictate terms, we suppose. . . . We are in touch with the hidden inner laws."³⁷⁸ Driven by the myth of speed, we are over-reliant on telecommunications and electronic computation. This is daily evidenced by the metallic, plastic landscape of mobile technology in our hands with which we nimbly prompt cyber applications in a flash; concealed behind our computers or in our cars dashing or stuck in traffic we cannot hear the "blessed, silent one."³⁷⁹ Merton said it in the 1960s in *Conjectures*, "Lights on. Clocks ticking. Thermostats working. Electric shavers filling the radios with static. 'Wisdom,' cries the dawn deacon, but we do not attend."³⁸⁰

Only those who realize and accept their own helplessness can respond to Sophia and awake to an acceptance of the primordial unity of creation, "to the impeccable pure simplicity of One consciousness in all and through all: one Wisdom / one Child / one Meaning / one Sister."

Merton intimates Sophia as nonviolence, coming forth (symbolized in the coming of daylight) appealing to our hearts to share in the work of making a new world each day. The "static" in our hearts and minds, transmitted one person to another, frightful, anxious, angry, forgetful and willing to remain unawakened from legitimating a commitment to militarism and violence which exports our neurosis as a primary way to "communicate" with the strange,

³⁷⁷ ESF, 63.

³⁷⁸ CGB, 131.

³⁷⁹ ESF, 63.

³⁸⁰ CBG, 132.

suspect other. “Instead of taking care to examine the realities of our own political or social problems, we simply bring out the idols in solemn procession. ‘We are the ones who are right, *they* are the ones who are wrong. We are the good guys, *they* are the bad guys.’”³⁸¹ If “we do not hear mercy, or yielding love, or non-resistance, or non-reprisal,” then, “we do not see the Child who is prisoner in all people, and who says nothing.”³⁸² Recall Herakleitos, “Dogs bark at everyone they do not know.”

This gift of “inexhaustible sweetness” can only be ascertained by a difficult un-centering and asceticism of the self, a humility which starts with the recognition of one’s limitations and the need for God and others. Who sees or hears “Nature made wise by God’s Art and Incarnation”? This is the implied question the reader faces.

The stars rejoice in their setting, and in the rising of the Sun. The heavenly lights rejoice in the going forth of one man to make a new world in the morning, because he has come out of the confused primordial dark night into consciousness. He has expressed the clear silence of Sophia in his heart. He has become eternal.³⁸³

In the third part, *Tierce*, Sophia is described as mercifully diffusing the full light of divinity (the High Morning Sun or the “Face of God”) mediating the softer light of Hagia Sophia shining within and speaking “to us gently in ten thousand things.” This phrase is a return to Hopkins (his sonnet, “As Kingfishers Catch Fire” in which Christ plays). Recall Merton on *theoria physike*, “When a man has been purified and humbled, when his eye is single, and he is his own real self, the *logoi* of things jump out at him spontaneously.”³⁸⁴ *Theoria*, Merton was

³⁸¹ FV, 154.

³⁸² ESF, 63.

³⁸³ *Ibid.*, 64.

³⁸⁴ ICM, 132.

saying, “implies a sense of community with things in the work of salvation.”³⁸⁵ God is depicted as both solitary Father transcending creation and as Mother, the “glory” of God embracing all creatures with tenderness and light, allowing the divine power to be experienced as mercy and love, as “Jesus our Mother,” in Julian of Norwich’s words:

All the perfections of created things are also in God; and therefore He is at once Father and Mother. As Father He stands in solitary might surrounded by darkness. As Mother His shining is diffused, embracing all His creatures with merciful tenderness and light. The Diffuse Shining of God is Hagia Sophia. . . . In Sophia His power is experienced only as mercy and as love.³⁸⁶

Sophia is the source of beauty and creativity, but glimpsed by very few if any in a fallen world that turns from light and loves darkness. “Perhaps in a certain primitive aspect Sophia is the unknown, the dark, the nameless Ousia. . . . Out of the silence Light is spoken. . . . in the nameless Beginning, without Beginning.” Susan McCaslin makes this observation regarding the striking “oxymoronic coincidence” of male and female metaphors, light and darkness, theophany and hiddenness: “The efforts to name Sophia, to catch her in the net of language defer to the apophatic tradition of ‘unnaming.’ Every naming becomes an unnaming, a backing off from language, and an insistence that words and names are inadequate before mystery. Sophia herself becomes ‘the unknown, the dark, the nameless. . . . God is not an object of knowledge. The God who is male and female, father and mother, is simultaneously neither male nor female, transcending gender categories.”³⁸⁷ Merton’s metaphors remain fluid regarding gender. Tenderness and mercy are attributed to God the Father just as Sophia exercises power and

³⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 131.

³⁸⁶ ESF, 65.

³⁸⁷ McCaslin in MHPH, 248-49; Cited in STM.

authority sending the Child forth into the world. Sophia is an “active power permeating all things.”³⁸⁸

The apophatic saying and unsaying, cumulative layering and juxtaposing of images Merton “carries us beyond the dialectic of positive/negative theology into a kind of mystical third moment, where idols are shattered not in the silence of negation but in the plentitude of affirmation, unity-in-difference, and ecstatic praise. In short, Merton ushers into a mosaic experience of God brimming with positive content, spilling over its linguistic containers.”³⁸⁹ In *Introduction to Christian Mysticism*, this point is concisely captured, “Mystical theology is not just *via negationis*, apophatic theology, dialectical. It is beyond both forms of discursive theology, cataphatic and apophatic. It is the FULFILLMENT OF BOTH.”³⁹⁰

The third part of Merton’s poem leads to our need for the incarnation as we are called “to help bring peace to the world” and to bear the responsibilities that come with the path “of truth and nonviolence.”³⁹¹ This work of new being and the need for incarnation is prescribed in *Sunset, Hour of Compline, Salve Regina*, the final section of the poem.

Merton’s quiescent gaze on Mary as a revelation of Sophia is particularly apt in this final section as “Salve Regina” is sung at Compline. In the Trappist tradition, during the monk’s last of the day’s communal prayer, ensconced in the contemplatively cultivated silence of their monastic choir, Mary is the focus. Customarily, all the lights in the abbey church are off except for a light on the image of Mary (ikon or stained glass window); the last image before the monks

³⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 153.

³⁸⁹ STM, 204 referring to ICM, 142-43.

³⁹⁰ ICM, 142-43.

³⁹¹ Patrick O’Connell, “Hagia Sophia,” in TME, 192.

are blessed by the Abbot and entrust themselves to sleep. In Mary, God enters the world as Sophia. Her consent opens the door as the perfect embodiment of redeemed human nature and the source of human nature for the incarnate Word. “Crowning” the Logos, in Jesus, God is revealed in poverty and weakness--the *kenosis*. As Wisdom incarnate, “The Child goes forth to . . . crucifixion and resurrection. As humanity, the child goes forth an Everyman or Everywoman into exile from paradise.”³⁹² The final scene of the poem depicts a “homeless God” lying down and entrusting Himself to sleep:

The shadows fall. The stars appear. The birds begin to sleep. Night embraces the silent half of the earth.

A vagrant, a destitute wanderer with dusty feet, finds his way down a new road. A homeless God, lost in the night, without papers, without identification, without even a number, a frail expendable exile lies down in desolation under the sweet stars of the world and entrusts Himself to sleep.³⁹³

“In identifying fully with the human condition, Christ is the perfect epiphany of Sophia, embodying and extending to all the redemptive mercy of God.”³⁹⁴ Like Mary, whose fiat celebrated her consent; like the hospital patient in the opening scene of the poem, “Entrusting himself to sleep”; from the still point of every human heart, each person will be free in grace, mercy, peace, justice and love when we attend to her tender voice and give our consent by giving ourselves over to the hidden Wisdom of God.

Who is this Hagia Sophia? The first we can say is that, for all Merton’s mystical-poetic symbology, Hagia Sophia is not symbolic, but real, more than literally real. “She is the Love joining the father, Son, and Spirit that longs for incarnation from before the very beginning. She

³⁹² McCaslin in MHPH, 249.

³⁹³ ESF, 69.

³⁹⁴ O’Connell, “Hagia Sophia” in TME, 193.

is Jesus our mother, and Mary, the *Theotokos*. She is the “pivot” (*le point vierge*) of nature, *Natura naturans*, and all creation in God from the beginning.”³⁹⁵ Pramuk concisely capsulizes.

More than any of these descriptions, the suggestion here is that Merton’s real Sophia is our “true self,” in the moment when we consent to her awakening in us a sense of mercy, presence and communion. This real, more than literally real, moment when we allow the hidden ground of mercy, creativity, and presence, that is, the mystical Body of Christ, to be birthed in us which opens us to a mystical spirituality of engagement in the world. The true self that always summons us into the depths of intimacy with God.

Through the many years practicing the silence of his vocation as a monk, Merton profoundly experienced the difference between the voice of the false self and the voice of the true self. It cannot be overemphasized that Merton’s Wisdom tracts were the fruits of a disciplined life of hours of contemplation and prayer coming to maturity in his later years. The vitality of his literary gift inspires others to take in his vision of the mystical life in all its dimensionality making this process personally accessible, vivid, actual and real.

His contemplative zeal as well as his sustained efforts studying Russian and patristic theology, Zen, and *lectio divina* make his writings much more than poetry, storytelling or other literary genres serving a systematic theology. He wrote as a mystical theologian. The power of his imagination brought the excavated past into the present through a fresh, creative lens to see the past and present with the most realized of poetic sophiological visions of the presence of God.

³⁹⁵ STM, 207.

Merton was aware that the sophiological tradition “had been marginalized within Western Christianity,” and with the poem *Hagia Sophia* he “attempts to restore it.”³⁹⁶ Christopher Pramuk points out that, “The internationality and depth of realization in *Hagia Sophia* are undeniable--yet there is no artifice, no hidden agenda anywhere in its lines.”³⁹⁷ Merton became a mainstay between God and the world and in *Hagia Sophia*, it “is the transfigured, spiritualized and divinized cosmos that speaks through him, and through him utters its praise of the Creator.”³⁹⁸

2. Merton's “Presence” as Hidden Grace

Merton's often used term “presence” refers to the hidden agency of Christ dynamically present in people everywhere. It refers to the grace of God-filled humans, the call of all Christians to be the presence of Christ for others in love, friendship and mercy. In *The New Man*, he distinguishes both aspects of love acknowledging each is crucial in the Christian vocation. It is “a call not only to love but to *be loved*.”³⁹⁹ As mentioned earlier, to his brothers at Gethsemani, he said, “What we must really do is *live our theology*.”⁴⁰⁰ In other words, be the mind of Christ.

Merton was ever onto the world of prayer and faith indissolubly circumscribed by its inner and outer dimensions.⁴⁰¹ His life was a witness to the synthesized link between the grasp of God's presence (Sophia) in the depths of one's heart and the discovery of God's presence in

³⁹⁶ McCaslin in MHPH, 252.

³⁹⁷ STM, 208.

³⁹⁸ DQ, 20-21.

³⁹⁹ NM, 91.

⁴⁰⁰ ICM, 16.

⁴⁰¹ MHPH, 419-29.

creation and in the entire human family. To realize and sustain the Christian vocation to peace, to stay awake to God's Spirit hidden in the mystery of the stranger, to be mindful that we love because *we have first been loved* by Christ in the center of our being, to consider creation and all reality sacramentally, places prayer, contemplation, solitude and silence at the center of an integral Christian life. In what he considered one of his most important essays, Merton describes solitude as an indispensable element of healing and peace not only for the monk but for all human beings. Solitude as *kenosis*, as ascetic disengagement from captivity to noise, the violence, the glitter of idols.⁴⁰²

3. Merton's Final Stage of Integration: An Inclusive, Universal Consciousness

Merton's recovery of the "true self" is the key to the liberation of the Divine Indwelling within us. The sophiological perspective is alive to the Divine Presence as the concrete, sacramental grasp of reality and depends on this key to actively cultivate and attune the spiritual senses, evacuate toxins of body, mind and spirit, and expand the reservoir of humility and love to build "a sense of community with the things in the work of salvation." Merton insists that, "Without love, this is completely impossible."⁴⁰³

Merton accomplished his desire to unite in himself "the thought of the East and the West"⁴⁰⁴ in his life and writing. The Eastern trajectory for Merton included not only the Asian east of Zen but also the wisdom (Sophia) of Eastern Orthodoxy. Merton crossed over an old estrangement in the Christian "federation" of monks. Curiously, dialoguing with the Eastern

⁴⁰² DQ, 177-207.

⁴⁰³ ICM, 128.

⁴⁰⁴ SFS, 87; CGB, 21.

Church may recover ancient hidden treasures long ignored by the West. Regarding Merton's Eastern turn, Sri Lankan theologian Aloysius Pieris reminds us that, "It was really not in Asia that Merton discovered the East; there he only recognized and named what he had already sought and found in his own monastic cell. . . . The West can recover its *Eastern sense* by dialoguing with its own monks."⁴⁰⁵

G. Summing up:

We have raised questions around Merton's mystical or sapiential approach, specifically his sophiology, regarding its merits for an ongoing consideration for theology and spirituality. We delved into the pivotal role of the imagination in doing theology, positing the validity of Merton's theological method.

We then considered the enriching benefits of the poetic dimension of theological thinking as a dynamic means of enlarging reason by reviewing some of Newman's contributions as well as the philosophy and poetry of Heschel. Later, we considered a broad sweep of Merton texts examining his fluent confidence in sacramental language.

As the influence of Sophia was about to emerge in Merton's consciousness, we looked at key influences in his life in the late 1950s, namely: D. T. Suzuki, Herakleitos the Obscure, Maximus the Confessor and Russian Orthodox Sophiology (and Boris Pasternak).

Merton became more Sophia centered and accelerated his outreach to many in dialogue, friendship and peacemaking. We looked at his early 1960s texts representing his brilliant formulation of sophiological realization at its best.

⁴⁰⁵ Aloysius Pieris, *Love Meets Wisdom: A Christian Experience of Buddhism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988), 12.

We then probed the poem *Hagia Sophia* considering who she might be. We asked if the mystical texts were translatable into a systematic theological scheme. If it were possible, would it be helpful or desirable? The later period in Merton's life was characterized by the Russian Orthodox sophiological tenor of a theology in crisis. We saw in Merton's mature period a valiant attempt to retrieve and reconcile the biblical vision of creation and a diverse humanity as unified in the narrative of God from the beginning.

We now reprise the major points we have made mindful of how the sophiological perspective helps to clarify today's pressing theological and spiritual questions.

Regarding Merton's central concern for everyday Christian spirituality, the remembrance of Sophia is less about the intricacies of theology than what it implies about a way of life. That is, the sophiological tradition underscores the tested means in Christian praxis for cultivating a wider, inclusive love in the world through purity of heart and poverty of spirit, distinctive hallmarks of the monastic life cultivated especially by commitment to prayer, simplicity, creativity, solitude, and asceticism. Merton emphasized the importance of poverty of spirit as the necessary prior disposition for a holistic transformation to be realized. This realization was, not least, the awareness of the sacramental presence of God in all people, sentients and material.

Merton's hidden Christ, Sophia, is more than a "sustained metaphor for the presence of the universal presence of God." It is not inaccurate to describe "her" as an "anonymous Christology."⁴⁰⁶ However, a full appreciation of Merton indicates what Orthodox theology means by "divinization"—our full participation in the life of God. She is "the Humanity of God,

⁴⁰⁶ STM, xxvi-xxvii.

the Body of God. . . . , the Divine World existing in God ‘before’ the creation.”⁴⁰⁷ In the lines of Proverbs 8: “I was brought forth, I was there, I was beside him,” is heard the sophiological gist of an expansive divine-human mystery.

Sophiology’s “humanization of God” made possible by the incarnation is a hauntingly poignant emblem of God’s love-humility for the Russian Orthodox theologians, and now for Merton, set against humanity’s dehumanization in the twentieth century.

Merton has spun a daring story. It is a cosmology and theological anthropology—a vision of all things conveyed in a meta-narrative of God “from the beginning.” The process of growing into the truth about the mystery of God connotes the parallel process of growing into an awareness of the truth of the mystery of our selves. The explosion of Sophia into Merton’s consciousness ignited a Christ centered humanism with the adequacy to “recognize Christ. . . in the persons of all men and women and love them with an active love, in word and deed” (*Gaudium et spes* 93).

Wisdom is a unifying theme for Merton’s religious imagination. It was pivotal in his “crossing-over” ventures to other traditions. Sophia can be seen as a christology of presence. Merton’s spirit of intellectual openness and inquiry has fostered an exemplary model of East-West spirituality which could be key to a holistic, all-embracing approach to christology.

⁴⁰⁷ Cited in Paul Valliere, *Modern Russian Theology: Bukharev, Soloviev, Bulgakov: Orthodox Theology in a New Key* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 336.

VIII. A SEGUE—from THOMAS MERTON (MONK) to RAIMON PANIKKAR (MUTANT)

A. Blessed Simplicity: An Archetypal Praxis of Compassion

The remembrance of Sophia for Thomas Merton, we said, was less about the intricacies of theology and more about what it implies about a way of life: the tested means in Christian praxis for cultivating a wider, inclusive love in the world through purity of heart and poverty of spirit. This mature blessed simplicity is the monastic principle par excellence with implications of engagement for the religious person in today's global converging climate.

For the modern day monk, the spiritual quest is more likely to be known as a search for harmonious complexity. For every human being, the monastic dimension, this universal archetype, tends toward the cultivation of integration and fullness. The quest for Oneness cannot exclude the world as it is in its complexity and contradictions.

Merton in his day, we said, risked unpopularity and losing his image as a monastic “pinup” when he took the prophetic stance of radical compassion. The following story is about modern Cistercian monks willing to risk far more than a sometimes saccharine, quaint image.

Paradoxically, the classical *contemptus mundi* of the monk “today takes a new and more subtle turn: not abandoning the world (which is practically impossible), but swimming against the current, like fish in the rivers, without rage or violence, but with poise and elegance, that is, love and patience. . . . Patience does not give up, rather, it perseveres and insists. It does not get discouraged, because it does not believe that a single individual, system, doctrine, or religion has the total answer. Humility. . . means the courage to be imperfect, not finished.”⁴⁰⁸

⁴⁰⁸ Raimon Panikkar, “The New Monk” in *Monastic Interreligious Dialogue* Bulletin 72, 2004; also published as an article, Website by Booklight, Inc.

B. *The Monks of Tibhirine*

*You've got to play the game
for keeps, all or nothing:
If you won't die for love,
love won't lend you its wings.*⁴⁰⁹

*Algeria is land and sun. Algeria is a mother, cruel and yet adorned,
suffering and passionate, hard and nourishing. More than in our
temperate zones, she is proof of the mix of good and evil, the
inseparable dialectic of love and hate, the fusion of opposites that
constitute mankind.*

—Albert Camus

1. Neopraxis of Listening—even unto death

The true story of Christian love set against political terrorism in contemporary Algeria is recorded by John W. Kiser.⁴¹⁰ These were French Trappist monks from three different monasteries in France, all from the same federation as Thomas Merton. In the spring of 1996, militants of the Armed Islamic Group, today affiliated with Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda network, broke into their monastery in war-torn Algeria. Seven monks were taken hostage, pawns in a murky negotiation to release imprisoned terrorists. Two months later, the severed heads of the monks were found in a tree not far from Tibhirine. Their bodies were never recovered.

The village of Tibhirine had sprung up around the monastery because it was a holy place, protected by the Virgin Mary, who is revered by Christians and Muslims. Even so, after 1993, as the Algerian military government's war against Islamic terrorism widened, napalm, helicopters, and gunfire became a regular accompaniment to monastic routine. The harmony between these

⁴⁰⁹ Charles Riba, *Salvatge cor* (Barcelona: Edicions 62, 1974), XXVL.

⁴¹⁰ John W. Kiser, *The Monks of Tibhirine* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2002); hereafter MT.

Christian monks and their Muslim neighbors of Tibhirine contrasts with the fear and distrust among Algerians engaged in a struggle for power and over what it means to be a Muslim. Woven into the story of the kidnapping and the political disintegration of Algeria is a classic account of Christian martyrdom. These monks, though, were not martyrs to their faith, as preaching Christianity to Muslims is forbidden in Algeria, but rather martyrs to their love of their Muslim neighbors, whom they refused to desert in their time of need.

The seven monks were abducted on March 26 to 27 assassinated on May 21 and buried in the ground of their monastery on June 4, 1996. The Church of Algeria included them in the same celebration at the funeral of their protector and friend Cardinal Leon-Etienne Duval, retired Archbishop of Algiers, who died on May 30, 1996.

One of the major impulses for Kiser to write this book was that he wanted to better understand what it means to be a “Christian.” He asks these related questions as well: Does being baptized make one a Christian? To lead a Christian life, does one have to be Christian? Why have Christians too often been bad advertisements for Christianity--dividing and excluding rather than uniting people--just as certain so-called Muslims are now doing in Algeria? Kiser felt that the story of the monks and the Muslims whose lives they shared held a clue.⁴¹¹

Brother Christian also held a clue and is representative of the spirit of compassion these seven men transmitted to each other and the neighboring community. Once a young soldier in Algeria during the war of independence, then Christian Chergé found in the Muslims a people more devoted to prayer and serving God than in supposedly Christian France. He was interested

⁴¹¹ *Ibid.*, xiv-xvi.

in expanding his Christianity, to make a place for Islam, and to seek “the notes that are in harmony.” He was a unifier not a separator.

Before citing two of Brother Christian’s brief reflections indicating a clarity of intent and compassionate insight he shared with his brothers, a few words are in order for context about Trappists generally: Upon entering the monastery, the monk takes on a new name as symbol of identity with Christ. The abbot becomes the father, fellow monks his brothers. Worldly wealth is forsaken for the habit. At death, the few personal possessions—books, papers, writings belong to the Order. The Trappist learns to do less things more intensely. The monk’s life is stripped down to the simplicity of prayer, study and manual labor. Things that distract and require decisions are largely eliminated. To love and praise God is the Trappist way. It is honed with obedience, humility, and charity and practiced in a working community of brothers joined in the love of Christ. Their life is practical, quiet and frugal. They earn their living mostly by the products they make that come from the land.

The Trappist life appealed to Kiser for its dualities of solitude and community, meditation and action, love and discipline. Trappists learn to be both self-disciplined and community-disciplined. The rhythms of work and devotion as a community equip their daily lives. The intent, entering the monastery, is to excel at love, purging all that impedes communal living. This discipline increasingly allows for an emptiness and receptivity for God’s spirit to fill. Their life is rare and easily overlooked or dismissed. The benefits that ensue from this monastic culture would be “like that of a rare, easy-to-overlook plant whose medicinal properties are known only to a few but which could benefit many.”⁴¹²

⁴¹² *Ibid.*, xvi.

Brother Christian left two writings that give us a telling glimpse into the hearts of these seven monks, martyrs to their love of neighbor. They were printed on a flyer⁴¹³ honoring the seven monks by Our Lady of Atlas in Tibhirine:

When we have to face an A-DIEU . . .

If it should happen one day - and it could be today - that I become a victim of the terrorism which now seems ready to engulf all the foreigners living in Algeria, I would like my community, my Church, my family, to remember that my life was GIVEN to God and to this country.

I ask them to accept that the Sole Master of all life was not a stranger to this brutal departure. I ask them to pray for me: for how could I be found worthy of such an offering? I ask them to be able to link this death with the many other deaths which were just as violent, but forgotten through indifference and anonymity.

My life has no more value than any other. Nor any less value.

In any case, it has not the innocence of childhood. I have lived long enough to know that I am an accomplice in the evil which seems, alas, to prevail in the world, even in that which would strike me blindly. I should like, when the time comes, to have the moment of lucidity which would allow me to beg forgiveness of God and of all my fellow human beings, and at the same time to forgive with all my heart the one who would strike me down.

I could not desire such a death. It seems to me important to state this.

I do not see, in fact, how I could rejoice if the people I love were to be accused indiscriminately of my murder. To owe it to an Algerian, whoever he may be, would be too high a price to pay for what will, perhaps, be called, the 'grace of martyrdom,' especially if he says he is acting in fidelity to what he believes to be Islam.

The second entry was written during Advent-Christmastide in Algiers dated December 1, 1993 and Tibhirine, January 1, 1994:

I am aware of the scorn which can be heaped on Algerians indiscriminately. I am also aware of the caricatures of Islam which a certain Islamism encourages. It is too easy to salve one's conscience by identifying this religious way with the fundamentalist ideologies of its extremists. For me, Algeria and Islam are something different: they are a body and a soul. I have proclaimed this often enough, I believe, in the sure knowledge of what

⁴¹³ Limited distribution with no publisher's note.

I received from it, finding there is often that true strand of the Gospel, learnt at my mother's knee, my very first Church, in Algeria itself, and already inspired with respect for muslim believers.

My death, clearly, will appear to justify those who hastily judged me naive, or idealistic: Let him tell us now what he thinks of it!

But these people must realize that my avid curiosity will then be satisfied. This is what I shall be able to do, if God wills - immerse my gaze in that of the Father, and contemplate with him his children of Islam just as he sees them, all shining with the glory of Christ, the fruit of his Passion, and filled with the Gift of the Spirit, whose secret joy will always be to establish communion and to refashion the likeness, playfully delighting in the differences.

For this life lost, totally mine and totally theirs, I thank God who seems to have willed it entirely for the sake of that JOY in everything and in spite of everything. In this THANK YOU, which sums up my whole life from now on, I certainly include you, friends of yesterday and today, and you, my friends of this place, along with my mother and father, my sisters and brothers and their families, the hundredfold granted as was promised!

And also you, the friend of my final moment, who would not be aware of what you were doing. Yes, I also say THANK YOU and this 'ÀDIEU' to you in whom I see the face of God. And may we find each other, happy *good thieves*, in Paradise, if it pleases God, the Father of us both. Amen! In sha 'Alah!

It is a delicate dance of politics and religion to be situated in Muslim societies today.

Given our global village, it is a delicate dance anywhere. This heartrending event is a narrative of compassion and grit. The massacre was met with anticipatory grace, utter simplicity, profound faith and love that transforms this tragedy into hope for the future of Christian-Muslim relations. The story offers a lens through which we may examine the violent forces severing the Muslim world. It also provides a microcosm of the struggle that has taken on great momentum all over the globe. For some, the description of the bonds of faith between Christians and Muslims and the hope it offers is a surprise. The motives for the kidnapping and the cause of the monks' death remain a mystery, thus the whole story has not been told or solved.

Recounted here, is the story of love and reconciliation amid fear and hatred. The intent of including this story is also to demonstrate the importance of interiority, a contemplative

consciousness cultivated by the myriad disciplines mentioned above and harnessed by the challenging rigors of living in community.

Father Thierry Becker was a guest at the monastery the night of the abduction. He now recounts the legacy of the monks of Tibhirine: “Theirs was ‘a message of poverty, of abandonment in the hands of God and men, of sharing in all the fragility, vulnerability and condition of forgiven sinners, in the conviction that only by being disarmed will we be able to meet Islam and discover in Muslims a part of the total face of Christ,’” he said.

Father Becker is no stranger to strife in Algeria. He was vicar general in Oran when on August 1, 1996, his own bishop, Pierre Lucien Claverie 58, was killed along with an Algerian friend, Mohammed Pouchikhi. The Dominican prelate, born in Algeria, had dedicated his life to dialogue between Muslims and Christians. He had a deep knowledge of Islam that he was often consulted on the subject of Muslims themselves.

“Precisely the desire to welcome in truth, brought us together ten years ago in Tibhirine,” said Father Becker. “The meeting ‘Ribât-es-Salam,’ Bond of Peace, was being held in those days, a group of Islamic-Christian dialogue which was oriented to share respective spiritual riches through prayer, silence. . . .

“The Ribât still exists; it has not given up the challenge of communion with the spiritual depth of Islam. Thus we make our own the spiritual testimony of Father Christian de Chergé, whose monastic choice matured after an Algerian friend saved his life during the war of liberation, while that friend, a Muslim of profound spirituality, was killed in reprisal.” Father Becket continued: ““We are worshipers in the midst of a nation of worshipers, ‘the Prior used to

say to his brothers in community, all of whom had decided to stay in Tibhirine even when violence was at its height.

“In the course of the decades, the monastery stripped itself of its riches, donated almost all of its land to the state, and shared its large garden with the neighboring village. The monks chose poverty, also in the sense of total abandonment to the will of God and of men.”

“And great trust was born with the local people, so much so that ten years after the events, nothing has disappeared from the monastery, everything has been respected. But the future of that holy place is in the hands of the Algerians.”⁴¹⁴

This trust and respect were cultivated at a price by sincere, simple persons who were willing to understand and embrace the *other* as Self. Their task included solidarity with their neighbor, but this would not be enough. They would have to invoke higher help. “As all that is tangible dissolves away, their serenity gives witness to a body-grounded awareness of a mystery that precedes, transcends and wholly permeates the unthinkable nature of life and death.”⁴¹⁵ They model the new innocence, a new consciousness, needed in our world to overcome individualism and ideologies. The exquisite selflessness demonstrated in this story, is the fruit of a disciplined ascetic life whose end is compassion and union. In a sense, it is the very microcosmic icon of all that has been stated up to now. As Merton said, it would be impossible without love. A final bow from an African wisdom tradition:

*Flowers hidden in the grass:
if they are trampled,
they breathe out their perfume.*

—Malagacy proverb.

⁴¹⁴ See “Legacy of Slain Monks of Tibhirine Recounted by Priest Was in Ill Fated Monastery,” Zenit article online, Innovative Media, Inc.

⁴¹⁵ James Finley, *The Contemplative Heart* (Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2000), 178.

We now turn to a third mystic, Raimon Panikkar, whose writing, teaching, poetry and essence profoundly manifest not only a uniquely wide and deep intellectual capacity. He also presents and insists on the pneumatic, sophianic, contemplative dimension of the “third eye” to see into the heart of human belief, meaning and reality. He calls for a new awareness of the limits of human knowledge to make room for the Divine.

We will first situate ourselves with a brief statement regarding challenges we face in the fields of contemporary theology and spirituality. I believe this statement aptly assists in introducing Raimon Panikkar, one of the most brilliant contemplative minds of the twentieth century. He has woven a vision, his experience, of the triune inter-being of the Divine, the world, and humanity transcending the confines of particular cultural or religious systems.

C. Shift in Consciousness: The Challenges

Both contemporary theology and spirituality are currently challenged by their own classical heritage. Theology is challenged to review and appraise its presuppositions to be more suitably inclined as a resource for spiritual experience. Contemporary spirituality is challenged to be firmly rooted in its heritage to appropriate the depth and expanse of its riches. Christology, specifically, must become more experiential to face the power of the Eastern experiences. The meaning of an emerging new myth will be cultivated only by subsuming into itself myriad aspects of a secular, global world. The creative energies that flow from spirituality will be invaluable for an effective theological response to what could otherwise be an overwhelming task in this “Second Axial Period.”

IX. RAIMON PANIKKAR

We now consider Raimon Panikkar as a case study of someone who has already started to craft a systematic theology for the transition to a complexified global consciousness. Drawing on “mysticism as well as science, myth as well as logic, *intellectus* as well as *ratio*, heart as well as mind, he both calls for and contributes to this bold new spiritual search, a quest mature enough to be nourished and enriched by the heritage of the entire human community.”⁴¹⁶

Earlier, we briefly described the Second Axial Age which Ewert Cousins, like others, sees dawning in this present mutational moment “within a larger shift in the forces of convergence towards planetization.”⁴¹⁷ Cousins sees the present time as bringing forth the possibility of a depth meeting of world religions distinguished by a dialogical orientation in accord with Teilhard’s “center-to-center unions.” Cousins states:

By touching each other at the creative core of their being, they release new energy which leads to more complex units. Greater complexity leads to greater interiority which, in turn, leads to more creative unions. Throughout the process, the individual elements do not lose their identity but rather deepen and fulfill it through union. . . .The more “other” they become in conjunction, the more they find themselves as “self.” At this point of history because of the shift from divergence to convergence, the forces of planetization are bringing about an unprecedented complexification of consciousness through the convergence of cultures and religions.⁴¹⁸

A. *Spiritual Mutant*

For good reason, Cousins sees Raimon Panikkar as a spiritual mutant, symbolic of the emerging myth of our times “in whom the global mutation has already occurred and in whom the new

⁴¹⁶ Frank Podgorski, “The Cosmotheandric Intuition,” in ICP, 110.

⁴¹⁷ C21, 73.

⁴¹⁸ C21, 8-9.

forms of consciousness have been concretized.”⁴¹⁹ For over sixty years, Panikkar has been engaged in “center-to-center unions” with at least four traditions—specifically, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism and modern science.⁴²⁰ His proficiency in these disciplines as well as the context in which his seminal ideas were conceived, make Panikkar both very challenging and rewarding. Since his early years, he has been in his element both in India and Europe—at ease in the Christian and secular traditions of Europe and in the Hindu and Buddhist traditions of India.

Panikkar is a prolific scholar. His extensive erudite writings in diverse fields testify to his versatility and his multicultural origins. His corpus includes close to sixty books and over five hundred major articles published in six languages. Ranging from theoretical to practical, Panikkar’s contributions to world religion and scholarship are incalculable. This was achieved in the climate of teaching, lecturing and pastoral responsibilities and among other professional engagements. It is confounding to imagine the breadth and depth of Panikkar’s mastery of diverse fields in this age of specialization; these fields are enveloped within his holistic vision.⁴²¹

In an era when the commodification of spirituality in America seems inescapable, Panikkar’s message is especially genuinely inspiring when one considers the reason for his long awaited 1989 Gifford Lectures not being published until 2010. Prabhu says that the “long gestation. . . allowed him to incorporate issues of christology and theological anthropology.” The “real reasons for the delay in publication, however, have more to do with the depth at which

⁴¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁴²⁰ Panikkar holds doctorates in Chemistry, Philosophy and Theology.

⁴²¹ See Joseph Prabhu in ICP, ix.

Panikkar deals with ultimate questions and with his firm policy of publishing only what he has vividly experienced in some fashion.”⁴²²

Panikkar was born of an Indian father and European mother. He has taught in Europe, Asia, and North America, including at Harvard University and the University of California, Santa Barbara. He has worked for years at the front lines of recent scholarship in the history of religions (concerned with cross-cultural understanding). By appropriating both the Christian and the Hindu spiritual traditions, both the European and the Indian elements of his heritage, Panikkar has engaged in asking creative questions about consciousness, culture and scores of other difficult issues. If not addressed, such issues block any adequate understanding of either first, how the major religious traditions are alike and different; and second, how we may gain any adequate understanding of the relations among their mysticisms⁴²³ or core contemplative wisdom.

“The extent and breadth of Panikkar’s writing, as well as the length of his career, make it difficult to summarize his position.”⁴²⁴ His mammoth project (to open the way for adequate understanding) is often misunderstood, frustrating and certainly challenging to western theologians. This is due, not least, to the convolutions of language and symbol, a sort of recreation of religious language, which is extremely effective yet presents a related set of problems. “If some have found his thought difficult to follow it is due not only to his neologisms and the originality of his ideas but also and more probably to the fact that these readers

⁴²² RB, xvii.

⁴²³ Denise Lardner Carmody and John Tully Carmody, *Mysticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 33; where this survey illustrates Panikkar’s description of Vedic revelation “whose compatibility with [their] working definition of mysticism as direct experience of ultimate reality should be plain.”

⁴²⁴ Daniel P. Sheridan, “Faith in Jesus Christ in the Presence of Hindu Theism” in ICP, 145.

themselves may have been nurtured in the well of one culture, not in the ocean where the waters of different traditions meet. Joseph Prabhu, Panikkar's colleague and friend, says,

Panikkar simply does not think straight. His mind leaps in a mandalic pattern, constantly creating fresh projections of a central intuition and showing their interrelatedness, or to shift to a musical analogy, crafting new harmonies out of a basic melodic structure. Those of a more linear and piecemeal temper typically respond to his compositions with respectful puzzlement, if not dazed incomprehension.⁴²⁵

In his writings, Panikkar repeatedly makes statements like the following: "I am attempting to speak a language that will make sense for the follower of more than one philosophical tradition—a risky task perhaps, but necessary if one is to do justice to a cross-cultural investigation." Again: "I 'left'" [Europe] "as a Christian. I 'found' myself a Hindu and I 'return' a Buddhist, without having ceased to be a Christian."⁴²⁶

As in the case of the mystical prophets, Teilhard and Merton, an attempt at a synoptic view of such a protean thinker as Panikkar within the limits of this paper is clearly incongruous. An attempt at even a partial exploration within these limits by one writer is seemingly pretentious. Nonetheless, the significance if any, lies in participating in an intuition that Teilhard and Merton shared and in which Panikkar's contemplation is anchored. This insight catalyzed all three of these luminary masters. This perspective detectable beneath all of Panikkar's work, gave him, over his illustrious career, a frame of reference for the contemplative search. He named this search the *cosmotheandric intuition*.⁴²⁷ Panikkar described his understanding of this insight as early as 1975 in Montreal this way. It is:

⁴²⁵ Joseph Prabhu, in ICP, ix.

⁴²⁶ Francis X. D'Sa, "The Notion of God," in ICP, 27.

⁴²⁷ See Podgorski, 106.

..... “that vision which brings together every scientific thread as well as all the other manifestations of the human spirit and discovers, to put it simply, that: There is no God without man and the World. There is no Man without God and the World. There is no World without God and Man.”⁴²⁸

Panikkar speaks largely but not exclusively from a mystical orientation which gives an overarching frame to his vision. His spirituality-based theology may blazon a new trend in Christian theology. Contemplation approximates art in the sense that, like an artist or poet, the contemplative first sees and becomes inspired. “Only then *may* this insight or *vision* of Beauty, Meaning, or Oneness be translated into a medium which is quite *incapable* of conveying that *vision*. Paradoxically, to the extent this *vision* is communicated well, so may an artist or contemplative be said to speak effectively to a particular milieu.”⁴²⁹

As a visionary “simply gazes” contemplatively, intuition may enable one to see through vistas and beyond to the genesis or final cause of whatever is. Panikkar coined the term *contuition* to underscore this notion that creation is unfolding, presently touching and engaging us. “When contemplation is well-advanced, reasoning ceases, having reached its goal; feelings are transcended; and only the recollection of the origin and end of everything persists.”⁴³⁰ Ironically, as the contemplative begins to tell of what has been seen or experienced, often frustration and failure overwhelm. Thus, “He who knows, does not speak; he who speaks, does not know” says the Tao Te Ching.⁴³¹ Yet, the contemplative is compelled to ineptly and

⁴²⁸ Raimon Panikkar, “Ecology,” *Monchanin* 7.3-5 (175):27.

⁴²⁹ Frank Podgorski in ICP, 108.

⁴³⁰ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁴³¹ Elemire Zolla, “Traditional Methods of Contemplation and Action” in Yusuf Ibish and Ilena Marculescu, editors, *Contemplation and Action in World Religions* (Seattle: distributed by University of Washington Press, 1978), 16.

impossibly report the vision seen. With this, we may be empathically cognizant of Panikkar's pneumatic approach as he identifies fragments of the plausible new myth emerging.

B. Rationalism and Theism

Rationalism and theism are becoming problematic for present and future spiritual needs.

Rationalism neither addresses affectivity of the heart nor the wisdom of the mystical intuition.

A rational culture ignores and/or undervalues this capacity and is thus underdeveloped. Modern science and apophatic traditions both East and West confront a theism embedded in rationalism.

Panikkar addresses ancient answers and modern crises regarding representations of the *philosophia perennis*. He states that ancient and contemporary discussions around cases such as predestination may be discovered as pseudo problems once we become aware of the “shaky ground” upon which the question stands or falls. His point is that the problem of the Divine is centered “not on theisms but on the very nature of Reality as a whole.”⁴³²

The inquiry into ultimate concerns of human consciousness when confronted with the mystery of reality leads us back to human identity after experiencing the world around us. Who are we: who perceive this world; who are linked to this world; who resist total identity with the destiny of this world; who have discovered a “more” that is other than or larger than the material world?

Inquiries over millennia of human thought and reflection has brought an almost unanimous agreement regarding belief: there is an Ultimate Source, a final reference point. This has been a central preoccupation for humans. The human question regarding the Divine is now in crisis. Our worldview has radically changed, while our perception of the Divine has either

⁴³² RB, 154.

weathered superficial changes or has been ostensibly consigned to the private domain. The problem of how we envision Ultimate Mystery integral to our experience and worthy of the name of God remains.

Panikkar reduces the summation of theisms to seven traits, considered as a whole:

- (i) Monotheism teaches us that reality has an ever-transcendent dimension.
- (ii) Deism strives to harmonize God and Reason.
- (iii) Pantheism stresses the all-pervading nature of this divine dimension.
- (iv) Polytheism reminds us that the Divine is irreducible to any singularity, of whatever type—intellectual, ontic, etc.
- (v) Atheism notes the fact that Man is an adult who, coming of age, has to confront himself with the *apophatic* character of the Ultimate.
- (vi) Agnosticism reminds us that only God is omniscient—and we are not God.
- (vii) Skepticism makes us aware that we cannot be absolutely certain of anything. The ground of our certainty could only be God and we are not it.⁴³³

Panikkar says that these seven traits are “ultimately understandable only within the framework of theism. Monotheism is their appropriate horizon.”⁴³⁴ His point is that monotheism and the other forms of theism have “so modified the theistic *mythos* or horizon that it has today become practically unbelievable—at least for a considerable part of the world.”⁴³⁵

A myth cannot be discarded or substituted for at will. When we find something unbelievable “it is because we have discovered a new ground, *in which we believe* that makes

⁴³³ RB, 169.

⁴³⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴³⁵ *Ibid.*

our ancient beliefs unbelievable.⁴³⁶ The alternative, Panikkar says, is the realization that what needs to be changed is not the answers as much as the question itself. “In these vitally ultimate matters this ground cannot be a pragmatic postulate or a rational axiom. No postulated principle has enough force to sustain the burden of our conscious existence. We cannot pretend to believe, to be convinced, or to be certain of anything if we are not.”⁴³⁷

The importance of this topic is directly related to the urgency of our present moment and our earthly predicament. Signals everywhere indicate that a new myth is unfolding. Names have been given to segments of this process, such as Thomas Berry’s “The New Story.” Raimon Panikkar speaks of this narrative using his own unique vocabulary and draws on human beliefs throughout the centuries. He encompasses the early myths focused on the drama of the gods, the later myths focused on human tragedy and the clash between the gods and men, and considers the ultimate fate of the universe now at stake. Significantly, like Teilhard and Merton, Panikkar’s vision is an authentic intellectual and contemplative approach guided by intense praxis and refined in untold hours of prayer, yielding a “Wisdom of Love.”

Raimon Panikkar’s thinking has been unified by his cosmotheandric perspective of reality. His vision brings to mind Merton’s deeply considered, mature transmission of sophianic insights. Merton’s famous “cosmic dance” tract⁴³⁸ is a contemplatively exquisite image musically expressing Panikkar’s main thesis—the cosmotheandric nature of *The Rhythm of Being*.⁴³⁹ Panikkar deliberately parallels “in a loose manner the three moments of the eternal

⁴³⁶ Ibid., 170.

⁴³⁷ Ibid.

⁴³⁸ Merton, NSC, 296-97.

⁴³⁹ The title of his recently published revised Gifford Lectures.

dance of Śiva Nataraja—creation, destruction, and preservation.” This “is designed to articulate four closely related aspects of reality: (1) its “trinitarian” structure, (2) its differentiated unity, (3) the open-ended character of reality, and (4) its essentially rhythmic quality.”⁴⁴⁰

Panikkar’s perspective has been driven over his long career by a vision of a triadic structure of reality. He uses the term interdependence to express this relationship. These three dimensions of Reality: the Divine, the Human and the Cosmic dwell within one another in a kind of *perichōrēsis*,⁴⁴¹ yet remain irreducible:

There is no matter without spirit and no spirit without matter, no World without Man, no God without the universe, etc. God, Man and World are three artificially substantivized forms of the three primordial adjectives which describe Reality.⁴⁴²

This is what he names the “radical trinity” of cosmic matter, human consciousness and divine presence.

Panikkar construes Reality as advaitic in its differentiated unity of relations and processes. The One both grounds differences and emerges in and through them. The unifying structure of Reality supports the movement and development of differentiation, that is, life forms growing and changing. Panikkar stresses the continuing, ever new character of reality, open-ended and unfolding with radical newness in unpredictable ways. Humans embody a universal rhythmic condition participating in the rhythm of the universe as co-creators with the rhythm in Being itself.

⁴⁴⁰ RB, xvii.

⁴⁴¹ Panikkar uses this theological term taken from the discussion about the Trinity by the Greek Fathers as a proximate parallel to three moments of the eternal dance of Śiva Nataraja.

⁴⁴² Raimon Panikkar, “Philosophy as Lifestyle,” in *Philosophers on Their Own Work* (Berne: Peter Lang, 1978), 206.

Life is a dance. . . . This choral dance is a combination of harmony and rhythm, Plato says. It reminds us of the Trinitarian *perichōrēsis*, the cosmic and divine dance. Śiva is Nataraja, the dancing god. The dance is his creation. Dance is practically for all popular religions the most genuine human sharing in the miracle of creation. . . . We all participate in rhythm because rhythm is another name of Being and Being is Trinity.⁴⁴³

Joseph Prabhu cites the current archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams's perceptive essay on Panikkar entitled "Trinity and Pluralism," in which Williams captures this dynamism of the different dimensions of Reality:

For Panikkar, the Trinitarian structure is that of a source, inexhaustibly generative and *always* generative, from which arises form and determination, "being" in the sense of what can be concretely perceived and engaged with; that form itself is never exhausted, never limited by this or that specific realization, but is constantly being realized in the flux of active life that equally springs out from the source of all. Between form, "logos," and life, "spirit," there is an unceasing interaction. The Source of all does not and cannot exhaust itself simply in producing shape and structure; it also produces that which dissolves and re-forms all structures in endless and undetermined movement, in such a way that form itself is not absolutized but always turned back toward the primal reality of the source.⁴⁴⁴

Panikkar attempts to further develop what many treat as esoteric teaching about the inner life of God apart from human life experience. In an intercultural and interreligious milieu, he advances the hope for dialogical sharing of this trinity symbol common in many other traditions so that mutual fruitfulness may be enjoyed by the particular traditions.

Panikkar's strategy is to employ the doctrine of the Trinity as a model of Reality. "By exploring Reality in depth from the vantage point of the Christian Trinity, by penetrating further through the Buddhist and Hindu modes of experience of silence and non-differentiation,

⁴⁴³ RB, 37.

⁴⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, xviii.

Panikkar has reached an advaitic trinitarian structure he calls, "Radical Trinity." He proposes this as the universal structure of Reality emerging in consciousness in the new era. 'The Trinitarian intuition,' he says, 'is neither an exclusive Christian doctrine, nor a monopoly of 'God.' It reveals the most fundamental character of reality. Being is trinitarian.'⁴⁴⁵

Expanding this rich symbol's application beyond its original contextual intent, he deftly translates this Christian core doctrine as a resource to interpret reality. His unique comparative theology is succinctly put at the beginning of the introduction to his opus, *The Rhythm of Being*, where he interprets Periandros of Corinth as saying, "Cultivate the whole."⁴⁴⁶

An Indian blessing clearly expresses the pretext and context of this work:⁴⁴⁶

*Pūrnām adah pūrnām idam.
pūrnāt pūrnām udacyate.
Pūrnasya pūrnām ādāya,
pūrnām evāvaśiṣyate*

That is Wholeness, this is Wholeness.
From Wholeness comes Wholeness.
If Wholeness is taken from Wholeness,
Wholeness still remains.

Upanishadic Invocation

C. The Limits of Christology

"The contemporary intercultural challenge," Panikkar emphasizes, "has shown itself more profound than previously imagined. There is no doubt that classical christology does not have at its disposal categories adequate to confront these problems. Today's christology is neither

⁴⁴⁵ Ewert Cousins, "Panikkar's Advaitic Trinitarianism," in ICP, 130; citing Program for the Gifford Lectures, 1988-89, 1,5.

⁴⁴⁶ RB, vi.

catholic—that is, universal nor is it necessary that it be so. Its content cannot be separated from the parameters of intelligibility that belong to a powerful yet single current of human culture.”⁴⁴⁷ Panikkar clearly is interested in open dialogue but “does not intend to be either polemic or critical of other people’s positions” on Christianity’s role among religions and Christ’s function in salvation. He is “always ready to learn better, in amplitude, extension, height, and depth, the love of Christ that transcends every knowledge because it belongs to God’s *plērōma* (Ephesians 3:18-19).”⁴⁴⁸ However it remains a fact that “christology has been developed only within the framework of the Western world. Despite its trinitarian soul, christology has not really freed itself from the monotheism it inherited from the abrahamic tradition.”⁴⁴⁹

Panikkar never implies that he is supplanting traditional christology or forgetting the *memoria* of the Christian tradition. He is after the truth of things, citing Thomas Aquinas’s demanding phrase, “The study of philosophy does not aim at knowing the opinions of Men but rather the truth of things (*De Caelo* II, 3).”⁴⁵⁰ Panikkar also aspires to a middle path between “a relativistic and objectivistic conception of truth: relativity is not relativism.”⁴⁵¹

The “indispensable presuppositions” of what were called *preambulae fidei*, are also under consideration. These requirements were to make the Christian message both intelligible and acceptable. These preambles of faith were said to be “a minimal degree of culture—of a culture convinced of possessing universal value. In fact, however, that degree was the product of a very

⁴⁴⁷ Raimon Panikkar, *Christophany* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004) English translation by Alfred DiLascia from the original Italian, *La pienezza dell'uomo: una cristofania* (Milan: Jaca Books, 1999), 7; hereafter CY.

⁴⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵¹ *Ibid.*

particular form of thought and vision of reality.⁴⁵² What kind of meaning might traditional Christianity have in such a vision of the world? “Is it necessary to destroy all the other symbolic universes in order to initiate those presuppositions (*preambula fidei*) on which the Christian *kērygma* rests?”⁴⁵³ Here is the problem.

In sum, we can say that christology is at the crossroads of crucial decisions to be made with far reaching consequences. Panikkar is persuasive in his efforts to illustrate that traditional christology is “only a halfway house.” His *christophany* is couched in the context of a Trinity utterly new in perspective. Incarnation is intelligible not in monotheism, but in Panikkar’s trinitarian cosmovision.

D. Christophany: The Task

Panikkar coined the term *christophany* to signify a Christian reflection which is to be elaborated and fleshed out in the third millennium. He notes three phenomena which characterize the contemporary religious scene: “1) the decline of the traditional religions along with the proliferation of new forms or religiosity, 2) the internal crisis of Christian identity, and 3) the external situation of a world in which cultures and religions meet on a planetary scale.”⁴⁵⁴

The intention of christophany is simply to suggest an image of Christ that all persons are able to believe in “especially those contemporaries who, while wishing to remain open and tolerant, think they have no need of either diluting their ‘Christianity’ or of damaging their fidelity to Christ.”⁴⁵⁵ Panikkar’s christophany neither pretends to present a universal paradigm

⁴⁵² Ibid.

⁴⁵³ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid., 9.

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid.

nor advances the notion that historical Christianity should take this as their model. Remaining open is the question of Christianity enduring as a “small flock,” or “remnant” or as a “leaven that helps the whole dough ferment.”⁴⁵⁶ These issues are particularly relevant considering cultures and religions usually meet within the “matrix of the Western technoscientific world, which at least, in part, bears Christian origins.”⁴⁵⁷

Christophany’s intention is to present “this epiphany” of the human condition not only in the context of our contemporary situation but also the light of what seems to “originate out of something beyond Man—that is, the light that has accompanied *Homo sapiens* since his very first appearance on earth.”⁴⁵⁸ The word christophany could be misinterpreted to mean a certain docetic vision of Jesus which is not the intention. The word represents the manifestation of Christ to human consciousness that includes both an experience of Christ *through* myth and a critical reflection on that experience.

Christophany does not ignore the christology of two millennia. The implication is that a Christian is rooted in tradition and open to the new. Continuity and novelty will not replace, but prolong and deepen intuitions of traditional christology, proposing new perspectives as previously unexplored fields are discovered.

Christophany is open to the reality of the Spirit. It gives credence to the mystical vision, incorporating without separating *pneuma* and *logos* and not subordinating *pneuma* to *logos*. This defines the major difference between christology and christophany. The substitution of the word

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid. Clear references to biblical images: Jer 31:7; Mt 13:33; Lk 13:20-21 respectively. See his “Are the Words of Scripture Universal Religious Categories? The Case of the Christian Language for the Third Millennium.” *Archivo di Filosofia* (Rome), 377-87.

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid.

“christology” with the word “christophany” suggests the transcending of a purely rational approach and an opening oriented to the Spirit’s action when studying “Christ.”

Accentuated in this approach is a more feminine, passive (contemplative or mystic) attitude in receiving “Christ’s impact” on the human condition as distinguished from reason’s aim at intelligibility and thus, rational evidence. “Christophany practices theology on the highest order,” Panikkar states, “and does not therefore accept the dichotomy between theology and philosophy that has been practiced in recent centuries.”⁴⁵⁹

Christophany is open to dialogue with other traditions and embraces an inclusive past (non-Christian and pre-Christian) and present. Christology, on the other hand, has mostly ignored the world’s other traditions. Christophany seeks to integrate Christ into a cosmovision and is not a discipline primarily focused on a past event. Christophany dares to widen the idea of theology as “God-talk” which implies a more elastic disposition to a discovery of every authentic expression. The contexts and languages found in various religions are different, therefore, it is a difficult task to present the figure of Christ meaningfully in a language in which the Christian does not feel betrayed.

In short, we can say that christophany “projects into the taboric light that allows us to discover our infinite dimension and presents the divine in the same light that allows us to discover god in his human dimension.”⁴⁶⁰ Panikkar turns to Paul’s final doxology in Romans 16:25-26 for “what is perhaps the best description of Christian self-consciousness: Jesus Christ, who ‘according to the revelation, kept silent for eternal centuries’ and in Colosians 1:26, Paul

⁴⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁴⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.

says, ‘has manifested himself now.’”⁴⁶¹ This “now” is what christophany has at heart, and attempts to immerse itself in that light.

E. Christophanic Experience: Interiority

The invitation to “come and see” and other invitations of the teacher in the New Testament are primarily about direct experience. It begins with one’s own action rather than in the head or from what others tell you. What counts is one’s own vision moved by grace or simple curiosity in seeking the answer to the query in one’s own heart. The invitation to direct experience of Christ is misunderstood by many as a theology of the elite reserved for the most sophisticated of contemplatives and not for ordinary people. The quest to “see” is for everyone, even children: “let the children come to me” (Mt 19:14; Mark10:14). It is a personal experience rather than formulations of doctrine or elaborating theology. One reason we appreciate young children is that they show concretely the essential aspect of life. The pale cast of thought is absent from their responses. A haiku from Bashō is an impressive example of the directness of the child:

You light the fire
and I’ll show you something nice—
a big ball of snow!⁴⁶²

Faith is a gift and those who receive it must be conscious of it. This consciousness is an experience of truth not just a trust in someone else’s experience and is not a rational conviction or a doctrinal evidence. Faith reveals to us that Christ is a reality in our own life. This faith is based on an experience of union. It transforms us because we feel taken over by a greater reality penetrating our being.

⁴⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁴⁶² R. H. Blyth “Haiku,” in *Mumonken* Volume 4 of *Zen and Zen Classics* (Tokyo: Hokuseido, 1966), 243. See also Robert Aitken, “Case 18” in *The Gateless Barrier* (New York: North Point Press, 1991), 123.

What the believer sees is revealed in John 15:4-10 and John 6:22-70. “Remain in me.” You no longer live *with* me but *in* me as intimately as I exist in the Source of life and reality. This interpenetration is the mystery of Christ between the divine and human and within the human there exists the cosmic.

Each must act according to what one has received. Each must travel their own authentic Christian journey, intellectually inquiring of their tradition who Christ is and an inner grasp of personal significance.

The significance of “to remain” one in the other is approached by Raimon Panikkar vis à vis two universal phenomenas.⁴⁶³ The first is falling in love. The vision of the person loved is transformed. Others might not see what the person in love sees. Those who love each other, in a sense, live one in the other. There is an interpenetration above all of one single spirit.

The second phenomenon can be expressed by saying that everyone is open to transcendence. Persons have a certain consciousness that there is something else greater than we can grasp by sight. This is classically generally defined as religious faith. The most common term to express this human experience is called the divine (often God). Something of this transcendence descends into the inner depths of persons. This is immanence. Our existence is in God. This is the customary language of mysticism: that it is in immanence that transcendence is discovered. The first phrase of the *Īśā-upanishad* summarizes the point: “Everything that moves in this changing world is entwined by God.”⁴⁶⁴

Panikkar employs the term christophany to convey the “christophanic experience” which is neither of the above exclusively experienced:

⁴⁶³ CY, 22.

⁴⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

It is the human and the divine in a union that is unique. Here in experiential form, is what doctrines later elaborate. The encounter with Christ partakes of the encounter with both the person lived and the divine. Without the falling in love, without the silence of the *Abgrund* (“abyss”), there is no christophany—no christic manifestation. Christian mysticism presents this polarity, which is not free of tensions. Those who are inclined to knowledge, to *jñāna*, will see the divine aspect; those more sensitive to love, to *bhakti*, will see Christ’s humanity as central.⁴⁶⁵

Christophany is presented here as non-dualistic union. The experience doesn’t split Christ’s immanence into human and divine parts. It is an *advaitic* experience. Panikkar suggests that perhaps the scriptural model of this christophanic experience is the meeting at Damascus (Acts 9:1ff.)⁴⁶⁶ Paul didn’t see Jesus’ full identity until the third eye of the spirit was suddenly opened. After this, Paul is able to speak with the authority of one who has seen. This is a direct vision that transcends rationality without denying it.

“The greatness of the Christian vision does not take away from other intuitions of the ultimate reality,”⁴⁶⁷ according to Panikkar’s idea of homeomorphic equivalences in other traditions. He cites a little-known hymn from an ancient (possibly seventh century) document of the Tibetan people to illustrate his point:

From a divine son
Will rise a human race. . .
and a hero will dominate the world,
and his fame will spread over the earth. . .⁴⁶⁸

“The christophany *from within*. . . constitutes the deepest interiority of all of us, the abyss in which, in each of us, there is a meeting between the finite and the infinite, the material

⁴⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 186.

⁴⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 186 citing Olschak (1987), 36.

and spiritual, the cosmic and the divine. The Christophany of the third millennium is a summons to us to live this experience."⁴⁶⁹

F. The Christic Principle: Identity and Pluralism

Important considerations arise when we situate a discussion of the *christic principle* within the context of religious pluralism. "Is there something specifically universal in the christic fact: Is Christ a universal symbol?"⁴⁷⁰ This question is not formulated from a Christendom of colonialism or even Christianity as a particular religion. It does not claim exclusive uniqueness or a reductionism that dilutes the Christian affirmation. The question rather opens the possibility of a wider understanding of Christian identity.⁴⁷¹

If, on the one hand, Christianity is one religion among others, we should keep distinctions, jurisdictions, and boundaries as clear as possible. If, on the other hand, Christians believe in their commitment to a universal mystery--revealed to them in Christ--they will also share in the manifestation of the Sacred of other religions without imagining that they are betraying their own beliefs or despising those of others.⁴⁷²

Stated another way, "If Christians are able to extricate from their own religion the christic principle, this principle can be experienced as a dimension at least potentially present in any human being, as long as no absolute interpretation is given."⁴⁷³ So, "The identity of Christ is not

⁴⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 189.

⁴⁷⁰ Raimon Panikkar, "The Jordan, the Tiber and the Ganges: Three Kairological Moments of Christic Self-Consciousness," edited by John Hick and Paul Knitter, in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987), 89-116; hereafter, MCU.

⁴⁷¹ ICP, 137.

⁴⁷² Raimon Panikkar, "The Crux of Christian Ecumenism: Can Universality and Chosenness Be Held Simultaneously?" in *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 26 (winter 1989), 82-99; hereafter, CCE.

⁴⁷³ MCU, 112.

our identification of Christ.”⁴⁷⁴ In this way “the christic principle is neither a particular event nor a universal religion,” rather the center of reality as seen by the Christian tradition.⁴⁷⁵

This image of Christian identity and self-consciousness, this Christianness, implies a different dynamism than a mechanistic model or the linear movement of history. The mystic appreciation of reality is “theoanthropocosmic,” a relationship in depth which neither objectifies nor excludes, but constitutes the real. This dynamism eliminates the need to search for a center. In such a relationship, there can be no absolute center; instead, as in trinitarian theology, the participants are constituted by relationship and mutual participation.⁴⁷⁶

Panikkar states that, “Christians may find in this christic principle the point of union, understanding, and love with all humankind and with the whole of the cosmos, so that in this concreteness they find the most radical human, cosmic, and divine communion with reality— notwithstanding other homeomorphic equivalents.”⁴⁷⁷ The christic principle signifies an openness to the activity of the spirit “transparent to the Mystery itself, faithful to the self emptying character of Christ”: “The Christian point of insertion is the kenotic experience of Christ, which entails acceptance of and openness to the Spirit.”⁴⁷⁸

“The concrete universality of the christic event, connected with the destiny of the human race and with the fate of the earth, but also with the dynamism of Being and the very life of the universe, calls forth a fundamental care for incarnate form, a kenotic and non-dual identification with the creative principle.

⁴⁷⁴ CCE, 91. See note 472.

⁴⁷⁵ MCU, 90.

⁴⁷⁶ ICP, 138.182

⁴⁷⁷ MCU, 112.

⁴⁷⁸ MCU, 112.182

Identification with this principle, participation in its activity, and kenotic openness to its freedom constitute the mystic core of Christian life, a fundamental choice about the spiritual path⁴⁷⁹:

The future of Christian history will show whether this effort at incarnation follows the pattern of the Grand Inquisitor or the Spirit of Bethlehem, under the witness of the skies, the hospitality of animals, the astonishment of shepherds, the astonishment of the Magi. Without this mystic core, the entire event degenerates into a masochistic complacency in being humble or a sadistic drive to show the power of the Cross.⁴⁸⁰

“Awareness of the christic principle involves a new Christian self-consciousness. Being Christian no longer entails identification with the religio-political imperium of Western civilization, Christendom, or with the superiority claims of a particular institutional religion, Christianity. Panikkar calls this identification with the fundamental christic fact “Christianness,” a path of personal religiousness, “emphasizing the personal spiritual path, the discovery of the kingdom of heaven, the pearl, the wholeness of the Mystical Body, the communion with the divine, the interior, historical, and at the same time cosmic and transtemporal Christ.”⁴⁸¹

For Panikkar, the “*ultimate* religious fact does not lie in the realm of doctrine or even in individual self-consciousness.”⁴⁸² He continues:

The ultimate religious fact can—and may well—be present everywhere and in every religion, although, its “explication” may require varied degrees of discovery, realization, evangelization, revelation, hermeneutics, etc. And this makes plausible that this fundamental—religious—*fact* may

⁴⁷⁹ ICP, 139.

⁴⁸⁰ Raimon Panikkar, “Can Theology Be Transcultural? [Plenary Address at 1988 College Theology Society Meeting],” in *Pluralism and Oppression: Theology in World Perspective* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1991), 3-22.

⁴⁸¹ ICP, 139 citing Panikkar in MCU, 113.

⁴⁸² Raimon Panikkar, *The Intrareligious Dialogue* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 57.

have different names, interpretations, levels of interpretations, levels of consciousness and the like, which are not irrelevant but which may be existentially equivalent for the person undergoing the concrete process of realization.⁴⁸³

Panikkar has abundantly contributed to the discussion of the christic principle. This task to develop further a way of life, Christianness, as a model of Christianity that, “Having died to its own desire to exclude and dominate, can confront the powers of division and can participate in a shared meal of reconciliation.”⁴⁸⁴ “Authentic life is neither conserved nor passed on to others, but burned off, lived out, which means constantly renewed, at the risk of death and new birth.”⁴⁸⁵

Some would consider Panikkar’s a powerfully “seductive theology” characterized by a spirit of theological nonviolence yet raising questions of authenticity around its allure.⁴⁸⁶ Cousins rejoins, “His sentences are like entrances to the shaft of a mine, drawing the reader to treasures below. Dynamic with playfulness and power, full of bubbling joy and cascading energy, it covers a breathtaking range—encompassing many disciplines, the entire globe, and the sweep of history.”⁴⁸⁷

Panikkar, we have said, is one who has made the transitional “quantum leap” into the future. He has crossed the abyss of a mutational moment, not remaining unalterably in the past or vacillating between the past and future. Having made the transition, as a mediator of the

⁴⁸³ Ibid. 184

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid., 142.

⁴⁸⁵ Raimon Panikkar, *Myth, Faith and Hermeneutics* (New York: Paulist, 1979), 157.

⁴⁸⁶ ICP., 143.

⁴⁸⁷ Ewert Cousins, “Raimondo Panikkar and the Christian Systematic Theology of the Future,” in *Cross Currents*, 29 (summer 1979), 141.

future, he models for us multidimensional, cross-cultural aspects of a kind of global renaissance prototype. As such, an archetype that will “combine the polarities of the East and West, outer and inner consciousness, science and mysticism, mythic and rational thinking, pragmatic involvement in the world and spiritual detachment.”⁴⁸⁸ New forms of consciousness have now taken on specific and definite cross-cultural structure, “For in the great cultural traditions—formerly distinct through their diverse historical origin and development—now converge.”⁴⁸⁹ So, for the first time in history, these mutational persons are made heirs to the spiritual heritage of humankind.

Panikkar considers the challenges of our technocratic age seriously. He writes prophetically because his diagnosis begins at the essence of the problem, never preoccupied on the level of symptoms. Panikkar explores Reality in depth from the vantage point of the Christian Trinity. His wholehearted passion led his concentrated reflections to the core of Hindu and Buddhist revelations. Before Panikkar’s preoccupation with his “radical trinity” connected these three traditions, he had written a “secularized” version presenting his cosmotheandric intuition.⁴⁹⁰ This version was concerned about the human invariants: the cosmic, the human, and the divine dimensions of reality. “The cosmic is about the objectifiable dimension of reality; the human stresses the objectifying dimension; and the divine is the depth dimension that endows the

⁴⁸⁸ Ewert Cousins in C21, 74.

⁴⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁴⁹⁰ This publication was called “Colligite Fragmenta: For an Integration of Reality,” in *From Alienation to At-one-ness*, edited by F. A. Eigo and S. E. Fittipaldi (Villanova, PA: Villanova University Press, 1977), 19-91.

objectifiable and the objectifying dimensions with a certain endlessness, a kind of infinity.

Because of the depth dimension, neither the cosmic nor the human dimension has a limit.”⁴⁹¹

One of Panikkar’s pioneering contributions is his approach to myth. Myth, for Panikkar, is “that *through* which you experience and understand and not that which you experience and understand.” It is the universe of meaning in which one finds oneself; it is the horizon of one’s being and understanding. Myth, just as the horizon, is not justifiable “but it reveals its characteristics, its presuppositions, and its prejudices in the way we understand, decide and act.”

Christophany does not separate philosophy from theology. For this reason, it does not reject christology but goes beyond it in the sense that it employs the language of symbol and metaphor. The same holds for reason and the role of the “critical function” as Panikkar insists repeatedly. Again, the distinction between christology and christophany is that christology focuses on the doctrines “developed on the basis of the words that speak of the experiences of Jesus. Christophany is the opening of the third eye, which brings one in touch with the experience that the christological doctrines refer to.”⁴⁹² Christology ignores the mysticism of Jesus Christ. The Christian traditions have largely neglected the mystical dimension. Christophany opens to *phania*; *logos* is not dominant here.

For Panikkar, “Jesus came to give life, not to hand down doctrines. It is this life that has to be lived and realized. Its lifeblood is the experience of the Ultimate” (which for Panikkar is the mystical experience).⁴⁹³

⁴⁹¹ Francis D’Sa in CY, xii.

⁴⁹² *Ibid.*, xiii.

⁴⁹³ *Ibid.*

In his “conscious pilgrimage to the center of his being,” Panikkar realizes he “encounters a profound truth: the experience of contingency wherein we can ‘discover the tangential touch between immanence and transcendence’ and realize that we participate in and are an integral part of the very flux that we call reality. ‘I am the point of the tangent in which those two poles [World and God meet: I stand in between.]”⁴⁹⁴ Again: “I do not know what I am. I know that, although limited, I have already in some way transcended the limits: consciousness that I am finite shows me the infinite. I am neither finite because I know I am such, nor infinite because I am conscious that I am finite.” Furthermore: “But about this ‘I’ which in a certain sense is inseparable from my ‘me’ I can say nothing—except, perhaps, that though it does ‘remain’ me, it is not *me*”⁴⁹⁵

Panikkar is referring to the different dimensions of Man that are essential elements but often overlooked. “The ‘me’ of our daily lives is really a ‘you,’ which is like a field of the I that cannot be objectified. God cannot be a you.” Rather, “God is the I and the ‘I’ the you. Yet, in moments of great difficulty, suffering, and testing in my life, I was led spontaneously to invoke You, Father, Divinity—and even more frequently, Christ, my *istadevatā*.”⁴⁹⁶

Panikkar’s christophany transcends christology in this way as well: it is a way to *re-live* the mystical experience, the same profound intuition of Jesus Christ. Christophany is “an ongoing invitation to realize that we are immersed in and belong to the eternal process of the ‘I’ ‘thouing.’” Panikkar observes that the Eucharist is the “work of the Spirit” and the resurrection

⁴⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid., xiv-xv.

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid., citing Panikkar: “An *astadevatā* is the most human way of carrying us close to this experience. We need to find the divine icon with which we can communicate.”

as “the real presence of the absence.” “The *I* will die and thus make room for the Spirit: this is Life and Resurrection.” *Kenōsis* is the precondition of the resurrection.

Panikkar beautifully expresses his idea of christophany: the fullness of Man—the symbol of the *mysterium conjunctionis* of divine, human, and cosmic reality. D’Sa says it is a “mission statement for the new millennium—a statement that can only be understood with the third eye!”

When I refuse to be called ‘a human being,’ or when I criticize evolutionistic thought, when I claim to be unique and, to that extent, unclassifiable, I am reacting against the invasion of the scientific mentality which tends to obscure one of the most central of all human experiences: being a unique divine icon of reality, constitutively united with the Source of everything, a microcosm that mirrors the entire macrocosm. In a word, I am one with the Father, infinite, beyond all comparison and never interchangeable. The I is not me. I am not the product of evolution, a speck of dust, or even mind in the midst of an immense universe. Man, the integrally concrete, real man, is not an item in a classification scheme: it is he who does the classifying.⁴⁹⁷

G. The Emerging Myth

In short, only a holistic insight of reality will orient us. We have mentioned that myriad opinions and specialized knowledge abound in a complicated world. We have discovered that old models do not sufficiently consider our present information or contemporary needs. Our present worldview is a cosmology from a western scientific perspective. This perspective is based on quantifiable criteria and therefore necessarily reduces the picture we perceive of the universe. Yet, there are many cultures with divergent world views.

The greatest endowment at our disposal is our consciousness. This gift facilitates our capacity to be creative, imaginative and spiritually alert to more fully participate in the cosmic evolutionary process. The heart of our humanity is the ability to invoke the wisdom that comes

⁴⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, xvii.

from within. This contemplative wisdom first manifests itself in the evolving creative process. We detect this inspirited, creative energy, name it sacred and call it the divine life force (or God).

The Originating and Sustaining Mystery is radically transparent for those who can see. Seeing is inseparably interconnected with our specifically human core. This seeing of things as they are, is the full maturation of the human process. It is central, the endpoint of the Great Wisdom that is Great Compassion.

H. Summary:

For Raimon Panikkar, Christ is the central symbol of all reality whose power is discovered by experiencing the deep inner center of each human person. Panikkar rejects shoehorning a “one-size-fits-all” model of christology. Instead, he encourages diversity in our understanding of Christ. Panikkar’s cosmotheandric rhythm of Being is a narrative of the Whole incorporative of God, Man and Cosmos in irreducible interdependent relationality. He identifies the implications of such a christology and radical trinity.

Panikkar confronts the problem of religious pluralism by promoting open conversation with persons who think differently. Panikkar’s model of dialogical dialogue is a process of authentic reciprocity. This is distinguished from the dialectical dialogue which involves defending one’s position against the other. He endorses an exchange of religious experience as more fruitful than discussions about doctrine. Intercultural encounter he suggests leads to a potential intrareligious fecundation without a shallow eclecticism. Panikkar envisions liberation from several self imposed and culturally cultivated barriers to the realization of a fuller religious life. Key to a unitive step toward peace is an understanding of Christ in our current world capable of transcending cultural differences.

New information about the structure of matter and the mechanisms by which the cosmos has evolved apparently cohere in revamped and new models of scientific theories. Panikkar's theological approach is both innovative and buoyant during an era in which mathematics and science calculate, observe, control, quantify, investigate, measure, reduce and otherwise induce mechanicism. As such, Panikkar's criticism is that Man the observer is not located among the data and therefore becomes the "great absentee"⁴⁹⁸ in the scientific paradigm. This enterprise "splits reality into compartments."⁴⁹⁹ Any form of rationalistic reductionism leads to a limited comprehension of reality.

Abstraction and abstract concepts pose difficult challenges for the Christian believer and theologian. The question is how we understand the mystery of Christ in this new cosmology. Panikkar's trinitarian intuition reveals the most fundamental character of Reality. Panikkar has named, in his own language, fragments of an emerging new myth: *sacred secularity*, *radical relativity*, *cosmotheandric insight*, *kosmology*, *interdependence*, and so forth.

He has crafted the rudiments of a systematic theology which recognizes that everything is related to everything without monistic identity and dualistic separation. This is a theology that can support a contemporary spirituality as we engage in the dawning of an emerging new myth. This spirituality requires a more complex religious consciousness which paradoxically entails simplifying a contemplative intentionality and focus with purity of heart and poverty of spirit. Panikkar's spirituality is a model of the *mutant, cosmic person*—an archetype of "a human being who links the cosmos, humanity, and the divine. . . .as microcosm to the macrocosm."⁵⁰⁰

⁴⁹⁸ See RB, 400.

⁴⁹⁹ *Ibid*, 395.

⁵⁰⁰ See C21, 189.

Raimon Panikkar, like Thomas Merton, and Teilhard de Chardin, having experienced the mystical dimension of reality, is capable of making the distinction without indulging in a separation. Panikkar's spiritual aspiration and ensuing theology is hopeful for those with a monastic calling or anyone attentively listening to the divine voice in our unprecedented age. Moreover, his sophianic spiritual theology incorporates ancient wisdom and novel discoveries of our time. So doing, he offers a plausible narrative of indestructible meaning and a model of praxis for our global future.

Panikkar may be the courier-sage of a new development, even mutation, in Christian theology. His spirituality-based theology contrasts with the customary historical tendency of this discipline to be more closely bound to the philosophical leanings of Western culture, especially in the academic setting. Panikkar's pioneering efforts have contributed enormously to intellectual culture and religion. We may discover his greatest contribution to be as architectural father of a new systematic theology of a new epoch—the Second Axial Age.⁵⁰¹

⁵⁰¹ See C21, 104.

X. CONCLUSION

We have briefly examined the impact of the postmodern convergence toward global consciousness and its attending implications. We recorded some of the remarkable achievements of persons who devoted their lives to understanding the cosmos and Ultimate Reality. Although our understanding is often abstracted from culture, described with rational speculation and religious dogma, we were more enamored by the underlying curiosity and mystical analysis that contemplatives adopt by direct experience.

We tried to demonstrate that findings, facts and rational analysis are external expressions of a deeper story and often hide and undermine fuller appreciation of archetypal insight. What is conscious is often merely the tip of an unconscious treasure trove. Drawing on imagination and intuition, the intent was to unlock and make more intelligible the deeper wisdom behind abstract, excessively compartmentalized, rational thinking.

We revisited the Christian story considering the great human story which includes other interpretations. While cosmic in our scope, we have attempted a rich synthesis of Christian spirituality. The content has been distinctively Christian grounded in the integration of Eastern and Western elements. If the incarnation reveals deep truths about our human condition, we need to revision our story to honor a more ancient wisdom we are discovering today. That story is imbued with a fundamental goodness and power for creativity experienced as grace. Neglecting the empowerment and wonder ingredient in wisdom will be detrimental to us personally and globally. If we personally and collectively honor this ancient wisdom as an integral dimension of our lives, we can embrace its innate resources to empower ourselves for a challenging future.

Humankind has always been and is on a spiritual journey in relationship to and toward the Ultimate Source. It is the human inheritance of ancestral grace which all spiritual traditions share no matter how much they differ one from another. Mystical awareness and contemplative practice are ways in each tradition beyond discursive explanations, terminology and ideas where all practitioners can meet. Behind all traditions and behind all their vast multiplicity of doctrines, rituals and abuses, there is a mystical experience available which is rediscovered over the ages to this day. It is the Divine Dwelling persons are seeking. This Reality, this mystical experience, has been interpreted in many different ways. All of them have a certain insight and value. None are absolutely adequate. We have raised pertinent questions around these points and attempted to answer them as appropriate.

In the last thirty years, we have experienced that all the world's cultures are now available to us. Not only are people geographically mobile, virtually every known culture on the planet can be studied. All cultures are exposed to each other in an unprecedented global village.

This means that knowledge, experience, wisdom and reflection of all major human civilizations—premodern, modern and postmodern is available and open to study by anyone. To even imagine that the sum of human knowledge, that literally everything that all the various cultures have to tell us about human potential, spiritual growth, psychological and social growth could be used to create a composite cosmic sense is complex and daunting.

On the other hand, imbued with foundational goodness, freedom and power for creativity, we have the capacity to take what sounds complicated and imagine the essentials of human experience in surprisingly simple, elegant and integral ways. The deep conviction presented in this paper is that the Divine Presence has been fully with humanity in our evolutionary journey

even before religion was formally instituted. Our inherited wisdom, rooted deeply in our past, if embraced, can empower us for new challenges today and into the future.

With the assistance of three mystical figures Teilhard, Merton and Panikkar, we have situated our human narrative within a large cosmic context of a prodigiously expanding universe to revision our enterprise with meaning and hope. We have stated that there has never been a time when God wasn't fully with us. Unconditional grace and wisdom have been abundantly bestowed on us from the start.

The context of our era seems to be the beginning of the Second Axial Age. We have employed the word *mutation* to highlight our era characterized by an unprecedented convergence of global consciousness. This transformation is so comprehensively sweeping it will influence the sphere of consciousness for many centuries. A new global consciousness has already begun to be complexified through the meeting of cultures and religions, the breaking open of mindsets by scientific developments and a rediscovery of spirituality in the West.

A holistic insight into reality is needed to orient us in the midst of myriad opinions and specialized sectors of knowledge. Our dignity, we said in the introduction, is inherent in the freedom grounded on Reality. We now discover old models are not sufficient to account for current objective data or subjective needs. We need to at least consider these anew. We have proposed a movement in the direction of reclaiming spiritual depth both for the values inherent there and as a catalyst for engendering the transformation into global consciousness.

We focused on Teilhard, Merton and Panikkar as theologians of the mystical tradition and proposed the rendering of their mature christologies. Each of these mystical theologians has a remarkable combination of speculative penetration, symbolic power and poetic sensibility which

places them in a central and pivotal position in Christian contemporary spirituality. We suggested that each of these mystical companions have largely contributed to our enterprise toward a holistic insight into reality, each in their own unique way.

Teilhard de Chardin's synthesis of evolution and Incarnation conveys that there is something more profound happening at the heart of matter than humans were aware or could observe before his time. Teilhard's faith tradition and understanding of evolutionary dynamic processes at work in the cosmos going on continually within the expanding universe allowed for deeper exploration at the level of spirit. He distilled the "features that are truly significant from both a belief system that had lost its vitality and its ability to inspire and from a science that had lost its ability to see beneath the surface of phenomena."⁵⁰² By breaking through to the core of his faith and his science, Teilhard bestowed on both his beloved traditions a new vitality.

Teilhard's "was a lived spirituality, one that has given us 'a God who makes himself cosmic and an evolution which makes itself person.'"⁵⁰³ We stated that his live sense of universal relationships of interdependence helps us to become increasingly aware that we are organically part of the universe. Teilhard's was a spirituality of love, we said, that envisions a durable meaning in the divine functions of evolutionary cosmology. Teilhard remythologized classical Christian categories thereby expanding the range of our intelligibility which now includes earth and an entire cosmic evolutionary narrative.

Cousins helps to refine our understanding of global epochal shifts in consciousness, especially by situating our era's convergence of consciousness within the Teilhardian narrative.

⁵⁰² See Kathleen Duffy, "The Spiritual Power of Matter: Evolution and Incarnation in Teilhard's *The Divine Milieu*" in Marist College Conference Program on Teilhard, May 14, 2005, 7.

⁵⁰³ *Ibid.*

Thomas Merton, like Teilhard and Panikkar, experienced contemplative intuition that did not place him in an outpost of wisdom. On the contrary, his direct experience of ultimate reality generated a supreme conviction which pointed him to a place of utter peace. The explosion of Sophia into Merton's consciousness ignited a Christ centered humanism with the adequacy to recognize Christ in the persons of all men and women and love them with an active love. A celebrated monk and interfaith pioneer, we focused on Merton as a bridge between traditions and as a herald for today's global milieu. A case was built by examining Merton's mature mystical-poetic and prophetic Christology as an interpretation of ancestral grace. We suggested that the eros animating his imaginative vision of divine presence could inspire new clarity and vitality into our religious understanding, imagination and spiritual practice. His is a vision, we said, fully in dialogue with contemporary spirituality, Russian Sophiology and Zen practice.

Merton gave voice to the question in our hearts: How do we experience God? He gave voice, as well, to sound the quest for wisdom in our own and other traditions.

We tried to make clear that Christian contemplative spirituality today must include a profound interaction with Asian traditions. This is vital to each, we said, and promotes mutual respect, unity, oneness and peace without threat of heterodoxy. This meeting will enable us to realize two things. It can help us to realize Christ more deeply and see Him from a new point of view and it can help us to interpret Asian traditions in a new way.

Merton's sacramental cosmic vision was also articulated by Teilhard and Panikkar. This vision embraces an eco-theological wisdom essential in the twenty-first century for recovering our connection to the life-sustaining mystery of the earth's creative energy. Reclamation of this

deep, archetypal wisdom will assist us in comprehending and appropriating the interdependence of all life forces, including death.

Today's postmodern era, as it emerges into global consciousness and the convergence of cultures and traditions, needs to retrieve the mystical, assimilating the transforming presence of the divine in the world. Over many hundreds of years, humankind has been impressed with an excessive rationalistic bent for comprehending reality. There are several predominating cultural assumptions keeping this view buoyant in the public domain. An ancient wisdom is accessible to each human, specifically articulated in sapiential Christianity. Dialogue and reflection on the personal experience of contemplation that leads to intelligibility must continue and increase in the twenty-first century.

There is an urgent need at this historical moment for a contemplative emphasis and practice based on direct experience. Christian and Zen practice, for instance, as well as a viable spirituality of action and engagement originating from deep faith is advocated. Most importantly, we have intimated that we need to live from a realization of emptiness, oneness and non-duality in our ordinary lives. Wholeheartedly seeing, hearing and responding to life and reality allows us to be increasingly present to ourselves, others and the world and aware and responsive to life and love.

We proposed that Wisdom is a unifying theme for Merton's poetic religious imagination. It was pivotal in his passing over to other traditions. Merton's spirit of intellectual openness and inquiry, we said, has fostered an exemplary model of East-West spirituality which could be key to a holistic, all-embracing approach to christology.

We have briefly surveyed Panikkar's insights gleaned from a lifetime of connecting the worlds of religion, philosophy, science and revelation. For Raimon Panikkar as well, Christ is the central symbol of all reality whose power is discovered by experiencing the deep inner center of each human person. His cosmotheandric intuition has spun a radical trinitarian narrative which encourages diversity in our understanding of Christ. Panikkar, we tried to clarify, believes that his cosmotheandric insight has sufficient traditional elements for continuity and enough of a revolutionary character to offer novelty, both serving as catalysts for hope.

Our world today needs a new myth. Panikkar we said, proposes an advaitic, non-dual approach to help meld old and new into something we cannot yet anticipate. Myth is polysemic by nature. Panikkar has provided new vocabulary to assist in the enterprise of overcoming misunderstandings, allowing for dialogue in the service of peace.

To be sure, other contemporary voices have attempted to clarify discontinuities in our era, inspiring the spiritual quest with their convergent views. Teilhard envisions for us a grand narrative of *planetization* and a radical change in consciousness. Jean Leclercq refers to a *global mutation*. Robley Whitson foresees a *coming convergence*. The French intellectual, Simone Weil, as early as the 1930s, insisted on a *catholicity* of unconditioned universality. Her very personal version of global consciousness envisions a new saintliness, distinguished by a new kind of universal holiness without precedent. For her, it is a key to a new spirituality:

A new type of sanctity is indeed a fresh spring, an invention. If all is kept in proportion and if the order of each thing is preserved, it is almost equivalent to a new revelation of the universe and of human destiny. It is the exposure of a large portion of truth and beauty hitherto concealed under a thick layer of dust. More genius is needed than was needed by Archimedes to invent mechanics and physics. A new saintliness is a still more marvelous invention.⁵⁰⁴

⁵⁰⁴ *The Simone Weil Reader*, edited by George Panichas, "Spiritual Autobiography," 20.

The German theologian, Karl Rahner writes of a “more mature Christian awareness that has grown over a long period and is slowly coming to terms more closely with the ultimate basic message of Jesus on the victory of God’s kingdom.”⁵⁰⁵ The presence of non-dual consciousness is implied nearly everywhere in Rahner’s writing. Rahner’s famous statement: “tomorrow’s devout person will either be a mystic—someone who has ‘experienced’ something—or else they will no longer be devout at all” parallels Merton’s suggestion that, “the spiritual anguish of man has no cure but mysticism.”⁵⁰⁶

We have raised and attempted to frame several substantial questions in the brief scope of this paper. We have explored the capacious, imaginative approaches of three mystics. Each has massively contributed to the christological and trinitarian discourse in their own bold and novel methodology. We drew on Merton’s poetic iconography which re-conceptualizes for us the essential presence of God in the attempt to invigorate the thesis.

The universal structure of Reality we proposed appears to be open ended. A converging global matrix and the ramifications of mutating traditions require a new myth. An all encompassing christological spirituality is needed which requires maturity. We must shape an authentic style of spiritual interiority congruent with the life context of our experience; a new paradigm appropriate to the contemporary world.

The cultivation and growth of the contemplative dimension leads to greater stability to perceive the presence of the divine dwelling in our contemporary world. A contemplative

⁵⁰⁵ Karl Rahner, “The Abiding Significance of the Second Vatican Council,” 101. See also FW, 158.

⁵⁰⁶ NM, 114. Rahner’s statement is cited in *Karl Rahner: Spiritual Writings*, edited by Phillip Endean [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004], 24. For both Merton and Rahner “we need to lose the sense of elitism associated with talk of the mystical” (ibid). Also cited in STM, 280.

disposition inspires profound acceptance for the gift of life and inspires the conviction of the primacy of being over doing. The contemplative spirit arises from a fundamental human need that is more ontological than psychological. The contemplative “has an essential thrust towards the fullness of Being, Truth, Love, Immortality and Peace. This dynamic thrust possesses a simplicity and veracity which together specify the depths of human nature in its spiritual authenticity. The human person has the innate capacity for depth—what Karl Rahner calls a ‘capacity for God.’”⁵⁰⁷ The maturity necessary for an all encompassing christological spirituality, we tried to describe, is embodied as models for us in the writings and the persons of Teilhard de Chardin, Thomas Merton and Raimon Panikkar.

A common belief for these visionaries is expressed in a complete cosmology of the West written by Dante in the fourteenth century. This simple and beautiful chant is Dante’s *gloria*. It is closer to the poetry and wisdom of Christian scriptures and Hindu Upanishads than the modern tabulated definitions of this term produced by our rational modern minds:

The glory of Him who all things moves
through the entire universe penetrates,
and shines in one part more
and less in another.⁵⁰⁸

⁵⁰⁷ Wayne Teasdale, “A Monastic (Contemplative) Contribution to Global Healing” in *Monastic Interreligious Dialogue*, Bulletin 46, January 1993.

⁵⁰⁸ Dante, *Divinia Commedia*, Paradiso: “La gloria di colui che tutto move/per l’universo penetra, e risplende/in una parte più, e meno altrone.” Also cited in RB, 178.

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THANK YOU

Dr. Ewert H. Cousins 1927-2009

The *coincidence* of a vast, synthetic, brilliant mind with a warm, affectionate and kind heart.

“In this passing over, Christ is *the way and the door*,”⁵⁰⁹ and “in this passing over, if it is to be perfect, all intellectual activities must be left behind and the height of our affection must be totally transferred and transformed into God.”⁵¹⁰

FOUNTAIN FULLNESS

⁵⁰⁹ Bonaventure, *The Soul's Journey into God*, VII, I; translation, 111. Cited in C21, 126.

⁵¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 4; translation, 113.