

**THOMAS MERTON'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE THEOLOGY OF HOPE:
A CONTEXTUAL, DIACHRONIC AND ANALYTICAL-SYNTHETIC STUDY**

**A THESIS
SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
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**BY
BANG-SIK OH**

**DEPARTMENT OF THEOLOGY
KNOX COLLEGE
AND
THE UNIVERSITY OF ST. MICHAEL'S COLLEGE
TORONTO SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY
TORONTO, ONTARIO, CANADA**

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Thesis Outline

THOMAS MERTON'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE THEOLOGY OF HOPE: A CONTEXTUAL, DIACHRONIC AND ANALYTICAL-SYNTHETIC STUDY

by

Bang-Sik Oh

The purpose of this dissertation is to explore the contribution of Thomas Merton (1915-1968) to the theology of hope. At the beginning of his monastic career (1941-1951), Merton had already discovered and engaged the many facets of hope. From 1952 to 1959 his writings embody an explicit concern with hope in the context of social and political issues. In the final period of his life (1960-1968), hope became axial to his thought. While Merton never wrote a full and formal treatise on the subject, his works invite a construction of a broad-based theology of hope. Only a few scholars have taken note of this important factor. A primary contention of this dissertation then is that Merton's reflections on hope are a key facet, if not the ground, of his theological legacy dating to the third quarter of the twentieth century.

The dissertation is divided into five chapters. Chapter I provides a summary of the theology of hope from 1959 to the present by its three major academic exponents, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Jürgen Moltmann, and Johann Baptist Metz. Although Merton's theology of hope does not impact or reflect the concerns of these academics, a survey of these works provides a basis for comparing Merton's approach to and gestalt of hope, especially since his writings on hope for the most part precede theirs. This comparative perspective provides a basic setting for the Merton contribution. Chapter II offers a diachronic investigation of Merton's views on hope, carefully following the publication sequence of his works. Chapter III studies the Merton correlations of hope with spirituality, the Messianic kingdom, historical disengagement, and pessimism and evil. Chapter IV constructs a synthesis of the Trappist's hope from a theological, philosophical, psychological, and socio-political standpoint. Chapter V, in conclusion, evaluates Merton's overall understanding of hope.

Even though Merton did not create an intentional philosophy or theology of hope, his reflections on the topics are rich, broad-ranging, cohesive and compelling. Beyond its

eschatological dynamic and prophetic dialogue with the world, what made Merton's theology of hope unique was its various formats: biographical/autobiographical features, poetic reveries, and meditations, and its various strands: monastic life, church renewal, American socio-political issues, and literary correlations.

While Merton had read some of Karl Rahner's and Teilhard de Chardin's writings, there is no evidence (at least to the present writer's knowledge) to demonstrate that Merton had ever read any of the writings of the theologians of hope: viz., Pannenberg, Moltmann or Metz. Two factors may be cited in support of this. Merton, as already stated, never aspired to be an academic theologian, and most of the works on hope theology began to appear in the United States only shortly before the monk's tragic death.

A major common denominator of the three premier academic hope theologians is the idea of *prolepsis*. Merton did not focus on this aspect of hope. Primarily poet, essayist and letter-writer, he skirted the enticement of a theological agenda, and committed himself to proclaiming the kingdom of God as present here and now. Driven by a prophetic outlook, he proclaimed a vision of hope as a future reality grounded in the present salvific order of things. This stance was shaped by his contemplative proclivity, and a psychology of self-transcendence and self-realization.

While professional purists may insist on denying him the recognition of a *bona fide* theologian, Merton has in fact demonstrated how theologizing can be done at a most basic level, and how theology, as originally conceived, can never be divorced from a personal and ecclesial life of prayer, of contemplation, of moral-pastoral response to the world. Merton exemplifies what might be called a theology of holistic integration.

To Sebastian A. Falcone

**Who has taught me about
Genuine Christian love through
His devoted life**

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABBREVIATIONS	vii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	x
INTRODUCTION	1
A. Statement of Purpose	1
B. Merton Scholarship on Hope	1
C. Statement on Method	4
D. Thesis Statement	4
E. Outline of Dissertation	5
CHAPTER I. THE THEOLOGY OF HOPE IN TWENTIETH CENTURY PERSPECTIVE	6
A. Background of the Theology of Hope	8
1. Historical and Social Environment	8
2. Theological Framework	12
B. Three Major Exponents	16
1. Wolfhart Pannenberg	16
a. Theology of the Kingdom of God	17
b. God as "The Power of the Future"	19
c. Summary	23
2. Jürgen Moltmann	24
a. Eschatology and Hope	24
i. God's Promise as Ground of Eschatology	25
ii. Promise of the Future Linked with Mission	28
b. Descriptions of Hope	29
c. Dialectic Nature of Hope between Future and Present Reality	30
d. Summary	34
3. Johann Metz	34
a. Theology of the World	35
b. Eschatology and the Theology of the World	38
c. Eschatological Proviso	42
d. Summary	47
C. Theologies of Hope: A General Summary	48

CHAPTER II. MERTON'S UNDERSTANDING OF HOPE IN DIACHRONIC PERSPECTIVE	57
A. Signs of an Implicit Hope: 1915-1954	57
1. Pre-monastic Period: 1915-1941	57
a. Merton's Early Passion for Freedom	58
b. Merton's Proclivity to Despair about Himself and the World	60
c. Merton's Discovery of Christian Hope	61
2. First Glimmers of a Thematic Hope: 1942-1951	64
3. Signs of an Emergent Implicit Hope: 1952-1954	75
B. Beginnings of an Explicit Theology of Hope: 1955-1959	76
1. Initial Phase: 1955-1957	76
2. Later Phase: 1958-1959	82
C. Merton's Mature Understanding of Hope: 1960-1968	85
1. Sociopolitical Critique Grounded in Hope: 1960-1968	86
2. Monastic and Ecclesiastical Renewal Grounded in Hope: 1964-1968	112
3. Dialogical, Spiritual Existentialism Grounded in Hope: 1966-1968	125
D. Summary	154
CHAPTER III: ANALYSIS OF MERTON'S UNDERSTANDING OF HOPE	156
A. Sources of Merton's Understanding of Hope	156
1. Biblical Sources	156
2. Spiritual/Mystical Sources	161
a. Herakleitos (c. 500 B. C.)	161
b. Origen (c. 185-c. 254)	163
c. John Cassian the Hermit (360?-432?)	164
d. St. Gregory of Nyssa (b. 331/340-ca. 394)	166
e. St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153)	167
f. St. Julian of Norwich (c. 1342-1413)	168
g. St. John of the Cross (1542-1591)	171
3. Literary Sources	172
a. William Blake (1757-1827)	173
b. Boris Leonidovich Pasternak (1890-1960)	174
c. Albert Camus (1913-1960)	175
d. Flannery O' Connor (1925-1964)	178
e. William Faulkner (1897-1962)	179
4. Theological Sources	181
a. Karl Barth (1886-1968)	181
b. Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945)	184
c. Karl Rahner (1904-1984)	185
d. Christian Existentialists: Jean-Paul Sartre, Sören	

Kierkegaard, Gabriel Marcel, Nikolai Berdyaev	186
e. John XXII	187
5. Summary	189
B. Hope and Its Correlates	190
1. Hope and Confidence/Trust in Spirituality	190
2. Hope and Eschatology	194
3. Hope and the Messianic Kingdom	196
4. Hope and Historical Disengagement	197
5. Hope v. Pessimism and Evil	200
C. Summary	203
CHAPTER IV: SYNTHESIS OF MERTON'S UNDERSTANDING OF HOPE	205
A. Hope as a Theological Reality	205
1. The Trinitarian Foundation of Hope	205
2. As a Process View of the World	208
3. Renewal and Hope	212
a. Monastic Renewal	212
b. Ecclesiastical Renewal	216
B. Hope as a Philosophical Actuality	219
1. As an Epistemological Factor	219
C. Hope as a Psychological Phenomenon	224
1. Relating to Self	226
2. Contributing to Transcultural Consciousness	228
D. Hope as a Socio-Political Dynamic	231
1. Against War	233
2. Against Racism	236
3. Against Violence	239
E. Summary	242
CHAPTER V: GENERAL CONCLUSION	243
BIBLIOGRAPHIES	255
I. Sectional Bibliography to Chapter I	255
A. The Theology of Hope in General	255
B. Wolfhart Pannenberg	262
C. Jürgen Moltmann	264
D. Johann Baptist Metz	267
II. A Classified Bibliography to Chapters II-IV	268
A. Primary Works	268
1. Full-length Works by Thomas Merton	268
2. Edited Works of Thomas Merton	272
3. Periodical Literature and Other Studies	275
4. Tapes by Merton	276
B. Works on Merton	277
1. Bibliographies	277

2. Monographic Studies	278
3. Periodical Literature and Other Studies	281
4. Unpublished Dissertations and Theses	286
5. Tapes on Merton	288
6. Other	289
C. General Reference	290

ABBREVIATIONS
(Works frequently cited in the text)

<u>AJTM</u>	<u>The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton</u>
<u>AT</u>	<u>The Ascent to Truth</u>
<u>BT</u>	<u>The Behavior of Titans</u>
<u>BW</u>	<u>Bread in the Wilderness</u>
<u>CA</u>	<u>Cables to the Ace: or Familiar Liturgies of Misunderstanding</u>
<u>CGB</u>	<u>Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander</u>
<u>CP</u>	<u>Contemplative Prayer</u>
<u>CPTM</u>	<u>Collected Poems of Thomas Merton</u>
<u>CT</u>	<u>The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers</u>
<u>CWA</u>	<u>Contemplation in a World of Action</u>
<u>DQ</u>	<u>Disputed Questions</u>
<u>DWL</u>	<u>Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage. The Journals of Thomas Merton. Vol. 5. 1963-1965</u>
<u>FV</u>	<u>Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice</u>
<u>GL</u>	<u>The Geography of Lograire</u>
<u>HGL</u>	<u>The Hidden Ground of Love. The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns</u>
<u>HR</u>	<u>Honourable Reader: Reflections on My Work</u>
<u>IM</u>	<u>The Intimate Merton: His Life from His Journals</u>
<u>LB</u>	<u>The Living Bread</u>
<u>LeL</u>	<u>Learning to Love: The Journals of Thomas Merton. Vol. VI, 1966-1967:</u>
<u>LETM</u>	<u>The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton</u>
<u>LF</u>	<u>The Last of the Fathers: Saint Bernard of Clairvaux and the Encyclical</u>

	<u>Letter, "Doctor Mellifluus"</u>
<u>LFH</u>	<u>Life and Holiness</u>
<u>LoL</u>	<u>Love and Living</u>
<u>MJ</u>	<u>The Monastic Journey</u>
<u>MZM</u>	<u>Mystics and Zen Masters</u>
<u>NA</u>	<u>The Non-Violent Alternative</u>
<u>NM</u>	<u>The New Man</u>
<u>NMI</u>	<u>No Man is an Island</u>
<u>NSC</u>	<u>New Seeds of Contemplation</u>
<u>OB</u>	<u>Opening the Bible</u>
<u>OSM</u>	<u>The Other Side of the Mountain: The Journals of Thomas Merton.</u> Vol. VII: 1967-1968
<u>PaP</u>	<u>Passion For Peace: The Social Essays</u>
<u>RJ</u>	<u>The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends</u>
<u>RM</u>	<u>Run to the Mountain: The Journals of Thomas Merton. Vol. I.</u> 1939-1941
<u>RU</u>	<u>Raids on the Unspeakable</u>
<u>SC</u>	<u>Seeds of Contemplation</u>
<u>SCb</u>	<u>Seasons of Celebration.</u>
<u>SCh</u>	<u>The School of Charity: Letters on Religious Renewal and Spiritual</u> <u>Direction</u>
<u>SD</u>	<u>Seeds of Destruction</u>
<u>SDM</u>	<u>Spiritual Direction and Meditation</u>
<u>SJ</u>	<u>The Sign of Jonas</u>
<u>SJTM</u>	<u>The Secular Journal of Thomas Merton</u>

<u>SL</u>	<u>The Silent Life</u>
<u>SpC</u>	<u>The Springs of Contemplation</u>
<u>SS</u>	<u>A Search for Solitude: The Journals of Thomas Merton. Vol. III: 1952-1960</u>
<u>SSM</u>	<u>The Seven Story Mountain</u>
<u>STB</u>	<u>Striving Towards Being: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Czeslaw Milosz</u>
<u>TMA</u>	<u>Thomas Merton in Alaska: The Alaskan Conference, Journals and Letters</u>
<u>TMP</u>	<u>Thomas Merton on Peace</u>
<u>TMSM</u>	<u>Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master</u>
<u>TS</u>	<u>Thoughts in Solitude</u>
<u>TTW</u>	<u>Turning Toward the World: The Journals of Thomas Merton. Vol. IV: 1960-1963</u>
<u>VC</u>	<u>Vow of Conversation: Journal, 1964-1965</u>
<u>WC</u>	<u>What is Contemplation?</u>
<u>WD</u>	<u>The Wisdom of the Desert: Sayings from the Desert Fathers of the Fourth Century.</u>
<u>WF</u>	<u>Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis</u>
<u>ZBA</u>	<u>Zen and the Birds of Appetite</u>

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INTRODUCTION

A. Statement of Purpose

This dissertation aims to explore the life and writings of Thomas Merton (1915-1968) in search of his interpretation of and contribution to a theology of hope. The underlying task will be to document and interpret his presentations of hope as an ideology, a postulate of socio-cultural critique, and paradigm of conscience-shaping. At an immediate level Merton's life and writings clearly attest the vocabulary and conceptualization of hope; at a deeper level a cohesive gestalt of hope rewards the careful reader.

B. Merton Scholarship on Hope

A few Merton scholars have called incidental attention to Merton's fascination with hope. Frederic Kelly states: "Merton's life is an expression of eschatological hope."¹ George Woodcock contends: "Merton is one of the creators of a contemporary theology of hope."² Walter Capps believes: "Merton's Asian Journal will serve the immediate future in much the same way that Bonhoeffer's Letters and Papers from Prison intrigued and informed the present and the recent past."³ Donald Grayston finds Merton's approach to the immediate future grounded in hope.⁴ E. Glenn Hinson identifies hope as the matrix of the Trappist monk's theology.⁵

¹Frederic Kelly, Man Before God: Thomas Merton on Social Responsibility (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974), 37.

²George Woodcock, Thomas Merton: Monk and Poet (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1978), 73

³Walter Holden Capps, Hope Against Hope: Moltmann to Merton in One Theological Decade (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 155.

⁴Donald Grayston, Thomas Merton: The Development of a Spiritual Theologian (New York: Edwin Mellen, 1985), 1-2.

⁵E. Glenn Hinson, "Thomas Merton," in A New Handbook of Christian Theologians, ed. by Donald W. Mussez and Joseph L. Price (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1996), 287-296, esp. 289-291.

Of the five scholars cited only two deal at some length with Merton's concern with hope. In two chapters of his book Capps compares Moltmann and Merton on the subject of hope. Even so, the approach is mainly descriptive rather than analytical, and no chronological trajectory is attempted. E. Glenn Hinson's discussion of hope in a section entitled "Salvation and Hope" skims over this aspect of Merton's theology. Hope, it might finally be noted, is conspicuously absent as an index item in the secondary Merton materials – even the James Baker index has only a single entry.⁶

The thoughtful reader who ventures into the Merton canon will soon discover that hope rises to the level of a recurring theme. Early in his monastic career, Merton ventured to touch on the spiritual subtleties of hope. By the early 1960s, when hope rises to an explicit concern in his writings as these addressed social and political issues, the Merton prepossession was given full expression. In the final period of his life, hope became axial to his thought. A critical moment in that process can be documented, when Merton confided: "If it were a matter of choosing between contemplation and eschatology, there is no question that I am and would always be committed entirely to the latter."⁷ This statement takes on heightened meaning, especially since contemplation is generally given primacy of significance in his thinking and writings.⁸

⁶ James Baker, Thomas Merton: A Social Critic (Lexington, KY: Kentucky University Press, 1971).

⁷ Thomas Merton, Vow of Conversation, ed. Naomi Burton Stone (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1988), 11.

⁸ This outlook finds support in Merton's own comment: "Contemplation is the summit of the Christian life of prayer." (Thomas Merton, Contemplative Prayer [New York: Herder & Herder, 1969], 3). J. E. Bamberger, lifelong confidant and once a novice under Merton, likewise contends: "The one word ... that best sums up Merton's spiritual teaching is contemplation" ("Thomas Merton: Monk and Author," in Thomas Merton: Prophet in the Belly of a Paradox, ed. Gerald Twomey [New York: Paulist, 1978], 144). The same outlook is shared by William H. Shannon (Thomas Merton's Dark Path: The Inner Experience of a Contemplative [New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1981], 4). An earlier study by the present writer argued that "contemplation was the basic driving force in Merton's spiritual journey and in his writings. No theme is more persistent, no dynamic more pivotal." (Bang-Sik Oh, "Contemplation in the Writings of Thomas Merton: A Developmental Hermeneutic" [M.A. thesis, St. Bernard's Institute, Rochester, NY, 1992], 1.)

While Merton never wrote a full and formal treatise on hope, many of his works construct a broad-based theology of hope. This same dynamic undergirds his extensive writings on monastic reform, on ecclesiastical renewal, and his mature analysis of Christian existentialism. A primary contention of this dissertation, then, is that Merton's reflections on hope are a key facet, if not the ground, of his theological legacy in the third quarter of the twentieth century.

"Theology of Hope," according to M. R. Tripole, is a standard designation of the theological movement inaugurated in the 1960s by three ranking European theologians. Wolfhart Pannenberg, Jürgen Moltmann, and Johann B. Metz.⁹ The diversity among them makes it difficult to identify a common theological methodology, or even to classify them as a single school of thought. The designation "school" is admittedly wide of the mark, since, in spite of occasional and even significant convergences of thought, they hardly share common postulates and procedures – apart from their overriding priority of hope. Yet despite their diversity all three academic theologians profess an essential preoccupation with hope. It is a chronological fact worthy of note that while Merton stands apart from these academic theologians of hope, his theological fascination with hope had already begun to surface in the early 1950s. By the early 1960s hope had become a primary impetus in his writings. Even though he never undertook a full, formal study of the subject, Merton's reflective pilgrimages in hope, remarkably, predate the published work of these three major academic theological exponents of hope.

Merton's basic proclivity towards hope seems to have been grounded in a malaise concerning himself and the world, and his own personal experience of God. But as a diachronic reading of his work evidences, his involvement in sociopolitical analysis, contemporary literature, monastic and ecclesiastical renewal fostered in him a consistent, long-term proclivity toward hope. Intimations of desire, trust and expectation crystallized

⁹M. R. Tripole, "Theology of Hope," New Catholic Encyclopedia, Vol. 17 (Washington, DC/ New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974), 273.

into an ever deepening theological outlook that, while unmistakably intuitive, coalesced into a broad-scoped theology of hope.

C. Statement on Method

Merton's wide-ranging explorations on hope and eschatology, his insights into the dynamics of trust, confidence, desire, optimism and into the theology of the kingdom and *kairos*, together with his reflections on dread and despair, will help us identify the texts relevant to our purpose. To construct a discernible theology of hope from the published Merton canon, a diachronic method will guide the first phase of the study; this will then be followed by a full-scale analysis and synthesis of the data.

D. Thesis Statement

A diachronic reading of Merton's published writings puts in perspective a world in existential turmoil poised at the threshold of an explicit call to respond to grace. Such an outlook is coincident with a biblical world-view and more specifically a Christian eschatological approach to human existence. The major facets of such a perspective are a psychology of desire, a metaphysic of potency and act, a sociology of optimism, a theology which counterbalances the polarities of sin and grace. Merton's writings bear the imprint of a Christian eschatology that takes full account of human sin, the expected ultimate vindication of the biblically transmitted divine plan, and confidence in God's call to redemptive union. These postulates consistently inform Merton's gestalt of hope.¹⁰

While neither a professional nor academic theologian, Merton's hope is shaped by a deep Christian faith, rich imaginative power, and a gifted articulateness, each triggered by a broad agenda of social, political and religious issues. Overall, an unmistakable originality enhanced by a distinctive individuality emerges. Drawing upon his own

¹⁰A close analysis of Merton's theology points to the influence of two premier theologians, Karl Barth and Karl Rahner. Where appropriate, these influences will be noted, without compromising our stated focus.

interior and exterior experiences, Merton's intuitive passion for hope was driven by a basic commitment to monastic contemplation in dialogue with his symbolic world.

This dissertation will argue, therefore, that Thomas Merton offers specific, even unique theological perspectives which contribute to the theologies of hope of the third quarter of the twentieth century. His specific contribution is found in the contemplative quality of his hope construct, in a psychology of self-transcendence and self-realization, as well as a vision of socio-political transformation.

E. Outline of Dissertation

This dissertation will be divided into five sections or chapters. Chapter I will provide an over-all summary of the theology of hope in the third quarter of the Twentieth Century by its three major academic exponents, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Jürgen Moltmann, and Johann Baptist Metz. Although Merton's theology of hope did not seem to impact or reflect the concerns of these academics, a brief review of their work will help clarify Merton's approach to and gestalt of hope. His writings on hope precede theirs, and reveal different premises and constructions. Even so, a preliminary presentation of their theology of hope will enable us to see Merton's contribution more clearly. Chapter II will present a diachronic investigation of Thomas Merton's reflections on hope in his published works to date. Chapter III will offer an in-depth analysis of Merton's perspectives on hope and its correlatives. Chapter IV will propose a synthesis of the Merton understanding of hope. Chapter V, by way of conclusion, will evaluate Merton's overall contribution to the theological elucidation of hope.

CHAPTER I. THE THEOLOGY OF HOPE IN TWENTIETH CENTURY PERSPECTIVE

By virtual scholarly consensus, “theology of hope” emerged in the mid-1960s. under the leadership of Wolfhart Pannenberg, Jürgen Moltmann, and Johann Metz as key exponents.¹ It is important to note, however, that a fair number of works on hope — less intentional in their methodology — had appeared during, and even before, this decade.

Among the standard presentations on the virtue of hope during the period under consideration, one may take note of the work of Henry Bars² and Mark Alexander Cunningham Warren.³ Both works follow a traditional line of theological development. The Christian existentialist Gabriel Marcel offered a significant contribution in a metaphysic of “man” as a “wayfarer” living by hope.⁴ William F. Lynch and Frank Kermode addressed the aesthetic dynamics of hope.⁵ while the psychological dimensions of the topic were being explored by E. Stottland and Karl Menninger.⁶

¹ M. R. Tripole is one among many who traces this new theological phenomenon to the pioneer efforts of three major European theologians. (“Theology of Hope.” *op. cit.*, 273). In the interest of a representative focus, Chapter I will forgo a review of the theology of hope by Karl Rahner, Carl Braaten, Gabriel Marcel, William Lynch, and Edward Schillebeeckx; as well as of the humanistic psychology of Karl Menninger and Erich Fromm; of the encyclopedic philosophic analysis of Ernst Bloch; of the sociology of Peter Berger and Clifford Geertz; and of the literary criticism of William Lynch and Frank Kermode.

² Henry Bars. Faith, Hope, and Charity. Trans. by P. J. Hepburne-Scott (New York: Hawthorn London: Burns & Oates, 1961).

³ Mark A. Cunningham Warren. The Truth of Vision: A Study in the Nature of the Christian Hope (London: Canterbury Press, 1948).

⁴ Gabriel Marcel. Homo Viator: Introduction to a Metaphysic of Hope (New York: Harper & Row, 1951; 1962). Also: Fresh Hope for the World: Moral Re-armament in Action. (London: Longmans, 1960).

⁵ William Lynch. Images of Hope. Imagination as Healer of the Hopeless (Baltimore, MD: Helicon, 1965). Lynch has valuable insights into the “fascination with despair” in contemporary culture (p. 21) and boldly states: “*Hope comes close to being the very heart and centre of a human being*” (p. 31; original emphasis). Frank Kermode. The Sense of an Ending (New York: Oxford University, 1967).

⁶ E. Stottland. The Psychology of Hope (San Francisco: Jossey – Bass, 1969). Karl Menninger. “Hope.” American Journal of Psychiatry (December, 1959), 481-491. *Idem.*, The Vital Balance (New York: Viking, 1963).

The sociology of hope had been explored earlier by H. J. Conn.⁷ By the time the great theologians of hope entered the picture, psychoanalyst and philosopher Erich Fromm (1900-1980) had published his influential work on the broad-ranging scope of hope.⁸

The largest contribution by far was forthcoming from the biblical field. Especially noteworthy are the essays of Rudolf Karl Bultmann, Karl Heinrich Rengstorf, John Knox, H. C. Kee, Paul S. Minear, C. F. D. Moule,⁹ all of whom stood at the gateway of a restructured, full-scale theology of hope.

The exploration of Christian hope from the standpoint of evolution included Ernst Benz, who traced the concept of the future from the early church fathers to Teilhard de Chardin.¹⁰ Full-length theological studies, all from a traditional point of view, were added by Roger Hasseveldt, Ruben A. Alves, Gerald O' Collins, S. J., G. J. Fackre and Bernard Olivier.¹¹

⁷H. C. Conn, The Hope that Sets Men Free (New York: Harper, 1954). Sociologists Peter Berger and Clifford Geertz also made hope an essential dimension of the social order. Peter Berger, The Sacred Canopy (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Anchor Books, 1969). Clifford Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

⁸Erich Fromm, The Revolution of Hope: Toward a Humanized Technology. (New York: Harper & Row, 1968). A single sentence reference hardly suffices to cover Fromm's life-long application of psychoanalysis, sociology, philosophy as well as religion to the specific problems of the human race in modern industrialized society. Perhaps his most significant contribution was the popularization of the two modes of human existence (presented earlier by Gabriel Marcel, Being and Having, 1951). (See To Have or To Be, New York: Harper, 1976).

⁹History and Eschatology (Edinburgh: The University Press, 1957). The Presence of Eternity: History and Eschatology (New York: Harper, 1957). Geschichte und Eschatologie (Tubingen, 1958). "Hope" in The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament. Trans. Dorothea M. Barton; ed. by P. K. Achroyd. In Bible Key Words from Kittel's Theologisches Wörterbuch zum neuen Testament XII (London: A. & C. Black, 1963); John Knox, Christ and the Hope of Glory (New York: Abingdon, 1960); H. C. Kee, The Renewal of Hope (New York: Association, 1959); Paul S. Minear, Christian Hope and the Second Coming (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954); C. F. Moule, The Meaning of Hope: A Biblical Exploration with Concordance (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963).

¹⁰Ernst Benz, Evolution and Christian Hope: Man's Concept of the Future from the Early Fathers to Teilhard de Chardin. Trans. Heinz G. Frank. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966).

¹¹Roger Hasseveldt, The Christian Meaning of Hope (Westminster, MD: Newman, 1958); Ruben A. Alves, A Theology of Human Hope (Washington DC.: Corpus, 1969); Gerald O' Collins, S. J., Man and His New Hopes (New York: Herder & Herder, 1969); G. J. Fackre, The Rainbow Sign: Christian Futurity (London: Epworth, 1969); Bernard Oliver, Christian Hope. Trans. Paul Barrett, O.P. (Westminster, MD: Newman, 1963).

Among the materials that emerged from lectures, conferences, thematic essays, and *Festschriften*, one should recall: Jean Bouilloc, Maryellen Muckenhirn, Joseph Pieper, Heinrich E. Brunner, Franklin Sherman, Robert Banks, and Barry Ulanov.¹² Most importantly, from the perspective of this dissertation, only the Josef Pieper work seems to have come to Merton's attention (it is in fact the only work among those here mentioned that he explicitly quotes).¹³

For all of their specific merits, these works did not give rise to a new theological movement, in which hope would serve as subject, object and method.

Organizationally, Chapter I of this dissertation will sketch the historical and social milieu of the new theology of hope, as well as its content and methodology, in the systematic treatment of Pannenberg, Moltmann, and Metz. A synthesis of the new theological enterprise — as a background if not an actual component of the Merton enterprise — will be presented in a closing summary.

A. Background of the Theology of Hope

1. Historical and Social Environment

The phenomenon known as “the theology of hope” is perhaps best explored in

¹² Jean Bouilloc, ed. *The Hope that Is In Us*. Trans. by Sr. Gertrude, S. P. (Glen Rock, NJ: Newman, 1968). Maryellen Muckenhirn, ed. *The Future as the Presence of Shared Hope* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1968). Heinrich E. Brunner, *Faith, Hope and Love* [The Earl Lectures, 1955]. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966). Franklin Sherman, ed. *Christian Hope and the Future of Humanity*. (Minneapolis, MN: Agusburg, 1969). Robert Banks, ed. *Reconciliation and Hope. New Testament Essays on Atonement and Eschatology*. Leon Lamb Morris on his 60th Birthday (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974). Barry Ulanov. *Seeds of Hope in the Modern World* (New York: Kenedy), 1962.

¹³ Joseph Pieper. *Hope and History*. Trans. by David Kipp. (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius, 1994). The original publication (*Hoffnung und Geschichte*) is formatted according to the lecturer's notes as used at the *Salzburger Vorlesungen* in August 1966 and published by Kosel-Verlag, Munich, 1967. Another publication of this same work (*On Hope*, Trans. by Sr. Mary Francis McCarthy, San Francisco, CA: Ignatius, 1986) affords a schematic picture of the academic presentation. Pieper's approach, after an introductory plea for “the new urgency of the question,” builds heavily upon the thought of Thomas Aquinas, Kant, Teilhard de Chardin, Ernst Bloch, and Franz Kafka. Passing consideration is given Hans Ur Von Balthasar, Georg Wilhelm Hegel, Aldous Huxley, Gabriel Marcel, Karl Rahner. As a Christian philosopher, Pieper takes into account the movement of history, the idea of progress, and hope for a better future based on faith and reason in pursuit of a divine plan.

See further reference to J. Pieper in *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964), 176, 178.

light of the historical and social conditions in the Germany of the late 1940s and 1950s.

In the overwhelming devastation of post-war Germany, Jürgen Moltmann sought a substructure of hope for the new forms of social, economic, and political justice in a transformed society.¹⁴ Such hope gave rise to degrees of disappointment and despair as reconstruction veered toward a restoration of the old forms.¹⁵ Meeks finds this period in German history marked by dismal realism and keen skepticism toward all ideologies and utopias. In light of these polarities, an ideology of maintenance, mixed with apathy toward the future, gained the ascendancy.¹⁶ Pannenberg believed that a theology of hope might revive the dashed hopes of humanizing society. He also believed this theology of hope would empower a strong commitment to optimism and the future in spite of the unfulfilled promise of secular aims.¹⁷

A decade earlier, Bultmann's existential theology and Gogarten's theology of secularity gave rise to an explicit concern about the present. But these theologies were unable to unite Christian faith with a firm commitment to human history. In fact, these theologies had the effect of undercutting, even rejecting, the subversive and revolutionary elements of the biblical tradition.¹⁸ Thus, with the powers of secularism unchallenged and unchanged, this younger generation of theologians began to question the old theological paradigms that had survived World War II. In support of this interpretation of events Meeks quotes Moltmann himself:

In a time in which the actual movement of history is beginning to reach the universal horizon of eschatology, our understanding of our responsibility in the

¹⁴For a fascinating set of retrospects, see Jürgen Moltmann, ed., How I Have Changed: Reflections on Thirty Years of Theology (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998), the published account of a day-long symposium in June 1996, celebrating Moltmann's seventieth birthday.

¹⁵ Moltmann, "Politics and the Practice of Hope," The Christian Century 87 (March 11, 1970): 288.

¹⁶ Meeks, Origin of the Theology of Hope (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974), 4.

¹⁷ Wolfhart Pannenberg, Basic Questions in Theology, Vol. 3 (London: SCM, 1970), 195.

¹⁸ Cf. Meeks, op. cit., 5.

areas of faith, politics, and ethics is still caught up in the provincial thought forms of a passing epoch.¹⁹

A new theological framework was needed to accommodate these radically new historical exigencies. These, Moltmann announced, can be "met only through reorganization of the theological system and a reorientation of the entire theological endeavour."²⁰

According to Meeks, the political developments of the 1960s provided a favorable cultural matrix for a theology of hope. By means of major advances in the fields of cybernetics, electronics, medicine, space travel, and in a general technological outlook for the possibilities of an open future, the era of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr., incubated new hopes in the U.S.A. The developed countries meanwhile nurtured a secular enthusiasm for political justice. This in turn opened opportunities for the civil rights movements and experiments in liberated existence within a repressive society. Communist countries saw a new Marxist humanism challenging a stratified bureaucratic determination of the future. The underdeveloped countries on their part witnessed a new awareness of the poor of the earth and the injustice in which they are forced to live. This was triggered in large part by the exploitation of the developed countries. During this period the Second Vatican Council and the World Council of Churches heralded visions of the Church opening to the future of the world. Despite these forward-looking movements, theology receded into the background with nothing valuable to say about the future.²¹

Given this state of affairs, Moltmann proposed a genuinely new theological conceptuality which might move the Church and theology into dialogue with these future-oriented movements.²² Moltmann acknowledges Ernst Bloch's influence on the

¹⁹ *Idem.* See Jürgen Moltmann, Religion, Revolution, and the Future, trans. M. Douglas Meeks (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969), 201.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 200.

²¹ Meeks, *op. cit.*, 5-6.

²² *Ibid.*, 6.

formulation of his theology of hope. In him, Moltmann discovered “the loose threads of a biblical theology, a theology of the apostolate and the kingdom of God, as well as of philosophy, which were woven into a tapestry in which everything matched.”²³ He writes:

In 1960 I discovered Ernst Bloch’s The Principle of Hope. I read it in the East German edition during a holiday in Switzerland and was so fascinated that I ceased to see the beauty of the mountains. My spontaneous impression was, “Why has Christian theology let go of its most distinctive theme, hope?” After all, Bloch referred to the “exodus and the messianic parts of the Bible.” And what has become of the earliest Christian spirit of hope for the kingdom of God in today’s established Christianity? With my 1964 Theology of Hope I did not seek to be Bloch’s “heir.” Nor did I want to “baptize” his Principle of Hope, as Barth in Basel suspected. Rather, I wanted to undertake a parallel action in Christianity on the basis of its own presuppositions. Whereas Bloch regarded the modern Feuerbach-Marx atheism as a ground for hope, I began from the biblical history of God, exodus and resurrection.²⁴

In Meeks’s view, “Bloch’s philosophy serves as both catalyst and source of conceptualization for Moltmann’s theology.”²⁵ Don H. Olive concurs, finding in Moltmann’s dependence on Bloch a cultural point of contact.²⁶ Moltmann outlines his dependence succinctly:

To his [Bloch’s] social utopias for the “weary and heavy laden” and his utopias of justice for the “humiliated and the injured” I added the eschatological horizon of the resurrection of the dead and saw the “homeland of identity” first in the annihilation of death in the eternal presence of God.²⁷

²³ Moltmann, “Politics and the Practice of Hope.” 289.

²⁴ Moltmann, How I have Changed, 15-16.

²⁵ Meeks, Origins of Theology of Hope, 16. Humanistic thought has always tended to look upon hope as the conative openness of the human spirit to reality, as outreach in quest of meaning and value of life. Bloch simply asserts that where there is hope, there is religion.

²⁶ Don H. Olive, Wolfhart Pannenberg (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1973), 78.

²⁷ Moltmann, How I have Changed, 16.

2. Theological Framework

Twentieth century theology attests at least three stages in the development of the idea of the future. The first stage, according to Carl E. Braaten, belongs to the older generation of Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultmann, and Paul Tillich, whose theology accommodated the future into an everlasting present. The second stage is the death-of-God school of theology, in which, the "God above us" of the prior stage died "as the retribution exacted from theology for the sterility of its future-less eschatology."²⁸ The third stage began with Wolfhart Pannenberg and Jürgen Moltmann, who changed eschatology into a new paradigm of the Christian message.²⁹ Against this emergence of eschatology in modern theology, a trajectory of the systematic development of contemporary hope theology may be traced.

In his Critique of Pure Reason (1781) Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) divided the core issues of his "critical philosophy" into three questions: What can I know? What ought I to do? What may I hope? According to Braaten, Christian theology has addressed the first and second question, but has yet to come to grips with the third.³⁰ According to L. D. Kliever, while modern philosophy and theology underscored the first epistemological question, they neglected the ethical question and paid little attention to the question of hope. The end result in traditional Christianity has been to link the question of hope with immortality. And since modern thought has increasingly turned away from the afterlife and the other world in preference to this life and this world, hope has become mute.³¹ From his vantage point as an exponent of hope, Pannenberg notes that theologians from Kant to Ritschl made the kingdom of God an ethical goal to be

²⁸ Braaten, The Future of God, 11.

²⁹ Ibid., 11-12.

³⁰ Ibid., 33.

³¹ Lonnie D. Kliever, The Shattered Spectrum: A Survey of Contemporary Theology (Atlanta, GA: John Knox, 1981), 97-98.

achieved by human effort.³² Johannes Weiss, on the other hand, resisted this ethical interpretation of God's kingdom and emphasized Jesus' imminent eschatological expectation of the coming kingdom of God.

Together, Joannes Weiss and Albert Schweitzer rediscovered the significance of hope in theology. Weiss contended that eschatology was at the core of first-century Christianity and provided the key for understanding the Gospel of Jesus. Schweitzer argued that the eschatological teaching of Jesus was not peripheral but pivotal.³³ Much twentieth century New Testament scholarship has been a response to Schweitzer. R. Bultmann, while agreeing that Jesus proclaimed an imminent apocalyptic kingdom, translated it into existential meaning for modern people by "demythologizing" the message. His hermeneutic of Jesus' eschatology is not a "coming again" at a future date, but a "coming to me" event which calls for an existential decision. The eschaton therefore is last, not in the order of time but qualitatively, and eschatology does not speak of a future end of history since history's meaning is rooted in the present of every moment.³⁴

C. H. Dodd's earlier scholarly work defended a "realized eschatology," while his later publications acknowledged this formulation was not an entirely happy one.³⁵ Hence, Dodd took the stance that Jesus' message was the kingdom of God, already realized in his ministry, death and resurrection. A more balanced synthesis seems to have been

³² Wolfhart Pannenberg, Theology and Kingdom of God (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), 52.

³³ Albert Schweitzer, The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede, with introduction by James M. Robinson. (New York: Macmillan, 1968). See especially "The Eschatological Question" (223-241); "The Struggle Against Eschatology" (242-269); "Thoroughgoing Scepticism and Thoroughgoing Eschatology" (330-397).

³⁴ See Zachary Hayes, What Are They Saying About the End of the World? (New York: Paulist, 1983), 7.

³⁵ C. H. Dodd, The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel. (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1958), 447, n. 1. See also idem, The Coming of Christ (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1954).

achieved by scholars such as O. Cullmann, R. H. Fuller, and G. E. Ladd.³⁶ Against Bultmann, for example, Cullmann argues that the eschatology of the Christian Scriptures must include chronology — which leads him to divide history into salvation history and secular history.³⁷

In the field of systematics, Barth over time altered his hermeneutic of hope, while still keeping hope as the focal point of his theology. The mature Barth came to the unequivocal position: "All Christianity that is not wholly and utterly and irreducibly eschatology has nothing to do with Christ."³⁸

It is helpful to recall here that by demythologizing the eschatological symbols into existential and ethical categories, Bultmann's existential, dialectical theology could not but emphasize present hope.

Thus, while the theologians undervalued hope for the world and history, the modest revival of hope in philosophy served as catalyst for a theological recovery. In addition to Moltmann's discovery of Bloch, Braaten traces this turn of events to the futurological tendencies in modern culture, the rediscovery of apocalypticism in the earliest Christian circles and in the historical Jesus, plus the exposure of critical weaknesses within the prevailing systems of theology.³⁹

Ernst Bloch, already recognized as having given a primary impetus to the theological recovery of hope, had philosophical predecessors in Hegel (whose dialectical philosophy of history prompted him to speak of "the history of God") and in the historical materialism of Karl Marx. Bloch's The Principle of Hope evoked a powerful

³⁶ See S. H. Travis, "Eschatology," New Dictionary of Theology, ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson and David F. Wright (Downers Grove, IL/ Leicester, England: InterVarsity, 1988), 229.

³⁷ Hayes, op. cit., 7.

³⁸ Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics 11/1 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1957), 634.

³⁹ Braaten, The Future of God, 12.

response from the post-war religious thinkers of Europe.⁴⁰ His fundamental proposition was that living in hope and expectation should at all times be the underlying posture of human existence, not just in situations of extremity. For despite his own atheism, Bloch conceded the revolutionary historical/philosophical significance of the biblical sense of time as history moving toward a qualitatively new future. He acknowledged that Marx's secular hope had Judeo-Christian eschatology as its historical backdrop.

As a result, many factors converged in the late 1950s to effect a theological "turn to the future." Still, Pannenberg's innovative projection remains the first and foremost thrust toward contemporary "eschatological theology."⁴¹ His formulation of Christian theology is both grounded in eschatology and deeply rooted in the soil of history. "Theology today," he notes, "has yet to digest this radical change from the ethical to the eschatological understanding of the kingdom of God."⁴² Moltmann's epochal work Theology of Hope (German original, 1964) became the spark that ignited theological debate on hope.⁴³ In Catholic circles, Karl Rahner, Johann B. Metz, and E. Schillebeeckx also began to give their theologies a futuristic thrust.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Ernst Bloch, The Principle of Hope (Eng. trans. of original Vol. I [1954], Vol. II [1954], Vol. III [1959]), Boston: MIT, 1986).

⁴¹ See Elgin Frank Tupper, The Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1973), 20.

⁴² Pannenberg, Theology and the Kingdom of God, 52.

⁴³ Jürgen Moltmann, Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology, trans. James W. Leitch (New York: Harper & Row/ London: SCM, 1967).

⁴⁴ Karl Rahner, "A Fragmentary Aspect of a Theological Evaluation of the Concept of the Future," in Theological Investigations 10 (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1973), 235-241. *Idem*, "The Hermeneutics of Eschatological Assertions," in Theological Investigations 4 (London: Darton, Longman, & Todd, 1966), 323-346. *Idem*, "Immanent and Transcendent Consummation of the World," in Theological Investigations 10, *op. cit.*, 273-289. *Idem*, "On the Theology of Hope," in Theological Investigations 10, *op. cit.*, 242-259. *Idem*, On The Theology of Death (New York: Herder & Herder, 1961). *Idem*, "The Theological Problems Entitled in the Idea of the 'New Earth,'" in Theological Investigations 10, *op. cit.*, 260-272. Johann Baptist Metz, "Creative Hope," Cross Currents 17 (2, Spring, 1967): 171-179. *Idem*, "The Responsibility of Hope," Philosophy Today 10 (4, 1966): 280-288. *Idem*, Theology of the World, trans. William Glen-Doepel (New York: Herder & Herder, 1969). Edward Schillebeeckx, "The Interpretation of Eschatology," in Concilium 41 (New York: Paulist, 1969): 42-56.

Before long the work of Moltmann and Metz in Europe impacted the development of several experience-based theologies in Latin America. This was particularly true in the case of Gustavo Gutierrez, Juan Luis Segundo, and Leonardo Boff.⁴⁵ These liberation theologians assign biblical eschatology a key role.

B. Three Major Exponents

1. Wolfhart Pannenberg

Pannenberg belongs to "the theology of hope movement" through his advocacy of the primacy of the future and revelation as history.⁴⁶ His essay "Redemptive Event and History" (1959) distinguishes him as the prime mover of this approach. Concerning his insistence on a bold new "eschatological theology of history," he writes:

History is the most comprehensive horizon of Christian theology. All theological questions and answers are meaningful only within the framework of the history which God has with humanity, and through humanity with his whole creation — the history moving toward a future still hidden from the world but already revealed in Jesus Christ.⁴⁷

Hardly less significant is Pannenberg's essay on revelation as history, "Dogmatic Thesis on the Doctrine of Revelation," in Revelation As History.⁴⁸ Here the claim is made that the end of history has already occurred with the resurrection of Jesus:

⁴⁵Gustavo Gutierrez, A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1973). Juan Luis Segundo, The Liberation of Theology (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1976). Leonardo Boff, Jesus the Liberator. A Critical Christology for Our Time (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979).

⁴⁶ Olive regards Moltmann and Pannenberg as exponents of the same theological type. He finds several aspects of their thought terminologically the same: e.g., like Moltmann, Pannenberg acknowledges the "God of Hope" and assigns the future a key role in Christian theology. (Don H. Olive, Wolfhart Pannenberg [Waco, TX: Word Books, 1973], 80).

⁴⁷ Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Redemptive Event and History," Basic Questions in Theology, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970), 15.

⁴⁸ Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Dogmatic Thesis on the Doctrine of Revelation," in Revelation as History, in collaboration with Rolf Rendtorff, Trutz Rendtorff, and Ulrich Wilckens (New York: Macmillan, 1969 [German, 1961]), 123-181.

It is through the resurrection that the God of Israel has substantiated his deity in an ultimate way and is now manifest as the God of all men. It is only the eschatological character of the Christ event that establishes that there will be no further self-manifestation of God beyond this event. Thus, the end of the world will be on a cosmic scale what has already happened in Jesus Christ.⁴⁹

Pannenberg brings this same outlook into his exploration of Christology:

When we speak today of God's revelation in Jesus, and of his exaltation accomplished in the resurrection from the dead, our statements always contain a proleptic element. The fulfillment, which had begun for the disciples, which was almost in their grasp, in the appearance of the resurrected Lord, has become promise once again for us.⁵⁰

This does not mean that nothing new happens after Christ. Rather, history after Christ is essentially determined by the proclamation of the revelation in Christ.⁵¹ Pannenberg postulates an eschatological future as a preliminary framework for his theology of the kingdom of God.

a. Theology of the Kingdom of God

Pannenberg's new, influential theological thrust was given different designations: e.g., "theology of hope," "theology of history," "theology of the future," "theology of the kingdom of God," and "eschatological theology."⁵² In formulating his theology of history, Pannenberg confronts kerygmatic theology for neglecting the historical basis of the biblical witness.

Pannenberg credits Gerhard Von Rad's Old Testament theology "for a genuine corrective of the one-sidedness of kerygmatic theology." Von Rad's interpretation begins with the perception that Israel's faith is fundamentally established in a "theology of history."⁵³ Using "real history" as a primary premise Pannenberg came to appreciate the

⁴⁹ Ibid., 142.

⁵⁰ Wolfhart Pannenberg, Jesus—God and Man, (London: SCM, 1968), 108.

⁵¹ Pannenberg, Revelation as History, 144.

⁵² Elgin Frank Tupper, The Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg With Postscript by Wolfhart Pannenberg (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1973) 20, 40.

⁵³ Gerhard Von Rad, Old Testament Theology, Vol. I. (New York: Harper, 1962), 106.

promissory biblical traditions. This re-focus of the concepts of promise and fulfillment gave new prominence to apocalypticism, and placed history within a sharply focused eschatology.

According to Pannenberg, the biblical writings attest to a God of hope through the historical promises which Israel received: e. g., the promises of land, richer posterity, and the duration of the Davidic dynasty.⁵⁴ Beyond these preliminary objects, Israel's hope was directed to an overriding expectation that all history would find its consummation in justice, peace, and everlasting life. Had not Israel's experiences been shaped by these expectations, the rise of the hope of the kingdom would have been unimaginable.⁵⁵

For Pannenberg, the Israelitic hopes of the ultimate future are embedded in Jesus' message. Thus, the Old Testament disclosures of God now proved, in retrospect, to have been only portents and anticipations of the future of God revealed and made accessible in Jesus' public ministry.⁵⁶ Pannenberg tries to clarify the kind of future envisioned in Christian theology — a future that is determined by the central conception of the kingdom of God.

The kingdom of God, for Pannenberg, is the key to understanding Christian theology. It is the message of Jesus based on the proclamation of the approaching kingdom.⁵⁷ Thus, from Kant to Ritschl and the religious socialists, the kingdom of God was a goal to be achieved through human efforts. This assumption, however, was overturned by Johannes Weiss and Albert Schweitzer toward the end of the nineteenth century. They contended that, according to the New Testament and to Jesus' message, the kingdom of God will be established not by human efforts but by God alone.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Wolfhart Pannenberg, "The God of Hope," Basic Questions in Theology, Vol. 2 (London: SCM, 1970), 246.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 240-247.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 247.

⁵⁷ Pannenberg, Theology and the Kingdom of God, 51.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 52.

However, for Pannenberg, "God's rule is not simply in the future, leaving men to do nothing but wait quietly for its arrival."⁵⁹ Rather, in Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God, present and future are inextricably connected.⁶⁰ Futurity is fundamental for Jesus' message. In Pannenberg's view, Jesus emphasized the present dimension of the imminent future. For Pannenberg (unlike Cullmann), Jesus understood the kingdom of God as beginning here and now but only being fulfilled in the future.⁶¹ This situates Jesus' message in the Jewish hope for the future kingdom of God, but with a modification:

God's Kingdom does not lie in the distant future, but is imminent. Thus, the present is not independent from that future. Rather, the future stakes an imperative claim upon the present, alerting all men to the urgency and exclusiveness of seeking first the Kingdom of God.⁶²

b. God as "The Power of the Future"

The dialectic character of future and present in Pannenberg's theology undergoes a shift in his interpretation of God. As the first of the eschatological theologians to think of God as "the power of the future."⁶³ Pannenberg explains: "This priority of the eschatological future which determines our present demands a reversal also in our ontological conceptions."⁶⁴ Because the future of God determines the good (viz., God's rule), the full revelation of God's reality is likewise still future. This corresponds to the futurity of the good which, as long as not conclusively possessed, still continues as the object of our striving. Hence God, as identified with the coming of his imminent Kingdom, is the concrete embodiment of the good. This good has priority over all human

⁵⁹ Ibid., 53

⁶⁰ Idem.

⁶¹ Ibid., 54.

⁶² Idem.

⁶³ Tupper, The Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg, 285.

⁶⁴ Pannenberg, Theology and the Kingdom of God, 54.

striving for the good. In this sense the kingdom of God defines the ultimate horizon for all ethical statements.⁶⁵

The God whom Pannenberg postulates as the absolute future destroys neither the freedom of humanity nor the openness of history. This God is the source of freedom's fulfillment, the end who brings history to perfection. The God of this futurity makes the future prior to the past and the present. In fact, that futurity does more than overarch past and present, it encompasses past, present, and the future. "The striving for God as the ultimate root beyond the world is turned into concern for the world."⁶⁶

Pannenberg thus links God's intention to transform the world in and through his rule of the world. The primary corollary of such an ethic is the Christian idea of love which affirms the present world while aiming at its transformation. The individual thus moves beyond the bounds of personal happiness in the present, realizing self-fulfillment as interdependent with the fulfilling of the whole of creation. For Pannenberg, this is tantamount to a "conversion to the world."⁶⁷

Understandably, Pannenberg was challenged on the grounds that prioritizing the eschatological future devalues the present. In response he wrote:

I would say that all my discussion of past and future is meant to rehumanize the present.... The depths of the present are opened up only in view of future possibilities, that is, through an awareness of the novelty that the future may bring.... There is a pressure of the future on the present.⁶⁸

In his article "The God of Hope" Pannenberg argues that to focus upon the power of the future over the present yields a new concept of creation, one oriented not towards a primeval event but toward the eschatological future. He eschatologizes the idea of a

⁶⁵ ibid., 111.

⁶⁶ Idem.

⁶⁷ Ted Peters, "Pannenberg's Eschatological Ethics," in The Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Philip Clayton (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988), 242.

⁶⁸ "A Theological Conversation with Wolfhart Pannenberg," in Dialogue 11 (1972): 288.

Creator-God in favor of the kingdom as the still unrealized consummation.⁶⁹ God thereby creates from the future. This redefines creation: the concept of creation is eschatologically reversed as soon as the God of the coming kingdom is conceptualized (as happened in Jesus' message) as the one whose future lordship sovereignly overarches the present world. In Jesus' message, creation and the eschatological future belong together most intimately.⁷⁰

For Pannenberg, therefore, the present becomes an effect of the future. To achieve a fuller understanding of the kingdom of God, Pannenberg offers his own concept of God. In essence, God's being is his rule; God's being and existence cannot be conceived apart from his rule.⁷¹ Because Jesus proclaims that God's rule as a reality belongs to the future, it must be stated that in some restricted but important sense, God does not yet exist. Therefore, since God's being is still in process of coming-to-be, God should not be understood as an objectified being presently existing in its fullness.

This same article notes that the idea of God as a particular being is today rejected on theological grounds because it reduces God to a finite, manipulatable object among others.⁷² Pannenberg stresses the biblical idea of almighty God as the all-determining being and constructs an ecclesiology in light of the coming kingdom of God. The basic point of reference for understanding the church, therefore, must be the kingdom of God.⁷³ Moreover, the kingdom of God is the future of the whole world.⁷⁴ Such a construal, with its inseparable relationship between Church and world in light of the coming kingdom, provides a theological understanding of the Church congruent with the early Christian

⁶⁹ Pannenberg, "The God of Hope," 243.

⁷⁰ Idem.

⁷¹ Pannenberg, Theology and the Kingdom of God, 55.

⁷² Pannenberg, "The God of Hope," 235.

⁷³ Pannberg, Theology and the Kingdom of God, 73.

⁷⁴ Idem.

view of the assembly of faith as an eschatological community, a community of exalted hope. As an anticipation of the new humanity under the rule of God and his Spirit, the Church, both in a proleptic and present sense, understood itself as the new people of God and the New Israel.⁷⁵ Only by taking these eschatological perceptions seriously can one understand the Church's nature and call in relation to the kingdom of God, which is the future of the entire world.

The Church keeps faith with its call only by anticipating and representing the destiny of all humankind, the goal of history.⁷⁶ The Church is therefore an eschatological community insofar as it pioneers the future of all humanity.⁷⁷ Because the Church is to be seen and understood in relation to the imminent kingdom of God, it is not primarily an association of individuals of common religious interests and convictions.

Pannenberg situates communion with Christ in one's dedication to the kingdom of God as the future of the world. Here he differentiates the kingdom of God from the Church. It is in fact quite possible to conceive of the kingdom of God without any Church at all.⁷⁸ Through the course of Christian history, the Church has sometimes been mistaken for or identified as the kingdom. At other times the Church has been understood as the present form of the kingdom, in contradistinction to the kingdom's future fulfillment. Pannenberg sees the second confusion as bad as the first.⁷⁹ In the final analysis, Pannenberg has to develop a political theology, though not as Moltmann and Metz do. For Pannenberg, a Christian who places full confidence in the coming kingdom of God does so only when private life is integrated with political thought and action. By way of a typical quote:

⁷⁵ Ibid., 74

⁷⁶ Idem.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 75.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 76.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 76-77.

It has been the distinctive message of Jesus that the coming kingdom of God as something future is already determining the present. In the light of the originally political nature of the hope for the kingdom, this must hold true also for political life, and not only for the private life of Christians. And in political life the supreme concern will be the quest for a universal order of peace and justice⁸⁰

Clearly, Wolfhart Pannenberg is a forthright twentieth century trailblazer of the God-talk called "theology of hope."

c. Summary

Although the phrase "Theology of Hope" is usually identified with Reformed theologian Jürgen Moltmann, Lutheran Wolfhart Pannenberg (and Roman Catholic Johann B. Metz) also championed a comparable pattern of thought during the 1960s.⁸¹

The starting point of a theological vision, Pannenberg believes, should be the kingdom of God as the eschatological future brought about by God. Instead of viewing the present as determining the future, Pannenberg views the present as an effect of the future. The future, not the present or even the past, is the source and power of being.

Pannenberg asserts that God is the power of the future. As such, all historical reality is — or perhaps better, will be — determined by the God of the future. Thus, God's eschatological future is the source and destiny of all that is.

⁸⁰ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Ethics* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981), 135. Don H. Olive concludes that Pannenberg's thought involves a political theology (*Wolfhart Pannenberg*, 75 – 76). And so too does Ted Peters: "Pannenberg's Eschatological Ethics," in *The Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg*, 264 – 265. According to Peters, Pannenberg's achievement has been to structure a universal ethic upon the promised eschatological act of God whereby history will be consummated and reality will attain its final quiddity.

However, according to Peters, although the revolution and liberation trajectory of the 1960s continued into the next decade for Pannenberg's disciples, it did not for Pannenberg himself. Pannenberg turned increasingly toward ecumenical matters and away from political theology because he became disenchanted with the student revolution of 1968 and its ideological aftermath. Pannenberg and colleagues such as Braaten became increasingly critical of liberation theology, suggesting that this school prematurely makes eschatology immanent so that the transcendent kingdom of God is collapsed into a political program. Ted Peters, "Wolfhart Pannenberg," in *A New Handbook of Christian Theologians* (ed. by Donald W. Musser and Joseph L. Price, Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1996), 367-368.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 367.

2. Jürgen Moltmann

Arguably the most influential of the three theologians of hope is Jürgen Moltmann. Though highly original in thought, he shows the influence of such diverse thinkers as Luther, Hegel, Barth, and Bloch. Our summary here, by way of preliminary to our study of Merton, will highlight only two key features of Moltmann's theology of hope. The first: Christian eschatology in relation to hope, the role of God's promise, and the promise linked to mission. The second: Moltmann's hope, as presented in his earlier writings and in his later works.

a. Eschatology and Hope

To articulate his notion of Christian hope, Moltmann begins with a traditional understanding of eschatology as the doctrine of the last things or of the end. Comprehensively, this includes these components: the return of Christ in universal glory, the judgment of the world, the consummation of the kingdom, the general resurrection of the dead, and the new creation of all things. Because eschatology is future-oriented, these final events will break into this world from beyond history, giving closure to history, in which all things now live and move.⁸²

Moltmann sets aside this static concept of eschatology for a more fully biblical and Christian hope. He argues for interchangeable relationship between eschatology and hope in his book, Theology of Hope: The Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology. He insists "from first to last, and not merely in the epilogue, Christianity is eschatology, is hope, forward looking and forward moving, and therefore also revolutionizing and transforming the present."⁸³ Not only, then, does Christian eschatology relate to the present, it is at once the proclamation of a present reality and of the future reality which starts from a definite moment in history, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

⁸² Moltmann, Theology of Hope, 15.

⁸³ Ibid., 16.

i. God's Promise as the Ground of Eschatology

Moltmann situates eschatology in the promises of God. The radical truth of Old Testament faith resides in promise. The best example of this is found in the nomadic religion of the Exodus. Citing Maag, Moltmann argues: "Nomadic religion is a religion of promise. The nomad does not live within the cycle of seed-time and harvest, but in the world of migration."⁸⁴ Such a religion has "vectorial kinetic elements."⁸⁵ That is, it has both direction for the future and a provisional regard for the present; as a movement, it does not remain static. The Old Testament experience means that history is viewed in the sphere of God's promise. Promise is "a declaration which announces the coming of reality not yet existing."⁸⁶

Moltmann spells out this promise of God in six affirmations. (1) This promise binds humanity to the future and conveys a sense of history. (2) The history thus launched and determined by promise does not consist in cyclic recurrence, but rather pursues a definite movement towards the promise and the as yet outstanding fulfillment. History is not evolution or progress or an advance that separates time from yesterday and tomorrow. Rather, the word of promise intersects events and divides reality into dual facets, one which is passing and can be left behind, another which must be expected and sought.⁸⁷ (3) The word of promise overarches the present reality because the present does not measure up to the standard of the future promise. The anticipation of a fuller and greater reality creates an opportunity to develop a political theology. (4) The word of promise creates an interval of tension between the proclamation and the fulfillment of the promise. This affords humanity a peculiar area of freedom to obey or disobey.⁸⁸ (5) The

⁸⁴ Ibid., 96.

⁸⁵ Idem.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 103.

⁸⁷ Idem.

⁸⁸ Moltmann, Theology of Hope, 10.

fulfillment of the promise does not consist in making calculations for the future; rather it carries an element of newness and surprise over against the original promise, because God is the subject of its fulfillment.⁸⁹ (6) The peculiar character of the Old Testament promise is not liquidated by Israel's history, because God's promise rises above any fulfillment that can be experienced here and now. In other words, the "not yet" of expectation surpasses every fulfillment which already takes place. The schema of promise and fulfillment is to be set aside in favor of the inexhaustibility of the God of promise.⁹⁰

For Moltmann, the promise becomes inclusive and universal in Jesus Christ.⁹¹ He never tires of drawing a fundamental distinction between the validation of the promise and its ultimate fulfillment. Jesus' life, death, and resurrection was God's once-and-for-all validation of the promise; God's fulfillment is yet to come.⁹² Such an understanding of promise has a unique epistemological status, for it stands between knowing and not knowing, between necessity and possibility, between what is not yet and that which already is.⁹³

The knowledge of the future constructed on this promise constitutes hope. Being provisional, fragmentary, and open, it strains beyond itself. For Moltmann then "it knows the future in striving to bring out the tendencies and latencies of the Christ event of the crucifixion and resurrection, and in seeking to estimate the possibilities opened up by this event."⁹⁴ At this point Moltmann draws upon Bloch's utopian epistemology, where

⁸⁹ Idem.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 106.

⁹¹ Ibid., 147.

⁹² Idem.

⁹³ Ibid., 203.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

knowledge is the anticipation of the not-yet-realized.⁹⁵ In God's promise the hidden future already announces itself and impacts the present through the hope it awakens. The affirmations which hope makes do not spring from experience but from the condition of the possibility which exists, and the reality which is forthcoming.

Just as the promises are not descriptive words for existing reality, but dynamic words about acts of faithfulness to be awaited from God, so the knowledge of God cannot consist in a resume of the language of completed facts. [Therefore] promise proves its truth in the specific *inadaequatio intellectus et rei* in which it places the hearer.... It transcends reality not by rising to an unreal realm of dreams but by pressing forward to the future of a new reality.⁹⁶

Such is the context in which Moltmann develops his Christology. Traditional theology concerning Christology has described the crucifixion and resurrection as the final revelation of God. For Moltmann, however, these events only point to a future reality which is yet to come. Jesus, on the cross as well as in the resurrection, has anticipated the final eschaton. As a result, the knowledge of Christ afforded by the promise is prospective and anticipatory and beyond itself.⁹⁷ The reality of the resurrection is the means by which one recognizes God's promise for the future. The resurrection of Jesus as a prolepsis of the future reign of God is basic for Moltmann.

In his analysis of Moltmann's Theology of Hope, Richard Bauckham argues that "what makes Christian faith eschatological, for Moltmann, and what determines the nature of the Christian eschatological hope is the raising of the crucified Jesus from death by God."⁹⁸ Moltmann himself asserts that "Christianity stands or falls with the reality of the raising of Jesus from the dead by God."⁹⁹ Bauckham presents two fundamental concepts regarding the meaning of the resurrection in Theology of Hope. The first is the

⁹⁵ Ibid., 196-197, 214.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 118-119.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 203.

⁹⁸ Richard Bauckham, The Theology of Jürgen Moltmann, T & T Clark: Edinburgh, 1995, 32.

⁹⁹ Theology of Hope, 32.

identity of Jesus in the total contradiction of the cross and the resurrection as they represent total opposites. The absolute contradiction of the cross and the resurrection and the identity of Jesus crucified and risen are both important for the nature of Moltmann's eschatology. For Moltmann, then, the eschatological kingdom is no mere fulfillment of the immanent possibilities of the present. Rather it represents a radically new future. The second fundamental concept is that this divine act of raising the dead Jesus to new life is an event — the definitive event — of eschatological promise.¹⁰⁰

ii. Promise of the Future Linked with Mission

Having grounded eschatology in the promise of God, already visible proleptically in Jesus' resurrection, Moltmann proceeds to link this promise with mission. To establish and sustain mission, the resurrection creates a unique awareness of history, moving humanity to search for ways to transform the world in order to make it correspond to God's coming kingdom. In this different, transforming understanding of faith, Moltmann consciously recalls both Bloch's and Marx's desire to see philosophy not only as interpreting the world but also changing it. Hence Moltmann proposes that the knowledge of Christ needs a praxis component as well as an ethic of imagination and transformation. At its core, Christianity is inseparable from a visionary drive. The sole constant in history is witness, which is the mediation between past history and future history in the process of becoming. Here a hermeneutic principle comes to light and is found to be based in praxis. Easter, in establishing the vision of the believer, supplies and strengthens the individual's eschatological hope. This hope results in (a) the proclamation of the Gospel to the poor, (b) the founding of the Christian *ecclesia*, and (c) the willingness to suffer in the everyday of the present world. Eschatology does not want merely to interpret the world religiously but to transform it through the creative act of the obedience of faith.¹⁰¹ Christians are construction workers, not just interpreters of the

¹⁰⁰ Richard Bauckham, The Theology of Jürgen Moltmann, 32-39.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 20.

future.

b. Descriptions of Hope

For Moltmann, then, not only is Christianity equated with hope, it also finds the ground for hope in the promise of God.¹⁰² Prompted by faith in God's promise, hope becomes a catalyst in our thinking, a driving force, indeed the source of its restlessness and torment. As such, it causes all our thinking in history to be eschatologically oriented and provisional.¹⁰³

Moltmann however does not believe that Christian eschatology speaks of the future as such. Rather, it takes its starting point from a definite reality in history and announces the future possibilities and power of that reality. More specifically, Christian eschatology speaks of Jesus Christ and his future.¹⁰⁴ Thus, hope anticipates a coming reality, and guides existing reality toward the promised and hoped-for transformation of the present. As a result, hope should be understood as the foundation and mainspring of theological thinking.¹⁰⁵ It is the mobilizing and sustaining force of faith's understanding.¹⁰⁶ This hope provides the inexhaustible resources for the creative, inventive imagination of life. It constantly provokes anticipatory thinking to give shape to newly dawning possibilities in light of the promised future.¹⁰⁷ Because theological concepts do not impose a fixed form to reality, they are expanded by hope and anticipate future being by involvement in a process of movement and change.¹⁰⁸ Hope takes seriously the possibilities which frame and constitute reality, and thereby not taking

¹⁰² ibid., 95-138.

¹⁰³ ibid., 33

¹⁰⁴ ibid., 17.

¹⁰⁵ ibid., 19.

¹⁰⁶ ibid., 33.

¹⁰⁷ ibid., 34-35.

¹⁰⁸ ibid., 36.

things as they appear, it guides them through the possibilities of change.¹⁰⁹ Moltmann's definition of Christianity as "eschatology, hope, forward-looking and revolutionizing and transforming the present"¹¹⁰ emanates from his basic view of hope. As a result,

the important thing in our present context is that on the basis of a theological view of the expectation of the creature and its anticipation he [Paul] demands a new kind of thinking about the world, an expectation-thinking that corresponds to the Christian hope. Hence in the light of the prospects in the raising of Christ, theology will have to attain to its own new way of reflecting on the history of men and things.¹¹¹

Hope insures that our theological concepts do not become judgments which shackle reality to what it is, but rather remain anticipations which show reality its prospects and future possibilities. In other words, rather than giving a fixed form to reality, theological concepts are expanded by hope and in turn anticipate future being.

Moltmann further distinguishes between genuine Christian hope and limited (or minor) hopes. Christian hope, in response to the promise of God, is eschatologically oriented. In contrast, limited hopes are directed towards attainable goals and visible changes in human life. Christian hope is directed toward a *novum ultimum*, toward a new Christ. Consequently, Moltmann insists that Christian hope can and must take the limited hopes of a renewed life, "stimulating them, revitalizing them, and giving them direction."¹¹²

c. Dialectical Nature of Hope between Future and Present Reality

When first published, Moltmann's Theology of Hope (1964) aroused great enthusiasm. It soon provoked a felt need for some specific political action, lacking which it gave rise to disappointment, debilitation, and diffusion. By 1968 Moltmann was engaged in writing Ethics of Hope. He acknowledged: "It failed because I did not know

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 16.

¹¹⁰ Idem.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 35.

¹¹² Ibid., 33-34.

whether reforms or revolution would improve circumstances."¹¹³ Even later he felt challenged by the problem and responded in a lecture on "Hope and the Apathetic Person."¹¹⁴ Ten years after his great work had appeared, the opponent was not despair. but frustration, indifference, and apathy among those who took renewal as their *raison d'être*. The lecture in question analyzes the origins of apathy. A hope which produces apathy is a hope that lacks authentic origins. It results from overcommitment to activity, success, progress, and development — in a word, it flaunts an over-confidence in reform programs of one sort or another.¹¹⁵

Moltmann is critical of the God who stands forth as the ideal of humankind's success. He proposes an alternative view of the deity and life¹¹⁶ — a view, in fact, that highlights the "weakness of God," not unlike Dietrich Bonhoeffer's God who has been "edged out of the world and onto the cross." Moltmann's God is one who suffers — the crucified God who contradicts the God of success, the idol worshippers, and the "officially optimistic society."¹¹⁷

In effect, then, Moltmann proffers no theology of hope which is not in fact a theology of the cross, and accordingly a theology of suffering and the crucifixion. This same theme is more fully addressed in his book The Crucified God.¹¹⁸ The introduction "In Explanation of the Theme" states that the *theologia crucis* does not part company with his previous theology of hope, but reworks the same theme, from the other side.

¹¹³ Moltmann, ed., How I Have Changed, 17.

¹¹⁴ Jürgen Moltmann, "Hope and the Apathetic Person" [a lecture given at the Center for Ethics and Social Policy] (Berkeley, CA: Graduate Theological Union, 1974).

¹¹⁵ Walter H. Capps, Hope Against Hope, Moltmann to Merton in One Theological Decade (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 114.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 135.

¹¹⁷ Moltmann, "Hope and the Apathetic Person," as quoted by Walter Capps, Hope Against Hope, 136.

¹¹⁸ The Crucified God. The Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology, trans. R. A. Wilson and John Bowden (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).

I may be asked why I have turned from 'theology of hope' to the theology of the Cross.... [T]his is not a step back from the trumpets of Easter to the lamentations of Good Friday. As I intend to show, the theology of the Cross is none other than the reverse side of the Christian theology of hope, if the starting point of the latter lies in the resurrection of the *crucified* Christ. As I said in Theology of Hope, that theology was itself worked out as an *eschatologia crucis*. This book, then, cannot be regarded as a step back. *Theology of Hope* began with the *resurrection* of the crucified Christ, and I am now turning to look at the *cross* of the risen Christ. I was concerned then with the remembrance of Christ in the form of the *hope* of his future, and now I am concerned with hope in the form of the *remembrance* of his death. The dominant theme then was that of *anticipations* of the future of God in the form of promises and hopes; here it is the understanding of the *incarnation* of that future, by way of the sufferings of Christ, in the world's sufferings.¹¹⁹

Moltmann faithfully maintains a common denominator of hope for his exposition of the resurrection and crucifixion. But he now finds himself

[m]oving away from Ernst Bloch's philosophy of hope, [and] I now turn to the questions of "negative dialectic" and the 'critical theory' of T. W. Adorno and M. Horkheimer, together with the experiences and insights of early dialectical theology and existentialist philosophy. Unless it apprehends the pain of the negative, Christian hope cannot be realistic and liberating. In no sense does this theology of the Cross 'go back step by step': it is intended to make the theology of hope more concrete, and to add the necessary power of resistance to the power of its visions to inspire to action.¹²⁰

This focus on the *theologia crucis* makes crucifixion the basis of hope. Moltmann's outline of apathetic existence being transformed into the existence of pathos distinguishes two states: "in the sphere of the apathetic God, man becomes a *homo apatheticus*. In the situation of the *pathos* of God, he becomes a *homo sympatheticus*."¹²¹ This relation of *pathos and sympathia* calls Moltmann back to a discussion of concrete political action. A comparison of The Theology of Hope with The Crucified God shows that the later work is not so much a corrective as an enriching extrapolation. The difference is that hope no longer stands alone but is now integrated into a larger systematic constellation.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 4-5.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 5.

¹²¹ Ibid., 272.

The linking term, *pathos*, highlights a deeper sensitivity whereby the crucifixion itself leads to hope. *Pathos* also functions as a conceptual bridge, an instrument of integration which keeps the relation between past, present, and future together. The earlier work had hope for its axis rather than *pathos*, and the future rather than present. Moltmann's overriding principle of hope is unmistakably present and at work in The Crucified God.

In fact, Moltmann introduces this wider context into his later works. In 1975 he published The Church in the Power of the Spirit.¹²² Its thesis is that the Church "will have a future only if it anticipates the kingdom of God in Jesus' name and is prepared to be converted to his future, freeing itself from imprisonment in its past."¹²³ Because of its foundation in Christ and its existence for the future of the kingdom of God, the Church is truly itself in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.¹²⁴ By this time Moltmann has effectively associated hope with the power of life in the Holy Spirit within the present order of things. The Holy Spirit has become the living energy of life.

The doctrine of the Holy Spirit is further developed as a trinitarian pneumatology in The Trinity and the Kingdom of God. This doctrine of the Holy Spirit is no less effectively developed in God in Creation.¹²⁵ Moltmann explores the concept of *shekinah*, a rabbinical crystallization of the dwelling of God among the people of the covenant.

The Way of Jesus Christ¹²⁶ expounds the eschatological resurrection of Christ, from the standpoint of a process through which eschatological fulfillment is achieved. Resurrection is not the end, but a movement toward the parousia. Moltmann also tries his

¹²² Jürgen Moltmann, The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology (London: SCM, 1977).

¹²³ *Idem*, "Preface to the Paperback Edition," in The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), xiv.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, xviii.

¹²⁵ Jürgen Moltmann, God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation (London: SCM, 1985).

¹²⁶ Jürgen Moltmann, The Way of Jesus Christ (London: SCM, 1990).

hand at an ecological Christology.

The Spirit of Life,¹²⁷ a major recent work, articulates a further understanding of pneumatology which has been in gestation throughout his career. Obviously, Moltmann has tempered his overemphasis on future-oriented reality. His theology remains thoroughly eschatological, evidenced again in his recent The Coming of God,¹²⁸ but it has long been balanced with a strong theology of immanence.

d. Summary

Moltmann constructs his theology of hope by way of radical emphasis on and redefinition of eschatology. In support of this understanding is the discovery of a sense of history in eschatology. To present a definite future reality, Moltmann chooses the paradigm of promise and fulfillment. God's promise is the foundation of eschatology. The crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ are the validation of God's promise, not the fulfillment. In the end, Moltmann connects this promise of the future with the Christian mission and an incisive political theology. This approach not only sets him apart from Pannenberg, but also allows him to provide a stimulus for the development of Liberation Theology. In response to widespread criticism that his theology was too idealistic and future-oriented, Moltmann integrated the crucifixion into his theology of hope, but also began to emphasize the role of the Holy Spirit. These developments offset his earlier futuristic emphases with an explicit theology of God's present saving activity in the affairs of the world.

3. Johann Metz

The other major figure associated with a "theology of hope" is the Roman Catholic theologian Johann B. Metz. Metz's theology of the world presents four general emphases: secularity, future orientation, de-privatization of faith, and overcoming the

¹²⁷ Jürgen Moltmann, The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation (London: SCM, 1992).

¹²⁸ Jürgen Moltmann, The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology. Trans. by Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996).

split between theory and practice in the life of the church.¹²⁹ His overall contribution is better approached from three specific perspectives: (a) his theology of the world; (b) his linkage of eschatology and the theology of the world; and (c) his eschatological proviso. The task before us here is a glimpse — not a thorough investigation — into Metz's theology of hope, as a lead-in into our study of Merton.

a. Metz's Theology of the World

Metz begins his analysis of the world of faith by examining the theological basis of secularization.

The secularity of the world, as it has emerged in the modern process of secularization as we see it today in a globally heightened form, has fundamentally, though not in its individual historical forms, arisen not against Christianity but through it. It is originally a Christian event and hence testifies in our world situation to the power of the "hour of Christ" at work within history.¹³⁰

Universal secularity is characteristic of the contemporary world. While many Christians assume that the secularity of the world is essentially at odds with the Christian understanding of the world and must therefore be countered by a number of Christian strategies,¹³¹ Metz argues that secularization is a product of the Christian faith.¹³² Because God created the world, blessed and entrusted it to human beings, the Christian response cannot be to escape from the world. Such a dialectic moves Metz to explore the interconnectedness of history and secularization in the Christian logos: theology must search for and witness to the constant union between salvation and world history.

Metz's understanding of church and world prompts him to indict the modern transcendental, personalistic and existential theologies. These theologies, he contends, have conflated the role of the human person in contrast to the objectivity of scholastic

¹²⁹ Roger Dick Johns, Man in the World: The Political Theology of Johannes Baptist Metz (Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1976), vi.

¹³⁰ Johann B. Metz, Theology of the World (New York: Herder & Herder, 1969), 20.

¹³¹ Ibid., 15.

¹³² Ibid., 62, 78, 133.

theology, which brought Christian faith into a proper relationship with human existence and subjectivity. Those anthropological theologies encounter two dangers. They restrict faith by emphasizing the present moment of the believer's personal decision, thereby forfeiting sight of the future.¹³³ They become so privatized that they undercut the social and political dimension of the individual's faith as hope and theology as eschatology.¹³⁴

In his attempt to define the world, Metz formulates two overriding theses. The first thesis is: "the modern man's understanding of the world is fundamentally oriented toward the future. His mentality is therefore not primarily contemplative but operative."¹³⁵ This first thesis encompasses five assertions.

(1) The modern era's emphasis on the new gives undue preeminence to the social, political, and technical revolutions of our time. The modern mentality is so taken up by the future that it acknowledges a purely historical relationship to the past and an existential relationship to the future.¹³⁶

(2) The contemporary experience of the world is not an imposed fate or a sovereign sacred reality, but a quarry which supplies the raw materials for building the new world.¹³⁷ Because present-day humanity can change, dominate, and secularize the world through technology, Metz views humankind and the world in a subject/object relationship.

(3) Concerning the relationship that should prevail between theology and the new

¹³³ Metz concurs with Pannenberg and Moltmann that Barth and Bultmann exclude or at least de-emphasize the future as a feature in their theologies. Metz argues that "contemporary man's orientation to the future and his understanding of the world as history are themselves grounded in the biblical faith in God's promises." (Johann B. Metz, "Creative Hope," Cross Currents [Spring, 1967] 173.) He presents the world as history, history as final history, faith as hope, and theology as eschatology. (Metz, Theology of the World, 82. See also Idem, "The Church and the World," in The World in History: The St. Xavier Symposium, ed. T. Patrick Burke, Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward, 1966, 70.)

¹³⁴ Metz, Theology of the World 82.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 83.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 83-84.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 84.

world situation, "dialectical theology" is to be faulted for emphasizing its radical difference from this world. Such a paradoxical understanding of Christian faith overemphasizes the total transcendence and otherness of God and the Christian faith. How then can the gospel of the totally other God flow into a social gospel? A consideration of the modern world in light of this question discloses that the shining glow of the "world above" and the "world beyond" has dimmed.¹³⁸

(4) The humanistic ideology of today is oriented toward the future, by virtue of its inheritance of the Marxist critique. This ideology reduces belief in a transcendent God to sheer mental speculation, which needs to give way to an active orientation toward the future.¹³⁹

(5) Faced by this situation, Christian faith can find an effective response on only one condition — if eschatology is rediscovered and awareness of the future is reintegrated into theology.¹⁴⁰

The second thesis is that the orientation of the modern era to the future, together with the concomitant understanding of the world as history, stems from the biblical belief in the promises of God. Biblical faith calls for theology to be eschatology.¹⁴¹ To support his contention Metz looks to recent exegesis which views the words of Old Testament revelation as words of promise. This dominant proclamation and word of promise introduce a future orientation, which embodies the essential Hebrew thought and experience in contrast to the Greek.¹⁴² Metz summarizes the difference between the two outlooks thus:

¹³⁸ ibid., 85 – 86.

¹³⁹ ibid., 86.

¹⁴⁰ idem.

¹⁴¹ idem.

¹⁴² ibid., 87-88. See further Thorlief Boman, Hebrew Thought Compared With Greek. Trans. Jules L. Moreau (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960).

Central passages of the Old Testament reveal this touching sense of the new, of the "not-yet" — again in contrast to the Greeks for whom the not-yet is the impossible, since there is for them "nothing new under the sun": all that is to come is simply a variation on what has been, a renewal and consolidation of memories. History is for the Greeks only the indifferent return of the same thing within the fixed frame of the cosmos. The essence of history is cyclic, and history can be said in a sense to devour again and again its own children: nothing really new happens and the essence of history is basically nihilistic. I stress this contrast between biblical and Greek ways of thinking, so as to bring out sharply the specific quality of the biblical understanding of the world and existence: as an historical process directed to God's promise, for whose fulfillment those who look forward to it in hope are responsible.¹⁴³

Drawing upon the work of Gerhard Von Rad and Martin Buber, Metz describes God as the power of the future rather than a being who exists beyond all history and experience. God is not above us but before us. The divine transcendence reveals itself as our absolute future, a future grounded in itself and self-possessed.

The New Testament message, Metz extrapolates, does not annul faith's orientation toward the future or hope in the future as the essential structure of faith. Rather, the New Testament heightens this orientation of the Christ-event towards the not yet realized future. The New Testament is centered on hope — a creative expectancy — as the very essence of Christian existence.

b. Eschatology and the Theology of the World

Metz constructs his theology as eschatology, a foundational discipline which shapes every theological statement, especially those concerning the world. He complains that eschatology's traditional place has been shunted from the center of theology to the treatise "on the last things."¹⁴⁴ Such an eschatology touches base with the theology of the world. While he acknowledges the importance of existential and personalistic theology, Metz contends that it becomes easily disengaged from the world and history. This compromises eschatology's significance in the overall theological enterprise. Only within the eschatological framework of hope does the world appear as history. In such a

¹⁴³ Metz, "Creative Hope," 173.

¹⁴⁴ Metz, Theology of the World, 90.

configuration, the centrality of human freedom accommodates a legitimate Christian anthropocentrism. Hence, the universal existential-anthropological outlook in Christian theology hinges on an eschatological viewpoint. Only by such an eschatological reorientation of hope does the world appear as a full-scale reality and its progress belong to the free action of humanity. In addition, Metz situates christology and ecclesiology within this framework of eschatology, to safeguard them from being attenuated to mere existential-anthropological viewpoints.¹⁴⁵

When secularization is premised on eschatological hope the world does not appear in a static and predetermined harmony, but as an emerging reality which is open to the future through the free action of humanity. "This universal alteration and innovation of the world through the offensive of human freedom" is, for Metz, secularization.¹⁴⁶ As a corollary, "the relationship between the Christian faith and the world should be characterized from a theological viewpoint as a creative and militant eschatology."¹⁴⁷

To support such a militant eschatology, Metz appeals to Thomas Aquinas. In contemplating the human orientation toward the future and the promise of God, Aquinas draws no distinction between natural and supernatural, or between church and world. Both dimensions shape our relationship to the future. For Metz, then, there is only one last end for humanity, namely, the future promised by God.

Metz moves on to explore the concept of hope. Since Christian hope is oriented toward the future, it cannot fulfill itself by disregarding the world and its development.¹⁴⁸ To position this Christian hope in relation to the world and its future, Metz reexamines biblical hope.

Rom 12:2 comes to mind: rightly understood, this text challenges conformity to

¹⁴⁵ Idem.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 91.

¹⁴⁷ Idem.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 91-92.

the world, but not Christian solidarity with the world. Metz proposes a hopeful faith not primarily as doctrine, but as an initiative for orienting the world toward the kingdom of God. Such an eschatological construal prompts him to reconsider the relationship between church and world. The church not only is of the world — it is in fact the world.¹⁴⁹ The decisive relationship between the church and the world is not spatial but temporal. The church is at once the eschatological community and the exodus community. The goal is not the object of her own striving, but the kingdom of God, in which the church places its hope as the future of the world. Metz finds corroboration in Karl Rahner: "The church always lives in a certain sense from the proclamation of her provisional character and from her historically progressive surrender to the coming Kingdom of God."¹⁵⁰

How then does the Church realize its mission to work for the future of the world? Not by pure contemplation, Metz answers, but by a creative and militant eschatology.¹⁵¹ Our eschatological expectation is not directed to a ready-made city of God because the city of God is, for Metz, now coming into existence. To bring this future into being, the Christian is not just an interpreter of this future, but a "co-worker" engaged in the construction of the promised universal era of peace and justice.

Here once more Metz turns to Christian eschatology. He rejects the eschatology of the existential theologians which merely "makes present" eternity's actual moment or personal decision.¹⁵² For Metz, Christian eschatology, more than mere passive waiting, has productive and aggressive dimensions. Metz appeals to Moltmann: "The hope of the Gospel has a polemical and a liberating relation to present and practical life and to the

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 92–93.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 94.

¹⁵¹ *Idem.*

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 95.

(social) conditions in which man leads his life."¹⁵³

Metz at this point broadens his theology of the world, in response to this creative-militant eschatology. He realizes that this type of eschatology cannot be developed according to the categories of the old theological cosmology. Nor can it adopt the categories of transcendental, personal, and existential theology, since they are too individualistic and isolated. Metz identifies the theology of the world as a theology of the emerging political and social order, which he calls political theology.¹⁵⁴ This political theology also affords a comprehensive understanding of salvation. At issue is not just personal salvation but a call to achieve an eschatological order of justice, the humanizing of humanity and the establishing of a universal peace.

To explain the militant nature of Christian hope, Metz denies that Christian hope is equivalent to human progress, for Christian hope is a hope against every hope which we place in the manufactured idols of our human society. Metz uses a series of negative clarifications to define his understanding of Christian hope. First off, because humanity cannot unlock the future, Christian hope is not an attempt on the part of reason to break through into the future and thus strip it of its mystery. One who hopes is not staking a claim to know more about the future than others, so as to make Christian eschatology an ideology of the future. What differentiates Christian eschatology from the ideas about the future both in East and West is not that it knows more but rather that it knows less about the hoped-for future of humankind, and that it stands by the poverty of this knowledge.¹⁵⁵

Thus, "Christian eschatology is not an omniscient ideology about the future, but a theological negative of the future...."¹⁵⁶ Moreover, Christian hope is aware of its own fatal risks, since to follow Jesus includes death. Christian hope, therefore, not only

¹⁵³ Idem.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 95-96.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 178.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 96-97. See also Metz, "Creative Hope," 178.

fulfills itself through love for the other, but also through “creative imitation of this being for others” stands “at the service of creative responsibility for the world.”¹⁵⁷

c. Eschatological Proviso

“Eschatological proviso” is Metz’s code-word for the meaning and goal of the history in which God appears as subject and meaning.¹⁵⁸ Almost from the outset of his theological career, Metz had made the future a persistent concern. His summary recollection is incisive:

The personal background that I have indicated here still stamps my theological work. For example, the category of danger still has a central role in it; I do not want to abandon the apocalyptic metaphors of the history of faith; I mistrust an ideology which has been smoothed over in an idealistic way. And above all, the whole of my theological work has been governed by a special sensitivity to theodicy, the question of God in the face of the history of the suffering of the world.¹⁵⁹

Like Moltmann, Metz feels that the revelatory word of the biblical proclamation is not primarily one of personal address or of God's self-communication, but rather is a word of promise (Verheissungswort) which announces the future.¹⁶⁰ It is also a promissory declaration of the ending of present suffering, injustice, and inhumanity. “In the biblical understanding,” Metz explains, “the world appears as a historical world coming into existence according to God's promises. Those who hope stand responsible for this world process.”¹⁶¹ This biblical understanding allows the world to assume its proper historical significance “in an eschatological perspective of hope.”¹⁶²

Bloch's philosophy of the *novum* serves as background here. It features a concept

¹⁵⁷ Metz, “Creative Hope,” 179.

¹⁵⁸ Metz, Faith in History, 117.

¹⁵⁹ “Johann Baptist Metz,” in J. Moltmann, ed. How I Have Changed, 32.

¹⁶⁰ Metz, Theology of the World, 87.

¹⁶¹ Johann B. Metz, “Der Christliche Glaube und die Zukunft,” Universitas 23 (1968), 292.

¹⁶² Metz, Theology of the World, 88-89.

of something totally and radically new, as "the empty space left by disposing of the God-hypothesis." It is "the open place of that which is before us, the *novum*, in which the procession of human goals continues to be conveyed."¹⁶³ For Bloch, then, the authentic feature in the Christian understanding of God is the absolute future. In such an interchangeability, "where hope is, there is religion."¹⁶⁴ As an atheist, however, Bloch has attempted to translate the Christian vocabulary of salvation into the secular language of hope. This turns heaven into "a homeland of identity" for human beings here on earth. The kingdom of God, interpreted without God, becomes the place of "the genuinely human," "the kingdom of freedom," a utopia in which Marx's "naturalizing of man and humanizing of nature" takes place.¹⁶⁵ This veritable utopia remains a Utopia (literally a "no where") because a person's life is characterized more by seeking and striving than by attainment and fulfillment. In the world as a *laboratorium possibilis salutis* ("a laboratory of possible salvation"), human beings strive toward Utopian goals.¹⁶⁶

In a panel discussion with Bloch in 1967, Metz acknowledged the influence of Bloch's philosophy of the *novum*.

There are fundamental differences, which however are not easy to formulate. Principally, there is a disagreement about the subject of nature and history. What motivates hope and the goal toward which it moves, in my theological opinion, is not the still hidden man, the *homo absconditus*, but the free nature of God. This is an understanding of history and the future in which the future becomes visible, not just as what has been accomplished, what has been struggled for historically, but also as forbearance, forgiveness and reconciliation. This seems to me to be decisive also in the history of humanity for the understanding of hope.¹⁶⁷

For Metz, unlike Bloch, the freedom of human beings is not left to their own

¹⁶³ Ernst Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, III, 1531; cf. Moltmann, *Theologie der Hoffnung*, 319, as cited in Johns, *Man in the World*, 105.

¹⁶⁴ Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, III, 1404.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 1408-1413, 1628; cf. *Theologie der Hoffnung*, 320-323.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 1413.

¹⁶⁷ "Ernst Bloch und Georg Lukács im Gespräch mit Iring Fetscher, Johannes B. Metz und Jürgen Moltmann," *Neues Forum*, 14 (1967), 841, as cited in Johns, *Man in the World*, 10.

arbitrary will:

For me as a theologian, the future as a whole stands under the eschatological proviso of God. It cannot in its totality become the content of the social and political endeavors of the individual or of single groups, lest it succumb to mystification or totalitarianism.¹⁶⁸

This eschatological proviso provides the "dialectical-critical relation to the present social situation" which undergirds Metz's sociocritical theory. This prevents the *novum* from being hypostatized or becoming a "mystification and totalization" of the future, as happens in Bloch's philosophy.¹⁶⁹ For Metz, the future is neither totally new nor unanticipated. It is made possible, in part, by the visions, anticipations and strivings of those who have caught a glimpse of it in the past. Without their witness, "the experiment of hope"¹⁷⁰ would not enter the present situation of the world with such force.

In this renewal of the world, Metz urges. Christians are not compelled to begin from point zero. Furnished with some blueprints from the past, their task is not to repeat the past but to recover past visions of the future.¹⁷¹ Metz believes a significant dimension of the future has been undervalued by a certain radical future-orientation. This prompts him to advance his "memoria-thesis" to deal with memories¹⁷² of the liberating

¹⁶⁸ Idem.

¹⁶⁹ Johannes B. Metz, "'Politische Theologie' in der Diskussion," in Diskussion zur "Politischen Theologie," ed. by Helmut Peukert (Mainz/Munich: Matthias Grunewald /Christian Kaiser, 1969), 273, 284ff., as cited in Johns, Man in the World, 107.

¹⁷⁰ Johannes B. Metz, "Experientia Spei," Diakonia, 99 (1966), 186-191, as cited in Johns, Man in the World, 108.

¹⁷¹ Johns, Man in the World, 108.

¹⁷² Metz presents many different kinds of memories which shape our future. One type seems to be a middle-class counterpart to hope, leading us deceptively away from the risk of the future. Another is a dangerous memory, which makes demands on us. He explains:

There are memories in which earlier experiences break through to the center-point of our lives and reveal new and dangerous insights for the present. They illuminate for a few moments and with a harsh steady light the questionable nature of things we have apparently come to terms with, and show up the banality of our supposed "realism." They break through the canon of the prevailing structures of plausibility and have certain subversive features. Such memories are like dangerous and incalculable visitations from the past. They are memories that we have to take into account, memories, as it were, with a future content (Metz, Faith in History and Society, 109-110).

future embedded in strata of past history. Herbert Marcuse is cited in support of this stance:

Remembrance of the past can allow dangerous perceptions to dawn upon us. The social establishment seems to fear the subversive content of such recollections. Remembrance is a way of detaching oneself from the given situation, a kind of "intervention," which for an instant interrupts the omnipotence of the given situation. Remembrance recalls past misery as well as past hope.¹⁷³

Memories, for Metz, inspire questions by creating dissatisfaction and hope for something better. Instead of a desire for return, memories provide a challenge to move forward. For example, the memory of suffering continues to resist the cynics of modern political power. Such memories are like dangerous and incalculable visitations from the past. These memories need to reckon with future content. Here Metz sees the Christian faith as *memoria Christi*. The remembrance of the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus is both the origin of faith and the impulse which keeps it alive through the Church. The Christian *memoria*, therefore, becomes a "provocative remembrance," a liberating memory withstanding the controls and mechanisms of the prevailing consciousness and its abstract ideal of emancipation.¹⁷⁴ As a result, faith is not confined to the past but comes alive in the form of

dangerous remembrances, remembrances of hope and terror which were experienced and then were suppressed or silenced, which suddenly break through again into our one-dimensional everyday world.... There are remembrances with which we must reckon, remembrances, so to say, with future content, remembrances which do not deceptively relieve our burden.... Such remembrances are like dangerous and incalculable visitations out of the past.... Such remembrances press us to change ourselves in accordance with them, if we want to perpetuate them.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷³ Johannes B. Metz, "Technik ... Politik ... Religion im Streit um die Zukunft des Menschen," in *Erwartung, Verheissung, Erfullung*, ed. Wilhelm Heinen and Josef Schreiner (Würzburg: Echter, 1969), 173, as cited in John, *Man in the World*, 108.

¹⁷⁴ Johann B. Metz, "The Future *Ex Memoria Passionis*," in *Hope and the Future of Man*, ed. Ewert H. Cousins (London: Garnstone, 1973): 127-128.

¹⁷⁵ Johannes B. Metz, "Befreiendes Gedächtnis Jesu Christi" (Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald, 1970), 6-7, as cited in John, *Man in the World*, 109.

Metz does not regard the memory thesis as a counterthrust to his emphasis on the future, but as a complementary notion to it.¹⁷⁶ Hence it "is not a reactionary bourgeois alternative to hope." Memory does not qualify the forward-looking futurity, the creative anticipation and the revolutionary power of the hope principle. It does give it a more clearly Christian form.¹⁷⁷ In it anthropology, Christology, and eschatology intersect for Metz.¹⁷⁸ He sees the stance of humankind in the world in terms of a promissory world horizon. In Christ, God's eschatological proviso is most clearly manifest. The future is not absolute; it is qualified by this proviso and by the dangerous remembrances of Jesus Christ.

In a recent contribution to a quincentenary collection of essays on the discovery of America, Metz offered "a personal recollection : that of my experiences in Latin America in 1988."¹⁷⁹ In this piece, impassioned and "necessarily subjective," he writes: "my strongest, most disquieting recollections are of the faces in Latin America."¹⁸⁰

I kept seeing the faces of the Indians, faces shaped by the dark shadows of what is called the mysticism of the Andes. At all events, I the European would call it a kind of mysticism of mourning. ... Will this mourning prove capable of being combined with our Western civilization? Or will we simply develop the Indians out of their mourning? In my view, were that to happen, humankind would be poorer by a hope.... Christian hope is certainly no kind of superficial optimism. The substance of Christian hope is not simply remote from mourning, stripped of any kind of mourning. With the inability to mourn there ultimately develops an inability to allow oneself to be comforted and to understand or experience any comfort other than mere postponement.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁶ Johns, Man in the World, 109.

¹⁷⁷ Johannes B. Metz, "Kirchliche Autorität im Anspruch der Freiheitgeschichte," Kirche im Prozess der Aufklärung, 72, as cited in Johns, Man in the World, 109.

¹⁷⁸ Johns, Man in the World, 109

¹⁷⁹ Johann Baptist Metz, "With the Eyes of a European Theologian," in 1492-1992: The Voices of the Victims, ed. by Leonardo Boff and Virgilio Elizondo, Concilium 1990/6. (London: SCM/Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), 113.

¹⁸⁰ Idem.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 114.

The political culture which seeks freedom and justice for all can be established only if among us and in those Latin American countries it is combined with another culture which for want of a better term, I might call a new hermeneutical culture: the culture of the recognition of others in their otherness, with the way in which they form a social and cultured identity, with their own images of hope and recollection.¹⁸²

The church does not hope for itself. Therefore it does not need to split its own history — in a suspiciously ideological fashion — in order only to display the sunny side of this history, as those must do who “have no hope.” To concede failure does not mean falling into a neurotically arrogant cult of self-accusation. It is quite simply a matter of honoring our eschatological hope and venturing conversion and new ways in the light of it.¹⁸³

d. Summary

A distinguishing feature of Metz's theology of hope is its tendency to supplant theoretical with actual categories. The future, Metz suggests, does not come through one or another form of theoretical categorization, but through the categories of creative, militant action which does not yet exist and in fact has never been — in a word, the “new” in the proper sense of the word. Metz further notes that the “future is not contemplative and cannot remain in the order of representation, since representation and contemplation refer to what has already come into existence or what still is.” In contrast to the contemplative or theoretical stance, “the relationship to the future is an operative one.” Hence, Metz finds the future inaccessible by forms of thought or representations which depict the present reality. Therefore, Christian eschatology is not an ideology of the future; rather, it honors the poverty of knowledge about the future. Metz's fundamental thesis is that one can glimpse the future only through the awareness of being for others. In this political dimension he discovers one of the distinguishing marks of hope, and defends it as the subject, object, and method of a new way of doing theology.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 117.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 118.

C. Theologies of Hope: A General Summary

Chapter I has examined the contributions of Pannenberg, Moltmann and Metz as exponents on the cutting edge of a new theology of hope.¹⁸⁴ A basic summary of their work, individually and collectively, is in order at this point.

Moltmann expressly targets his theology at the three great interlocking threats of modern atheism to Christianity: secularism, reductionism, and utopianism. The same might be said in general of Pannenberg and Metz. The three major threats of the modern world to the traditional faith are incisively profiled by Kliever:

[Most basically the] secular dissolution of classical Christianity's "hierarchical transcendence." Christianity's absolute God may no longer be claimed as the necessary and evident ground of all things. The world can be explained, controlled, and changed in terms of its own immanent structures and inherent powers.

A second and related challenge is the modern world's humanistic reduction of hierarchical transcendence. Christianity's absolute God need no longer be thought of as the sole basis for personal identity and social order. Personal and social life centered in God can be reduced to idealized projections of human need and human value.

A third challenge to the Christian faith rises from the modern world's utopian critiques of the hierarchical transcendence. The call to overcome human suffering and inequity need no longer be deferred to Christianity's absolute God. The opportunities and responsibilities for creating a new person and a new society rest in human hands.

In short, modern secularism, reductionism, and utopianism find Christianity's hierarchical God intellectually superfluous, morally dispensable, and politically dangerous.¹⁸⁵

Moltmann believes this three-pronged threat to Christian faith cannot be met so long as a hierarchical, disengaged conception of God and world is retained. Pannenberg's theological concern is spurred by the two pivotal issues of the Bible and modern culture.

¹⁸⁴ As stated at the outset of this dissertation, one may speak of a common theological focus or movement, but not of a school or a theology of hope. Walter Capps insists there is no full-scale movement, but rather a mood which expresses itself in related proposals deriving their impetus from a preoccupation with the future (*The Future of Hope*, 1).

¹⁸⁵ Kliever, "Hope as Ground and Goal," 101-103.

How, he asks, can a Christian be both biblical and modern?¹⁸⁶

Moltmann accepts the Feuerbach-Marx allegation that Christianity's hierarchical, extraneous God has served both as source and sanction for a "multi-stratified world that protects the privileges of the powerful and perpetuates the miseries of the weak."¹⁸⁷ Nonetheless, Moltmann sees a way around this discredited "God beyond us" (the God above us of orthodox Christianity) and "God within us" (the God in us of liberalism). For him, the modern debate between faith in the "God above us" and faith in the "God in us" or "God between us" admits yet another position. "God in front or ahead of us," the "God of hope," the God of the Exodus. In the modern controversy between a theism that philosophically affirms "God is," and an atheism that iconoclastically asserts "God is not," eschatological theology can say: God's being, the Kingdom of God's full identity, is coming.¹⁸⁸ For Metz, likewise, God is the "God before us instead of a theological argument."¹⁸⁹

This return to the eschatological outlook of the bible opens a way for making one's own whatever dimensions of truth there are in modern secularism, reductionism, and utopianism without surrendering a basic belief in God or radical responsibility for the world.¹⁹⁰ All the theologians of hope approach God as the power of the future. Because the future is God's primary mode of being, God is not yet present in the form of a sovereign definitive, unlimited presence.

Granting these perspectives on God, the theologians of hope can and do still speak of God historically. For example, God is identified as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and

¹⁸⁶ Cf. Braaten, The Future of God, 23.

¹⁸⁷ Kliever, "Hope as Ground and Goal," 103.

¹⁸⁸ Jürgen Moltmann, "Hope and History," Theology Today, vol. 25, no. 3 (October 1968): 376.

¹⁸⁹ Johann B. Metz, "God Before Us Instead of a Theological Argument," Cross Currents, vol. 18, no. 3 (1968): 298-306.

¹⁹⁰ Moltmann, Theology of Hope, 37-94.

Jacob, and no less the God of the Exodus and Covenant. In this broad, coherent context God is the God of history. Christian theology however, according to Moltmann, has tended to ignore this view of God in favor of its different types of arguments about God's existence: cosmological, psychological (Descartes), moral (Kant), and existential (Kierkegaard).¹⁹¹ Eventually, then, anthropology shaped the discussion concerning God's existence and attributes, and especially the divine relationship with human beings and the cosmos. Ostracized from cosmology by the natural sciences, Christian theology became an anthropology.¹⁹² The shift from a theistic metaphysics of the world to the theological illumination of existence and language analysis is an important step. When Moltmann links human authenticity to human suffering, the latter becomes the primary theological concern, and the human quest for identity frames the horizon of the question of God.

For Moltmann, then, a closer analysis of the identity question of humanity skews the problem of God toward a political theology.¹⁹³

The theodicy question for a just world cannot be answered apart from the justification of humanity in its personhood. The theodicy question and the question of human identity are therefore two sides of the same coin.¹⁹⁴ To support his argument, Moltmann appeals to the role of primitive Christian apocalypticism in the New Testament. Ernst Käsemann's well-known dictum is cited: "Apocalypticism is the mother of all Christian theology."¹⁹⁵ This insight is based on the special correlation of the question of God to the issue of the future of history.¹⁹⁶ Thus, the eschatology of Paul, of

¹⁹¹ Moltmann, Religion, Revolution and the Future, 205.

¹⁹² Idem.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 206.

¹⁹⁴ Idem.

¹⁹⁵ See footnote 209 below.

¹⁹⁶ Moltmann, Religion, Revolution and the Future, 206.

the Book of Revelation, and of primitive Christianity in general is driven by the dual question: whether or not God is and when God would become fully realized. Such an epistemological approach forges an inquiry that goes beyond the basic arguments for the existence of God (as in the Thomistic "five ways"¹⁹⁷ or "the arguments by which both philosophers and Catholic teachers have proved that God exists"¹⁹⁸).

Theology — in the eschatological construction of the hope theologians — relates human beings to the world in such a way that both theology and humanity may engage in a joint historical pursuit of that future which both will find in the future of God.¹⁹⁹

In summary, three major conclusions can be drawn.

(1) All the theologians of hope assign theological priority to the future.

Pannenberg, who has given futurity its recent significance in theological discourse, assigned to "future" and "hope" a primacy among the key concepts of a new religious sensibility.²⁰⁰

From the standpoint of this God (of the Bible), all reality is referred to the future and is experienced as eschatologically oriented. [Such a God is experienced] as the God of the promises, as the God who leads history into a new future, and as the God of the coming kingdom.²⁰¹

Pannenberg's understanding of the future marks a further "breakthrough" to a theology of revolution.²⁰² Such an approach to eschatological newness clarifies its application to social and political transformation within history.²⁰³ Thus Moltmann

¹⁹⁷ Summa theologica I a. 2.3: Contra gentiles 1.13, 15.

¹⁹⁸ Contra gentiles 1. 1. 3.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 207.

²⁰⁰ Wolfhart Pannenberg, "The God of Hope," Basic Questions in Theology, Vol II (London: SCM, 1971), 234-249.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 237.

²⁰² Braaten, The Future of God, 12.

²⁰³ Cf. Peters, "Pannenberg's Eschatological Ethics," 263.

asserts: "there is therefore only one real problem in Christian theology, which its own object forces upon it and which it in turn forces on mankind and on human thought: the problem of the future."²⁰⁴

The hope theologians recall time and again how the future must be shaped. Unless the future can be planned and unless human responsibility can creatively impact the future, there may be no future at all. The future must be mediated.²⁰⁵ Braaten insists on a specific intersection:

apocalyptic eschatology and secular futurology can be correlated and their horizons connected if they both orient upon a new horizon which includes them both, if they share the horizon of a common future that links the past to the present without sacrificing what is particular and valuable in each.²⁰⁶

The horizon of the future, arguably, can accommodate the dualism of both rigidly self-sufficient horizons, that of the biblical record and that of the secular humanist.²⁰⁷

According to Braaten:

A crucial difference between secular futurology and Christian eschatology is this: the future in secular futurology is reached by a process of the world's becoming. The future in Christian eschatology arrives by the coming of God's kingdom. The one is a becoming, the other a coming. This difference can be illustrated etymologically by the German word *Zukunft*. *Zukunft* is a translation of two different Latin words, *futurum* and *adventus*. *Futurum* is what grows out of something that already exists, hidden away in it as an inner potentiality. All that is

²⁰⁴ Moltmann, Theology of Hope, 16.

²⁰⁵ Moltmann articulately describes how hope should anticipate the future as well as how hoping and planning can be differentiated in actualizing the future. Jürgen Moltmann, Hope and Planning (New York: Harper & Row, 1971). Cf. Capps, The Future of Hope, 8. Also: Time Invades the Cathedral, 113. It is beyond our scope here to explore Leslie Dewart's related contention that Christianity should be dehellenized in order to recapture the primary eschatological perspective of a future kingdom of God. Such a dehellenization of the (traditional) faith will, by the sheer process of inference, call forth a "reeschatologization of the kerygma" (Leslie Dewart, The Future of Belief: Theism in a World Come of Faith [New York: Herder & Herder, 1966].)

²⁰⁶ The importance of the horizon of the future in the interpretation of universal history is examined at length in Pannenberg's essay, "Hermeneutics and Universal History," History and Hermeneutics, Journal for Theology and the Church, IV, ed. Robert Funk (New York: Harper & Row, 1967). See also: "Hermeneutic and Universal History," Questions in Theology, I (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970), 96-136.

²⁰⁷ Braaten, The Future of Hope, 23.

needed for the future to be reached is more growth, development, maturation, actualization.... *Adventus* is the arrival of someone or something new, which cannot be extrapolated out of history as such. This something new can be anticipated, hoped for, prayed for.²⁰⁸

(2) Eschatology as key to the Christian meaning of hope and to the future is broadly shared. Moltmann accepted not only Ernst Käsemann's thesis that "apocalyptic is the mother of Christian theology,"²⁰⁹ but also the prominence of eschatology in the exegesis of Old Testament scholar Gerhard Von Rad as normative for an approach to the future in the Judeo-Christian tradition. While eschatology has a similar role in the theology of Pannenberg, Moltmann and Metz,²¹⁰ the first two appropriate eschatology quite differently. Pannenberg finds in apocalyptic eschatology the first formal presentation of a universal conception of history; Moltmann sees in apocalypticism the radical contradiction between the historical and the eschatological, between the promise of hope and historical reality.²¹¹

(3) Philosophical process, if not process philosophy, undergirds the work of the hope theologians. Broadly speaking, process philosophy²¹² is a horizontally modeled

²⁰⁸ Idem., The Future of God, 29-30.

²⁰⁹ Cf. Ernst Käsemann, "The Beginnings of Christian Theology," in New Testament Questions of Today (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), 82-107, quotation at p. 102. Also, "Primitive Christian Apocalyptic," in ibid., 108-37, quotation at 137.

²¹⁰ Cf. Jürgen Moltmann, "Theology As Eschatology," The Future of Hope, ed. Frederick Herzog (New York: Herder & Herder, 1970), 1-50.

²¹¹ Cf. Tupper, The Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg, 258.

²¹² Process thought does not stand out as a logical or formal theology of hope. The contributions of Alfred North Whitehead, Charles Hartshorne, and Henri Louis Bergson are of primary significance. Alfred North Whitehead, Models of Thought (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1938). Idem., Process and Reality: The Gifford Lectures, 1927-28 (New York: Macmillan, 1929). Idem., Science and the Modern World, Lowell Lectures, 1925 (New York: Macmillan, 1925). Charles Hartshorne, The Divine Relativity: A Social Conception of God (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967). Idem., The Logic of Perfection and Other Essays in Neo-Classical Metaphysics (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1962). Idem., Man's Vision of God and the Logic of Theism (Chicago: Willett, Clark, 1941). Henri Louis Bergson, Creative Evolution (New York: H. Holt, 1913; New York: Philosophical Library, 1946). Idem., An Introduction to Metaphysics (New York/ London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1912).

Pannenberg has articulated his reservations about Whitehead's philosophy in his essay "Atom. Dauer. Gestalt. Schwierigkeiten mit der Prozess Philosophie," Whiteheads Metaphysik der Kreativität, ed. Friedrich Rapp and Reiner Wiehl (Freiburg: Karl Alber, 1986), 185-195. Pannenberg's critique in the

conceptual pattern which emphasizes time and change, and subjects all reality to temporal conditioning. While the theology of hope does not emanate from it, process philosophy's "primary disposition is toward eschatology."²¹³ It would be inappropriate to trace a direct formative influence from any process philosophers upon the theologians of hope.²¹⁴

Nevertheless, Bloch, Moltmann, Metz, and Pannenberg may be considered "process thinkers," despite their avoidance of process theology in the traditional sense. In fact, Moltmann and Metz never attempted to articulate Christian faith in such terms. Nor do Henri Bergson, Alfred North Whitehead, or Charles Hartshorne exert a direct impact on the work of the theologians of hope.²¹⁵ One may however add that both process thought and hope theology build upon horizontal schematics (plan, pattern, order): both place major emphasis on future time; both prefer dynamic over static categories.²¹⁶ Both, finally, assign a major role to creativity and human agency in the eventual shaping of the world.²¹⁷

On the other hand, each of the hope theologians provides examples of variant process concepts. For example, "the type of radicality that places sole emphasis upon discontinuity, that views the future as the force standing in utter contradiction to past and

foregoing essay is summarized by Lewis S. Ford, "The Nature of the Power of the Future," in The Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Philip Clayton (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988).

²¹³ Capps, Time Invades the Cathedral, 95.

²¹⁴ Walter Capps presents three similarities between the theology of hope and process philosophy: (a) the schematic model must be horizontally and not vertically conceived; (b) time and change, rather than permanence and staticity, are regulative; (c) the future orientation of process thought allows for the realization of possibility. Nevertheless, process philosophy does not offer a schematic foundation for the theology of hope.

²¹⁵ Ibid., 95.

²¹⁶ At this point, Capps also introduces the personal human categories of intuition and insight into his analysis of the theology of hope and process thought.

²¹⁷ Ibid., 96.

present," is foreign to Pannenberg's thought.²¹⁸ This obviously differentiates Pannenberg's eschatological construal from Moltmann's in which the future is more or less discontinuous with past and present. Pannenberg, furthermore, discloses the influence of Hegel with whom he shares the notion of an ultimate synthesis which leads to the resolution of disparities.²¹⁹ Yet, Pannenberg's understanding of the generative power of the future itself decisively distinguishes him from the thoroughgoing evolutionary and teleological view advanced by Teilhard.²²⁰

These key factors in the theology of hope have given rise to a political theology in the European context. To explore the political theology of theologians of hope, Olive drew upon Bloch as a point of reference. Bloch capsulized his philosophy in one sentence. "S is not yet P." thereby indicating that what is, is becoming something else. The future is that "not-yet-being" to which one relates by means of hope.

According to Olive, political theology is becoming a theology that is eschatological in its emphasis on hope and future.²²¹ Moreover, political theology is primarily committed to the responsibility inherent in humankind's hopes for the world. This responsibility leans more towards the social dimensions of freedom, power, revelation, than the individual dimensions of salvation, faith, happiness, or authentic

²¹⁸ Richard Neuhaus, "Wolfhart Pannenberg: Profile of a Theologian," in Theology and the Kingdom of God (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), 22.

²¹⁹ Pannenberg also echoes the futuristic view of Teilhard de Chardin, sharing with him the recognition of the radically provisional character of existence and the anticipation of human destiny fulfilled in Christ. (Ibid., 24)

²²⁰ Ibid., 24. In his response to process thought, Pannenberg questions whether Whitehead's doctrine of God can be compared with the biblical affirmation of God as the infinite, all-determining reality. In fact he questions whether Whitehead has really spoken of God at all. "God must not be conceived like finite creatures but as infinite." He continues: "In some way, according to our experience, the reality of God is still in process from every finite point of view. This does not mean that it is in the same way a process on its own terms." Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Letter of Clarification," in Philosophische Theologie im Schatten des Nihilismus, ed. Jorg Salaquarda (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1971), 177, as cited in Tupper, The Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg, 287.

²²¹ Olive, Wolfhart Pannenberg, 77.

existence.²²²

This chapter has presented a summary of a theology of hope as gleaned from the published works of academic theologians Pannenberg, Moltmann, and Metz. This review has underscored their points of convergence with Merton. With hope as a shared topic of discourse, they can be expected to find some common ground for the underlying reality of hope, however their methodology, purpose or construction might differ on the surface. Hope as a conceptual gestalt retains its basic identity irrespective of the modalities of approach and application.

This review has, perhaps more definitively, underscored their divergencies from Merton. A systematic theology of hope is more formal, more cohesive, and less flexible in its conceptualization and content. If the primary difference can be expressed in terms of genre, the hope theologians write formal treatises whose intent is to convince intellectually, within the broad tradition of the theological virtues and in light of contemporary concerns. Merton, on the other hand, uses the popular essay format to express his moral posture, contemplative attitude, and aesthetic approach toward contemporary life, with a view to persuading his readers towards a hope-filled way of life.

Chapter II will now undertake a diachronic exploration of Merton's reflections on hope.

²²² Idem.

CHAPTER II: MERTON'S UNDERSTANDING OF HOPE IN DIACHRONIC PERSPECTIVE

A. SIGNS OF AN IMPLICIT HOPE: 1915 - 1954

1. PRE-MONASTIC PERIOD: 1915 - 1941

Our exploration of Merton's hope, it should be noted, begins several decades before the formal theology of hope emerges in the lecture hall or in full-scale monograph. Merton's early life already evidences moments of an ability to project beyond the here and the now. These episodes may, on close analysis, be nothing more than a deeper appreciation — rather than a simple perception — of the meaning of the events unfolding before him. This exploration might be called “inscape” — Gerald Manly Hopkins' coinage for “inward significant character or quality belonging uniquely to objects or events in nature and human experience esp. as perceived by the blended observation and introspection of the poet...”¹ Stated in simple terms, Merton seems to have been innately endowed with a gift of criticism and of poetic vision, the first enabling him to see things as they are and the second leading him to look to an idealized state. More than a mere dreamer, he envisioned stages of what could be on the brink of realization.

Our analysis will review moments of his early experience that shaped his thought and personality.

To the best of the present writer's knowledge, the term “hope” does not occur in Thomas Merton's pre-monastic writings. But equivalent terms and analogous concepts in these writings are not lacking. In the youthful Merton, the fires of imagination, desire, and expectation became “a walking dream,” as hope has been defined by the sages across the centuries.²

¹Webster's Third New International Dictionary, 1168.

²Aristotle (384-322 BC) is credited with the aphorism “Hope is a walking dream.” in Apothegm, as quoted by Diogenes Laertius, in Lives of the Eminent Philosophers, bk. V, sec. 18. Joannes Stobaeus (5th cent., AD) attributes the saying to Pindar (522?-443BC), Fragments. Quintillian (fl. 68 A. D.) cites the saying in Institutiones Oratoriae, as does Basil, Bishop of Caesarea, in a letter to Gregory of Nazianz (c. 370). Sir Edward Coke (c. 1600) rendered it into Latin: “Spes est vigilantis somnium” (Hope is the dream

How did Merton view his youthful aspirations? How did he articulate the radiant promises of a nimble imagination? What moved his heart toward Christian hope? A study of Merton's retrospects on his earliest life suggests three perspectives for presenting these data.

- a. An Early Passion for Freedom
- b. Proclivity to Despair about Himself and the World
- c. Discovery of Christian Hope

a. An Early Passion for Freedom

Merton's reflections on his youth embody a passionate search for freedom as his highest concern and deepest desire. The Seven Story Mountain (SSM, 1948) contains a fierce *élan* that at times peaks to moments of sheer hope. An early self-disclosure qualifies as such a moment:

Free by nature, in the image of God, I was nevertheless the prisoner of my own violence and my own selfishness, in the image of the world into which I was born. That world was the picture of Hell, full of men like myself, loving God and yet hating Him; born to love Him, living instead in fear and hopeless self-contradictory hungers.³

As a boy, Merton's pastime of choice was reading a geography book: "I wanted to become a sailor. I was only too eager for the kind of foot-loose and unstable life I was soon to get into."⁴ His favorite collection of stories, entitled Greek Heroes, stoked the flames of freedom:

I unconsciously built up the vague fragments of a religion and of a philosophy, which remained hidden and implicit in my acts, and which, in due time, were to assert themselves in a deep and all embracing attachment to my own judgement and my own will and a constant turning away from subjection, towards the freedom of my own ever-changing horizons.⁵

of a man awake). Matthew Prior (1664-1721) quoted it as: "Hope is but the dream of those that wake." in Solomon on the Vanity of the World (Book III).

³SSM, 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 10-11.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

Merton's recollections of his early education highlighted an untrammelled freedom:

In a sense, this was intended as the fruit of my early training. Mother wanted me to be independent, and not to run with the herd. I was to be original, individual. I was to have a definite character and ideals of my own.⁶

One vivid childhood recollection was of a stained glass window depicting an anchor. The youngster was spellbound by the emblem while attending church with his father. If an anchor might trigger in others associations of "the theological virtue of Hope, dependence on God,"⁷ the image evoked in young Thomas more tangible yearnings of "travel, adventure, the wide sea, and unlimited possibilities of human heroism."⁸ The death of his mother when he was just six transfigured these dreams of travel into sudden reality. Since his father worked as an artist, they were nearly forced into the devil-may-care life Merton craved, since subjects and ideas for paintings could be found everywhere.⁹

In 1928, Merton's father came to Montauban to fetch his son to England. As they drove away from the Lycée, the twelve-year old was certain he could hear the cry of "Liberty!" The event turns into one of the more graphic moments in SSM.¹⁰ The new-found opportunities to travel overwhelmed the youngster. He was to cross the Atlantic at least nine times before reaching twenty.¹¹

In June, 1930, being just 15, Merton was informed that his magnanimous grandfather had made him financially independent.¹² This sudden turn of events flung

⁶ Idem.

⁷ Ibid., 48. See footnote 59 below.

⁸ Ibid., 13.

⁹ Ibid., 16.

¹⁰ Ibid., 32ff., 51, esp. 60.

¹¹ Basil Pennington, Thomas Merton, Brother Monk: The Quest for True Freedom (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 43.

¹² Idem.

open the gate to an unbridled wanderlust, his inner sense of *Lebensfreiheit*. But not before his father's death! When this second major loss occurred, Merton felt unburdened of everything "that impeded the movement of my own will to do as it pleased.... I would think what I wanted and do what I wanted and go my own way."¹³ Merton's lust for life would impel him toward unrestricted freedom.

b. Merton's Proclivity to Despair Regarding Himself and the World

Young Merton's passion for life and his giftedness for dreaming and hoping had a dark side: a propensity toward doubt. He soon found himself engulfed in a pervasive gloom regarding himself and the world. The unpublished original typescript of SSM sketches the kind of freedom he craved.

I imagined that I was free. And it would take me five or six years to discover what a frightful captivity I had got myself into. But now, at any rate, the sense of isolation and independence, except for the restraint of the school rules, which irked me very much, grew upon me until I was convinced that I was my own lord, and despised every form, not only of control, but even of advice, accepting even suggestions of Tom, my godfather, with certain reserves, and only insofar as I agreed with them.¹⁴

The SSM notes:

It was in this year, too, that the hard crust of my dry soul finally squeezed out all the last traces of religion that had ever been in it. There was no room for God in that empty temple of dust and rubbish... and so I became the complete twentieth century man... a true citizen of my own disgusting century: the century of poison gas and atomic bombs... a man with veins full of poison, living, living in death.¹⁵

Merton presents himself as morally derelict during this time. William Shannon sees Merton adrift on a sea of aimlessness, amorality, and lack of faith, all contributing to his confusion and depression at this time.¹⁶

By the end of 1932, Merton graduated from Oakham. The next year he enrolled in

¹³ Compare SSM, 85 with B. Pennington, Brother Monk, p. 44.

¹⁴ William Shannon, Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 54.

¹⁵ SSM, 85, cited in Idem.

¹⁶ William Shannon, Silent Lamp, 54.

Clare College, Cambridge. Merton recalls this year at Cambridge as the fall of night over his life.¹⁷ This dark period is couched in the passive voice, as if what happened to him were somehow beyond his control.¹⁸ The experience at Clare College brought him to the spiritual and moral nadir of his life; to some degree he touched bottom, even academically.

As he was leaving England, Merton passed by Dover Castle. William Shannon speculates that "Passing Dover Castle" symbolized a crossroad of life up to that point, more specifically serving as a metaphor of illusion or an unrealized dream. Many associations cluster around that castle, which stood at the geographic and psychological crossroads of Merton's life in France and England. His resolve is explicit, even if his vision is less than clear:

There is yet work to be done in my own life. There were great illusions to be got rid of and there is a false self that has to be taken off, if it can. There is still much change before I can be living in the truth and in nothingness and in humility and without any self-concern.¹⁹

At this point Merton allowed himself to dream of a brighter future, a better world. The dreams point to an unspecified reality, which became more transparent only as time passed, without ever achieving total clarity.

c. Merton's Discovery of Christian Hope

Following an unrestrained youth, Merton stabilised his life through an intellectual conversion, which in turn led to a moral and finally a religious conversion. Merton described his intellectual transformation in terms of the recognition of God's reality. Once Merton came to accept the existence of God, he moved on to explore the concept of *aseitas*, or "the power of a being to exist absolutely in virtue of itself." The idea of an

¹⁷ SSM, 118.

¹⁸ Ibid., 119-121.

¹⁹ From an unpublished letter in the Thomas Merton Center archives, Louisville, KY. This quotation is from William Shannon, Silent Lamp, 77.

indefinable and indescribable Supreme Being, living in and of himself transformed Merton.²⁰

Another stage of conversion was achieved when Merton came to a moral appreciation for the Catholic just war theory; by 1941, Merton had not only developed a conscience, in his own words, but had moved to be “committed to value, wedded to intelligence that demanded careful, realistic analysis of the concrete situation, that motivated and guided his decision[s].”²¹ In the final stage of his self-transformation process, Merton underwent a religious conversion, which, as Lonergan describes it, is “the fulfilment of a capacity and desire for self-transcendence” and as an unconditional love for the Creator.²² This overall process is fully explored in Conn.²³ A key factor in the whole transformative process was unrelenting desire — a foundational dimension of hope.²⁴

After becoming a Christian, Merton longed to become a priest or monk. More than once at this point of his life he envisioned this deep-rooted desire as his “last hope.”²⁵ Following a careful reading of Gilson and Maritain, Merton began attending church, which aroused a range of emotions more sincere and mature than he had ever felt before.²⁶

²⁰ Walter Conn, Christian Conversion: A Developmental Interpretation of Autonomy and Surrender (Paulist, New York, 1986), 165.

²¹ Ibid., 182.

²² Ibid., 227.

²³ Ibid., 228-267.

²⁴ For a psychological correlation, see “Hope and Despair” in Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counselling, ed. by Rodney J. Hunter (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 532-534. Also Donald Capps, Agents of Hope: A Pastoral Psychology (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

²⁵ Thomas Merton, Secular Journal of Thomas Merton (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1959). Also Thomas Merton, SSM, 175ff. Thomas Merton, School of Charity [SCh], ed. by Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1990), 6.

²⁶ SSM, 175.

As to his college experience at Columbia in 1936-1937, Merton recalls: "All that year we were, in fact, talking about the deepest springs of human desire and hope and fear."²⁷ He recalls his friend Gibney who at that time was nurturing "a sense of deep metaphysical dismay — an anguish that was real."²⁸ Faith, love and desire loomed large. In his reading excursions into William Blake, Merton discovered a mirror image of himself:

What he was glorifying was the transfiguration of man's natural love, his natural powers, in the refining fires of mystical experience: and that, in itself, implied an arduous and total purification, by faith and love and desire, from all the petty materialistic and commonplace and earthly ideals of his rationalistic friends.²⁹

This period is steeped in longing:

I was filled with a growing desire to stay in the city and go to some kind of a church....³⁰ My desire became much greater still, by the end of October....³¹ It was only in the last days before being liberated from my slavery to death, that I had the grace to feel something of my own weakness and helplessness. It was not a vivid light that was given to me on the subject.³²

Before long, however, Merton discovered deep within "an obscure desire to become a priest."³³ "I had given up politics as more or less hopeless, by this time."³⁴ He also began to feel a call to holiness. "All that is necessary to be a saint is to want to be one.... All you have to do is desire it."³⁵ Much of this language rings with the enthusiasm

²⁷ Ibid., 180.

²⁸ Ibid., 183.

²⁹ Ibid., 203.

³⁰ Ibid., 206.

³¹ Ibid., 217.

³² Ibid., 221.

³³ Ibid., 218.

³⁴ Ibid., 214.

³⁵ Ibid., 238. This statement came to Merton from Robert Lax.

of a new convert. But, as time would prove, these impulses would mature into authentic hope. On Nov. 27, 1941, Merton wrote

I would be almost certain they'd [the monks] let me in.... But I may be afraid to write and find they wouldn't, and have *that last hope* taken away, as if it were a hope...³⁶

SCh details the inner process of this period:

As a result of studies and reading which familiarized me with the works of E. Gilson and Maritain, but particularly as the result of the work of God's grace which now began to move me with the most urgent promptings of desire, I began going to Mass at Corpus Christi Church, West 121st Street, New York. And there, I soon began to take instruction and was happily baptised on November 16, 1938.³⁷

I went to work at St. Bonaventure College [now St. Bonaventure University, in Olean, NY], in order to live as nearly as possible the life I would have led if my *hopes* had not been disappointed.³⁸

In the course of a retreat at Gethsemani in Holy Week of 1941, Merton recalls:

From the very first moment of entering the monastery I was overwhelmed with the holiness and sanctified atmosphere that filled it, and by the end of that week I was again filled with an intense desire to enter this community. However, I still believed that I had no choice in the matter and that, being "unworthy" of the priesthood, it would be useless for me to ever think of applying to be admitted here. Nevertheless I was praying for a Trappist vocation against all *hope*.³⁹

Clearly, Thomas Merton had discovered a glimmer of Christian hope: an in-depth yearning for the Trappist way of life.⁴⁰

2. FIRST GLIMMERS OF A THEMATIC OF HOPE: 1942-1951

Merton wrote little during his early monastic life. The writings before the

³⁶ Run to the Mountain: The Journals of Thomas Merton, Vol I, 1939-1941. (Ed. by Patrick Hart. San Francisco, Harper Collins, 1995), 455 (emphasis added).

³⁷ SCh, 6.

³⁸ Ibid. (emphasis added)

³⁹ Ibid. (emphasis original).

⁴⁰ The repetition of the word "desire" through this section of SSM is meaningful, especially since he underscores the term on p. 296.

publication of the SSM included: translations of books and articles from the French (1943); Thirty Poems (1944); A Man in the Divided Sea (1946); and the well-known article on "Poetry and the Contemplative Life" (the earliest version of which is dated July 4, 1947). None of these early publications contains an explicit reference to hope.

Sixteen early poems written between 1940 and 1942 were published in 1971 under the title of Early Poems.⁴¹ Though making no formal reference to hope, they do contain hope-related images and expressions. The first poem "The Philosophers," rejecting philosophy as a workable human solution, has two mandrakes (philosophers) juggling Keats's famous line from Ode to a Grecian Urn: "Beauty is truth, truth beauty." "Body is truth, truth body... Beauty is troops, troops beauty."⁴² While the word-play suggests meaninglessness, a better hope awaits the sleeping poet, that of the drenching Easter rains. The anticipation of the Easter rains that will "crown my seedtime with some sap and growth" turns into a key image of hope.⁴³

Four other poems invite brief comment. "Dirge For The World Joyce Died In" is a lament, seething with images of disease and death in a hope-deprived world.⁴⁴ "Two British Airmen" mourns the forlorn ritual of military burial in a foreign land.⁴⁵ "Poem" deals with the despondency of black slavery.⁴⁶ "Poem" (the second by that title) depicts the terror of the war and the death of helpless civilians, in the image of a fleeing woman. The poet contemplates a return to Europe after the war and his burying of loved ones, in

⁴¹ Thomas Merton, Early Poems (Lexington, KY: Anvil Press, 1971). The entire text of Early Poems was reprinted in The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton (CPTM) (1977).

⁴² John Keats, The Poetical Works of John Keats, ed. by H. W. Garrod. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1939), 262.

⁴³ CPTM, 3.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 3-4.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 4-5.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 5-6.

point of fact the interment of his entire life.⁴⁷ These four poems, steeped in images of death and destruction, find their contrast in the deeply hopeful "The City's Spring."⁴⁸ The poem launches Merton's personal response to the springtime signs in the city. At another level, however, the poem celebrates the hope of the resurrection of Christ. Fresh metaphors speak of Christ's burial. The jealous March (the marble recalling Rome) imprisons Christ on an April Saturday. Strophe 2, depicting Christ's suffering, speaks of walls weeping "with arrowy rain." Strophe 3 climaxes with a triumphant resurrection, heralded with loud cries and sweet songs. "Italies," which could be interpreted as hope in the resurrection, actually stands for "Our Italies," a reference to both New York City's Little Italy and the seat of official Christendom.⁴⁹

A sardonic, despairing outlook on the world finds expression in several other poems of this period.⁵⁰ "Lent (A Fragment)"⁵¹ voices an impassioned desire for the purification of worldly pleasures, the senses, and pride. The poet even asks his creativity to depart. The image of Lent denotes a hope for Easter.

In the poem "Sacred Heart 2 (A Fragment)" Merton confesses he cannot find any hope:

Geography comes to an end.
Compass has lost all earthly north.
Horizons have no meaning
Nor roads an explanation:
I cannot even *hope* for any special borealis
To rouse my darkness with a brief "Hurray!"⁵² [sic]

⁴⁷ Ibid., 6-7.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 7.

⁴⁹ Here one must consider Merton's allegiance to Roman Catholicism after his conversion in 1938. "The City's Spring" was written between 1940 and 1942 (CPTM, 7).

⁵⁰ E.g., "Dirge for the City of Miami" CPTM, 7-8. "Hymn of Not Much for New York" CPTM, 19-20. Merton candidly assesses these "monastery poems" as his "poorer ones" (SS, 363).

⁵¹ CPTM, 23-24.

⁵² Ibid., 24 (emphasis added).

Merton's only hope is the Sacred Heart of Jesus:

O flaming Heart,
Unseen and unimagined in this wilderness,
You. You alone are real, and here I've found You.
Here will I love and praise You in a tongueless death,
Until my white devoted bones,
Long bleached and polished by the winds of this Sahara,
Relive at Your command,
Rise and unfold the flowers of their everlasting spring.⁵³

Thirty Poems (published in 1944) combines pre-monastic pieces written between 1938 and 1941 with several poems composed after entering the monastery. The volume abounds in religious and spiritual symbols and themes, commenting on socio-political situations in a rich flow of images and symbols of hope. For example, "The Flight into Egypt" intimates World War II and the Nazi annihilation of countless Jews, including children.⁵⁴

A Man in the Divided Sea (1946) combines pre-monastic poems written between 1938 and 1941 with some written after Merton's entrance into the monastery.

In "How Long We Wait," the poet expects the earth to be resurrected by monastic efforts.⁵⁵ "A Letter to My Friends: On Entering the Monastery of Our Lady of Gethsemani, 1941," expresses a yearning for Jerusalem and discovers it, even if only provisionally, in the "knobs and bottoms of Kentucky." The calamities of the world, the wounds of the cities, and the ruins of once-proud lives, are calmed and healed by those "who have wandered like... the moaning trains" and live now "in the House of God."⁵⁶

"The Trappist Cemetery – Gethsemani" offers a vision of an other-worldly hope.

⁵³ Idem. Under the date of June 26, 1965, Merton records in his journal: "... Twenty years ago I was uncomfortable with this concept. Now I see the real meaning of it (quite apart from the externals). It is the *center*, the 'heart' of the whole Christian mystery." IM, 250 (original emphasis).

⁵⁴ Ibid., 27-28.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 89-90.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 91-92.

Here Merton's vigil climaxes with descriptions of sunset, night sounds, the promise of morning. The destiny of humanity in resurrection is shared by all of creation:⁵⁷

Yet when the sun, exulting like a dying martyr,
Canonizes, with his splendid fire, the sombre hills,
Your graves all smile like little children...

...

But now the treble harps of night begin to play in the
deep wood,
To praise your holy sleep....

...

But look: the valleys shine with promises,
And every burning morning is a prophecy of Christ
Coming to raise and vindicate
Even our sorry flesh.

...

The beasts and trees shall share your resurrection.
And a new world be born from these green tombs.⁵⁸

This hope for a new creation flows over into "A Whitsun Canticle." Casting a hopeful glance at the fulfillment of the Apocalypse, the poem is essentially a psalm of exultation about Pentecost.⁵⁹

Minds, minds, sing like spring
To see the hills that fling their hands into the air:
To see the trees yield their gladness to the tender
Winds
And open wide their treasures:
Behold the birds, released like angels, from those leafy
Palaces,
With fire and blue and red-gold splashing in their
Painted wings.
Each one proclaiming part of the Apocalypse.
They aim their flights at all the four horizons
And fire their arrows of tremendous news.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ William Nicholas Koch, An Unexpected Apocalypse: Eschatology in the Thought of Thomas Merton and Its Significance for the Myth of America. Ph. D. diss. Saint Louis University, 1989. 8.

⁵⁸ CPTM, 116-118.

⁵⁹ Koch, op. cit., 8.

⁶⁰ CPTM, 119.

For Merton, Pentecost, the ecstasy of anticipation, the Book of Revelation, the wrath of God portended by the heavenly host and the birds surrounding his monastery are married in a ceremony of verse.⁶¹

The last of these poems—“La Salette”—brings together end-times imagery with a glimmer of hope. This celebrates the vision of Mary the Mother of Jesus to two shepherd children in the 1840s. Merton grieves that, forgetful of hope, the world has so quickly overlooked the Virgin’s message:⁶²

...
John, in the might of his Apocalypse, could not foretell
Half the story of our monstrous century,
In which the arm of your inexorable Son,
Bound, by His Truth, to disavow your intercession
For this wolf-world, this crazen zoo,
Has bombed the doors of hell clean off their hinges,
And burst the cage of antichrist,
Starting, with two great thunderbolts,
The chariots of Armageddon.⁶³

The poem reveals Merton’s apocalyptic bent. The “two great thunderbolts” unmistakably points to the two atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of World War II. Merton always found in nuclear weaponry a stark eschatological symbol, threatening to engulf the human race in ultimate destruction.⁶⁴ Merton’s apocalyptic imagery reflects a deep concern about hope.

SSM, as already indicated, contains scattered but significant references to hope, which make up in quality what they lack in quantity. Mention has already been made of

⁶¹ Koch, op. cit., 9.

⁶² Ibid., 10.

⁶³ CPTM, 131.

⁶⁴ Gordon C. Zahn, in “Original Child Monk: An Appreciation,” remarks that for Merton, “‘The Bomb’ was the eschatological weapon, its introduction having brought man and his world to the threshold of complete and final destruction. Not only possible destruction, he took care to note, but probable destruction.” The Nonviolent Alternative (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980), xx, as cited in Koch, An Unexpected American Apocalypse, 50-51.

the six-year-old's attendance at church with his father.⁶⁵ On that occasion the stained glass image of an anchor, the standard symbol of Christian hope, triggered yearnings of unrestricted freedom. For all of its inverted interpretation, this is Merton's first reference to Christian hope. He comments:

Strange interpretation of a religious symbol ordinarily taken to signify stability in Hope: the theological virtue of Hope, dependence on God. To me it suggested just the opposite.⁶⁶

For Merton, hope as a theological virtue would eventually signify unequivocal dependence on God. This early "peak moment" implanted in Merton's consciousness a *coniunctio oppositorum*, the polarities of hope and hopelessness. The emblem would serve as a pivotal image of his youthful, and later, aspirations. In fact it might well serve as a metaphor for his entire life!

Thus, the opening pages of SSM, as already noted, characteristically portray the author as "born to love Him, [yet] living instead in fear and hopeless self-contradictory hungers."⁶⁷

The same year saw the publication of six other works: Guide to Cistercian Life; Cistercian Contemplatives; Figures for an Apocalypse; The Spirit of Simplicity; Exile Ends in Glory; and What is Contemplation?⁶⁸ This last work affords a major insight into his writing career and personal experience.⁶⁹

What is Contemplation? (1948) steers wide of the explicit concept of hope, and indeed does not even mention the term. However, its essential concern is union with God

⁶⁵ See p. 59 above.

⁶⁶ SSM, 13. See footnote 7 above.

⁶⁷ SSM, 3.

⁶⁸ GCL (Trappist, KY: Abbey of Gethsemani, 1948); CiC (Trappist, KY: Abbey of Gethsemani, 1948); FA (New York: New Directions, 1948); SS (Trappist, KY: Abbey of Gethsemani, 1948); EEG (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1948); WC (South Bend, IN: St. Mary's, 1948).

⁶⁹ The importance of contemplation as a key to Merton's life was the subject of the present writer's MA dissertation: "Contemplation in the Writings of Thomas Merton: A Developmental Hermeneutic." St. Bernard's Institute, Rochester, NY, 1992.

and contends that unrelenting desire lies at the root of monastic (indeed all Christian) prayer. As such, the work points to the nurture of desire as the starting point of the theological virtue of hope.⁷⁰

Figures for an Apocalypse (1948), a title poem, includes eight parts. Part I describes the second coming in images of light.⁷¹ Part II highlights the return of the "Too sudden 'BRIDEGROOM!'" Merton's poetry features images of time tinged with hopeful moments.

Part III deals with the imminent disaster of "the secret bomb."⁷² as he pictures himself with friends in a train station waiting for "the escaping train."⁷³ A wealth of apocalyptic images (among them the beast of Babylon, and the antichrist) climaxes in a graphic tableau of the imminent disaster featured in the last alarm, the final train.

Part IV focuses on the apocalyptic Christ as the Son of Man pictured in Rev 14:14 descends from heaven. Red horses, borrowed from Rev. 4, represent the devastation of war, while the music of the sickle represents spiritual and intellectual conviction.

Part V deals with the judgment of false optimism in the face of war and destruction. The optimistic prophet, who invariably speaks of the forthcoming

⁷⁰ In a set of notes on spiritual direction and prayer written in 1951 and published in Sponsa Regis, Merton outlined four basic essentials of meditative prayer, in schematic form. "1) Preliminary: a sincere effort of recollection, a realization of what you are about to do, and a prayer of petition for grace.... 2) Vision: — the attempt to see, to grasp what you are meditating on. This implies an effort of faith.... 3) Aspiration: — From what you 'see,' there follow certain practical consequences. Desires, resolutions to act in accordance with one's faith, to live one's faith. Here, an effort of hope is required — one must believe in the possibilities of these good acts, one must hope in the fulfillment of good desires, with the help of God. Above all, one must have a sincere hope in the possibility of divine union. 4) Communion: — here the prayer becomes simple and uncomplicated. The realization of faith is solid, hope is firm, one can rest in the presence of God..." (Later republished under the title of Spiritual Direction and Meditation, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1960, p. 92. Emphasis original.) The role assigned to hope at the core of the meditation outline (viz., steps 3 and 4) is revealing.

⁷¹ CPTM, 136.

⁷² Ibid., 139.

⁷³ Idem.

millennium, is finally dragged down and eaten by the wild dog of unexpected events.

Part VI begins with an apocalyptic destruction of New York City. The second half voices Merton's hope for an idealistic pastoral society which flourishes on the ruins of the great metropolis.

Part VII features the seven-headed beast, with her worshippers waiting for her to come up from the sea. The imagery is drawn from Rev 12-13.⁷⁴

Part VIII pictures "the smoke of the last bomb," the heavenly city "coming down /Coming down from God" and "Dressed in the glory of the Trinity." The message is starkly clear: No hope resides in history, hope is to be found only in God.

Victor Kramer observed that Merton placed "Landscape: Wheatfields" after the title piece in order to counterpoint Armageddon with the New Jerusalem Merton discovered at Gethsemani.⁷⁵ Merton's imagination was kindled by images from Scripture, his heart warmed by the hopeful rhythms of the church year.⁷⁶

One final poem here considered, "Winter Afternoon," brims with apocalyptic images.

... we look up and praise you. winter.
And think of time and the uncertain centuries
Flying before your armies like the coward sky.

And oh! From some far rock some echo of your iron.
December,
Halts our slow steps. and calls us to the armored parapet
Searching the flying skyline for some glare of prophecy.

We thought we heard John-Baptist or Elias. there. on
the dark hill
Or else the angel with the trumpet of the Judgement.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Ibid., 147.

⁷⁵ Victor Kramer, Thomas Merton, (Boston: Twayne, 1979), 51, as cited in Koch, 15.

⁷⁶ Koch, 15-16.

⁷⁷ CPTM, 186.

Much of Merton's poetry does not reflect a deliberately conscious concern with the theological dimensions of hope. But much of its thematic emphasis and imagery attests a fascination with apocalyptic — a glimmer of a world-vision shaped by hope.

The year 1949 saw the publication of five works: Seeds of Contemplation; Gethsemani Magnificat; The Tears of the Blind Lions; The Waters of Siloe; and Elected Silence.⁷⁸ Two of the works invite comment for their insights into hope.

As to Seeds of Contemplation (1949), a single, basic consideration calls for attention. The work explores hope's dual connection: with the discovery of the true self,⁷⁹ and with union with God.⁸⁰ For human hope to achieve full union with God, it must be defeated or overcome by God.⁸¹ As a result,

The ordinary way to contemplation lies through a desert without trees and without beauty and without water... It may become almost impossible to believe that this road goes anywhere at all except to a desolation full of dry bones — the ruin of all our hopes and good intentions.⁸²

On the other hand, hope in the discovery of the true self is inseparable from hope in union with God:

The secret of my identity is hidden in the love and mercy of God. But whatever is in God is really identical with Him: for his infinite simplicity admits no division and no distinction. Therefore I cannot hope to find myself anywhere except in Him. Ultimately the only way that I can be myself is to become identified with Him in Whom is hidden the reason and fulfillment of my existence.⁸³

⁷⁸ SC (New York: New Directions, 1949); GM (Trappist, KY: Abbey of Gethsemani, 1948); TBLZ (New York: New Directions, 1949); WS (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1949). ES (London: Hollis & Carter, 1949).

⁷⁹ SC, 29, 68.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 32-37. See also SCh 11 (Spring 1949) and SCh 13 (Summer 1949).

⁸¹ Ibid., 27.

⁸² SC, 153. This passage reappears in NSC, 235.

⁸³ SC, 29.

In The Tears of the Blind Lions the “Hymn For the Feast of Duns Scotus,” centering on the Trinity, develops the concept of individual and existential transformation by God’s “Three-Personed Love.” By the poem’s end, the surrender to that love has been effected and

...God sings victory. sings victory
In the blind day of that defeat.⁸⁴

In “On a Day in August” Merton recollects his days working in the hayfields. hearing the “locust fry their music in the sycamores.”⁸⁵ Koch writes, “[Merton’s] reflections alternated between scenes of life on earth—the fields, cars traveling to Louisville, a drunk found unconscious behind the monastery mill—and the expectation of the Apocalypse via natural phenomena:”⁸⁶

Very well. clouds.
Open your purple bottles.
Cozen us never more with blowsy cotton:
But organize.
Summon the punishing lighting:
Spring those sudden gorgeous trees against the dark
Curtain of apocalypse you’ll hang to earth. from heaven:
Let five white branches scourge the land with fire!
And when the first fat drops
Spatter upon the tin top of our church like silver dollars
And thoughts come bathing back to mind with a new life.
Prayer will become our new discovery

When God and His bad earth once more make friends.⁸⁷

For all his repugnance of the world triggered by sin-prone people. Merton (as Koch notes) still longed for a hopeful reconciliation between God and creation. between God and humanity.⁸⁸

⁸⁴ CPTM. 198-199.

⁸⁵ Ibid.. 204.

⁸⁶ Koch. 18.

⁸⁷ CPTM.. 205-206. in Koch. 18-19.

⁸⁸ Koch. 19.

The poem "To the Immaculate Virgin, on a Winter Night" describes a winter desert, where prayer is envisioned metaphorically walking across a frozen lake. The interplay of despair over war and of hope through prayer is dramatized across a freezing landscape where "trees make gallows up against the sharp-eyed stars."⁸⁹

Of the four works published between 1950 and 1953, only The Ascent to Truth is directly germane to the purpose of this thesis.⁹⁰ The Ascent to Truth (1951) was in effect a sequel to What is Contemplation?⁹¹ Using St. John of the Cross and St. Thomas Aquinas as key resources, this book describes how contemplation is achieved. If reason and faith are indispensable for advancing in contemplation, only desire and trust transform contemplation into a way of life. This work marks a major milestone in Merton's developing understanding of hope. Early on in his monastic experience, he had perceived hope as a uniquely personal and spiritual expectation.

During this early monastic period, hope surfaces now and then in the writings, but falls short of explicit expression. It tends to be eclipsed by a concern to discover the true self and to achieve union with God. Still these early reflections on contemplation and desire for union with God set the stage for Merton's theology of hope. His encounter with hope will occur explicitly in the period ahead.

3. Signs of an Emergent Implicit Hope: 1952-1954

Signs of an emergent implicit hope are to be found throughout Merton's writings for the period 1952 -1954. The article on "The Sacrament of Advent in the Spirituality of St. Bernard" (1952) develops aspects of Christian eschatology latent in the theology of Advent. The operative categories of thought are the Kingdom, parousia, and [deutero-

⁸⁹ Ibid., 218-219.

⁹⁰ Viz., What Are These Wounds? (1950), A Balanced Life of Prayer and The Ascent to Truth (1951), and The Sign of Jonas (1953, though its composition had dragged on from 1946 to 1952).

⁹¹ The Ascent to Truth, New York, Harcourt, Brace, 1951. What is Contemplation? Holy Cross, Indiana: St. Mary's, 1948.

Pauline] eschatology — essential components of Christian hope.⁹² Meanwhile the correspondence of the period reveals a strong concern with the dynamics of hope.⁹³

In 1954 The Last of the Fathers was published. An underdeveloped work, it proposes as its basic thesis: "St. Bernard seems to have struck on a new note of hope and encouragement in medieval spirituality."⁹⁴

During the 1952-1955 period, Merton's reflections on hope reveal an attraction to contemplation and a bias toward St. Bernard as medieval theologian. Implicitly common at this point, hope is subordinated to other concerns. But the seeds of a theology of hope have begun to sprout.

B. BEGINNINGS OF AN EXPLICIT THEOLOGY OF HOPE: 1955-1959

A new phase in Merton's articulation of hope occurs in 1955-1959. A major trajectory can be tracked in the writings of these four years, which fall into two stages: 1. Initial Phase: 1955–1957; 2. Later Phase: 1958–1959.

1. Initial Phase: 1955-1957

The works published in 1955 attest a hope that has now become an underlying, if not predominant, theme. In No Man is an Island, a seminal article "Sentences on Hope" highlights the first full-scale treatment of hope in Merton's writings. The significance of this article is best seen in terms of its genre. Neither elaborate affirmations nor embryonic

⁹² Seasons of Celebration (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1965), 61-68.

⁹³ A letter (dated Jan. 22, 1953) to biblicist Barnabas M. Ahern, C.P., discloses Merton's hope to become a hermit (SCh, 51-52). This documented reference to a yearning for the hermitical life will be followed by many others in the 50s and early 60s. These "laments" for a modified monastic life are best read as a deep-rooted hope driven by great ego strength. Merton also mentions the negative side of this hermitic hope. An Oct. 23, 1953 letter to Dom Gregorio Lemerrier speaks of active hope: the life of a contemplative runs the risk of becoming an illusion when a restless monk yearns for change and new projects. Such a projected desire fosters delusion, since it is always "hoping" for a contemplative situation in the near future (Ibid, 69).

⁹⁴ LF (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1954), 11. A reading of this work seems to support Merton's contention, though lexically only two references to hope (pp. 14, 99) actually occur.

theories, these sentences (or notes) express basic observations on a variety of things that matter to Merton.⁹⁵ Three viewpoints shape the work, with the concept of hope serving as a common denominator.

First, Merton links hope with freedom. Human beings are not perfectly free, until they live in pure hope. When hope is authentic, it no longer places trust exclusively in human and visible means, nor finds rest in any visible end.⁹⁶ This linkage of hope to freedom recalls Merton's earlier pursuit of freedom.

Secondly, Merton locates union with God in hope. This new formulation of hope calls for disengagement from all created things.⁹⁷ "We do not hope for what we have. Therefore, to live in hope is to live in poverty, having nothing."⁹⁸ "If we hope in God, by hope we already possess Him, since hope is a confidence which He creates in our souls as secret evidence that He has taken possession of us."⁹⁹

Thirdly, Merton links detachment to hope. "Supernatural hope is the virtue that strips us of all things in order to give us possession of all things. ... Hope is proportionate to detachment. It brings our souls into the state of the most perfect detachment."¹⁰⁰ Every act of hope, Merton points out, may open the door to contemplation,¹⁰¹ but in the final analysis, hope is "anchored in a vibrant asceticism."¹⁰²

Two other major articles of this period offer a rich exposition of hope. The first is

⁹⁵ No Man is an Island, New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1955, xiv.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 14.

⁹⁷ Cf. Ibid., 15.

⁹⁸ Idem.

⁹⁹ Idem.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 14-15.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 17.

¹⁰² Ibid., 18.

"*In Silentio*" — a reflection on the monastic vocation as call to live in hope.¹⁰³ This hope consists in a silence enfolding the wisdom of the cross. The second article is "Time and the Liturgy." Here hope is pictured as making Christ live among us, so that apart from eschatological hope there is neither meaning nor dynamism in liturgical worship.¹⁰⁴

In 1956 The Living Bread is a sustained argument that "hope" enables us to "seek Christ." To overcome the forces of death and despair, one must be united to Christ who has overcome death and brings life and hope.¹⁰⁵ The final chapter of the book, entitled "Toward the Parousia," pictures the hope of a glorious manifestation of the great mystery of Christ. To prepare for the parousia with hope and joy a eucharistic life is essential, since its fruitfulness leads to the union of all humankind in Christ. Hope moreover urges a resolute commitment to the union of all humankind.

A letter to Catherine de Hueck Doherty (Aug. 22, 1956) pleads: "We have got to be people of hope." The false hope of materialistic culture is the worst form of despair.¹⁰⁶ By this time Merton's conception of hope has broken the shell of a personal concern enclosing the search for God and the discovery of true self. On this very same day Merton made this entry in his journal: "A hope that is defeated is not good enough. Our hope is victorious."¹⁰⁷

On the following day (Aug. 23) Merton wrote "The Exploits of the Machine Age," a poem which can only be read in terms of the illusory hope of mechanized

¹⁰³ Seasons of Celebration (SCb), New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964, 204-215, esp. 207.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 60. A letter to Dom Maurizio Devy-Duplont (dated June 3, 1955) speaks of "a source of hope." At this time Merton, sparing no effort to become a hermit, inquires if he might be accepted as a hermit in Dom Maurizio's community (SCh, 87). The restive Merton surfaces again.

¹⁰⁵ The Living Bread (LB), New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1956, xvi.

¹⁰⁶ The Hidden Ground of Love. The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns, Selected and ed. with Introduction by William H. Shannon, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985, 14.

¹⁰⁷ A Search for Solitude: The Journals of Thomas Merton (SS), Vol. III, 1952-1960; ed. by Lawrence S. Cunningham, San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996, 71.

society.¹⁰⁸ Disillusion and dismay erode whatever glimmer of self-fulfillment the machine-shop worker can hope to achieve at the daily grind.

In A Search for Solitude, Merton's reaction to Vladimir Sergeyevich Soloviev's lecture on Godmanhood prompted him to extract this quote:

The importance of a truth lies of course in the truth itself but within us in our inconsistency by not carrying out a truth to the end, we limit it — and any limitation of a truth provides an expanse for falsehood.¹⁰⁹

For Soloviev, according to Merton, consistent truth calls for engagement with a pure hope to actualise our "positive unconditionality" — in other words, it is possible to possess in God the "whole content, the fullness of being, not as a mere fantasy — but as a real actuality." On this "inconsistency" Soloviev charges Catholicism as inadequate because "it does not carry its faith to its logical end." Soloviev would further argue, according to Merton, that modern materialism, in its counteraction to the Catholic tradition, is "in a transition period between the inadequate spirituality of the past and the new, more perfect, spirituality of the future — 'Godmanhood.'"¹¹⁰

During this period a Merton letter offers a powerful testimonial to hope. Written to Abbot James Fox (on Jan. 5, 1957) after the community retreat, the communication strikes a deeply personal note:

For the first time in fifteen years I can begin to *hope* that my vocation is getting to be really solid, although I have no illusions yet on that score. Now I know that I am not just looking for some spiritual kind of self-satisfaction, but honestly want to do the will of God.... I beg Him to give me grace to carry this through in spite of darkness, depression and disgust. I know I yet have to grow very much in the spirit of faith and need *much more hope*.¹¹¹

The communication attests an evolving appreciation of hope. The retreat had

¹⁰⁸ CPTM, 237-238. See also SS, 72.

¹⁰⁹ SS, 63.

¹¹⁰ Idem.

¹¹¹ SCh, 99 (emphasis added).

obviously induced an in-depth hopeful appreciation of his vocational vision. The letter marks a milestone on Merton's journey of hope.

In The Silent Life (1957) Merton's treatment of the inversions of hope, e.g., hopelessness and despair, is truly noteworthy. Noteworthy, too, is Merton's alignment of humility with deliverance from a hopeless conflict.

Humility detaches the monk first of all from that absorption in himself which makes him forget the reality of God.... It gradually pulls down the edifice of illusory projects which he has erected between himself and reality.... It finds and saves him in the midst of a *hopeless* conflict against the rest of the universe – saves him in this conflict by a salutary "*despair*" in which he renounces at last his futile struggle to make himself into a "god." When he achieves this final renunciation he plunges through the center of his humility to find himself at last in the Living God.¹¹²

Monastic humility makes possible the triumph of the real over the unreal. As false human ideals are cast aside, the divine ideal is attained, grasped and possessed, not in a mental image but in the present, concrete, existential reality of one's life.¹¹³

Basic Principles of Monastic Spirituality (BPMP) (1957) explores the theological virtues as a substructure for the vowed life. The monk who would be what he is meant to be must rise above the common ethical level of humanitarian paganism. He must in fact live the "theological life centered on God, a life of pure faith, of hope in God's providence, of charity in the Holy Spirit."¹¹⁴

The poem "The Tower of Babel" in The Strange Islands (1957)¹¹⁵ challenges sophisticated scholarship which contends that language, forever manipulated, never achieves objective truth. Part I takes issue with this "great illusion" of modern thinkers that the meaning of language changes according to the speaker or writer, and is therefore

¹¹² The Silent Life (SL). New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1957, 4 (emphasis added).

¹¹³ Ibid., 5.

¹¹⁴ See BPMS, Trappist, KY: Abbey of Gethsemani, 1959, 34 (also 11).

¹¹⁵ CPTM, 247–273 (not to be confused with "Tower of Babel: The Political Speech," idem, 21–22).

always subjective. In its reflection on Gen 11, the piece reads as a blistering attack on modern views of linguistic analysis.

Part II, the second unit of the whole volume, focuses on the human need for unity and hence the need to communicate. Since language is God's creation and not a human construction, humankind will ultimately find unity and peace only when it is united with Christ. The image of the exile provides an evocative symbol for modern thinkers who ask "if life can have any meaning."

With Augustine, Merton looks to a City of God built on the ashes of the present destruction. Augustine situates that destruction in the invasion of Rome by barbarians: Merton, in the debacle of World War II and contemporary philosophy. The resultant redemption is total and encompasses all human activity. This scenario contrasts with Merton's earlier hope-deficient view of human society. Human society united in the peace of Christ faintly reflects the eternal City of God. For this divine reality to be realized, Babylon as symbol of falsehood must fall. A tension between hope and despair undergirds the entire piece.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁶ To present here a hermeneutic for interpreting Merton's poetry would take us too far afield. Suffice it to offer a few guidelines based primarily on the categories and themes of Merton's poetry as designed by George Woodcock and George Kilcourse. One way of recognizing the symbols of hope in Merton's poetry is to adopt the category of Poetry of Paradise-Consciousness. George Woodcock divides Merton's poetry into two classes: the poetry of the choir and the poetry of the desert. (George Woodcock, Thomas Merton: Monk and Poet [Edinburgh: Canongate: 1978]). George Kilcourse's analysis of Woodcock's study (George Kilcourse, Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton's Christ [Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993]) tracks the poetry of the choir in two directions: as an outright rejection of everything in the lost world, as a retreat to the refuge of the monastic enclosure. In this poetry, Merton highlights the world's depravity through violent images of decay and moral torpor. Stylistically and thematically, these anti-theses are formulated in stark, taut imagery: black and white, darkness and light, imprisonment and freedom, urban and rural, earth and sky.

Yet another gestalt emerges from a heightened awareness of events from the monastic perspective: these call forth a deeper, true self to new life in imitation of Christ's humility. This poetry often drifts into a romanticization of a separatist, holy existence. Themes of alienation, exile, solitude, freedom, as well as the identity/illusion quandary alternate in this poetry of the choir, according to Kilcourse.

In a concluding comment on Woodcock's categorization, Kilcourse observes that these different themes are supported by images of transformation and an optimism about all of human nature. Kilcourse perceptively argues that by this time Merton has adopted a more incarnational and sacramental vision of the world through his deep experience of God's mercy. Yet, Merton was still unable to broaden the orbit of grace beyond the monastic setting (*ibid.*, 60).

According to Kilcourse, most of Merton's poems (despite Woodcock's compelling categorization) resist such sharply contrasting categories. Kilcourse counterposes another categorization for Merton's

2. Later Phase: 1958-1959

Thoughts in Solitude (1958) brims with positive insights into hope. This work features the antitheses of hope (viz., despair and the barrenness of the desert experience), Merton's well-known prayer on the concomitants of hope (viz., desire and trust), and a component of hope (viz., conviction).¹¹⁷

The book charts the unequivocal commitment of self to reality through hope. The desert or the wasteland is the place where people withdraw to escape from unreality to reality. "The desert is the home of despair. And despair, now, is everywhere," Merton contends. To live facing despair constitutes our desert. "If we wage [war against despair] courageously, we will find Christ at our side. If we cannot face it we will never find Him."¹¹⁸

Merton incisively explores the connection between real self-conquest and hope. "Real self-conquest is the conquest of ourselves not by ourselves but by the Holy Spirit. Self-conquest is really self-surrender."¹¹⁹ To achieve possession of ourselves, confidence must nurture some hope of victory, even to the point of offering a foretaste of victory. Our hope must be rooted in concrete reality. "There is no hope for the man who struggles to obtain a virtue in the abstract — a quality of which he has no experience."¹²⁰

"Aspects of the Spiritual Life" contains a detailed analysis of hope. Hope — the secret of true asceticism — refutes our own judgments and desires in the here and now. It rejects the world, not because "we or the world are evil, but because we are not in a

poetry: namely, an all-encompassing paradise-consciousness which transcends both the choir and the desert themes. These poems primarily deal with the true self or inner self, wrestling with the illusory, false self. The debate over classification aside, a mood of hope broods over the writings of this period (ibid., 66).

¹¹⁷ TS (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1958), 83.

¹¹⁸ ibid., 20, 21.

¹¹⁹ ibid., 29.

¹²⁰ ibid., 30.

condition to make the best use of our own or of the world's goodness." By rejoicing in hope we enjoy created things, "not as they are in themselves but as they are in Christ — full of promise."¹²¹

Merton moves on to restate the interrelation of faith, hope, and love.

Commitment of one's whole self to God can be achieved only by a deep, simple faith, enlivened by a hope which knows that contact with God is possible, and urged by a love which desires above all else to do his will.¹²²

Possessing nothing within us constitutes a condition of hope, Merton argues. Having nothing special within ourselves to love, we reach beyond ourselves and rest in God in whom alone is our hope.¹²³ Thus, poverty opens the door to freedom.

A man becomes a solitary at the moment, when, no matter what may be his external surroundings, he is suddenly aware of his own inalienable solitude and sees that he will never be anything but solitary. From that moment solitude is not potential — it is actual. ...Actual solitude has ... the dissatisfaction and uncertainty that comes from being face to face with an unrealized possibility. It is not a mad pursuit of possibilities — it is the humble acquiescence that stabilizes us in the presence of one enormous reality which is in one sense already possessed and in another a 'possibility' — an object of hope.¹²⁴

Hence, the solitude of the committed solitary consists above all in the " 'possible' possession of God, and of nothing else but God, in pure hope."¹²⁵

To sum up, TS presents the desert as the place of despair. But more than the locus of individual despair, the desert in contemporary society has a collective and social dimension. Within this landscape the solitary is called to discover hope, which finds its verification in the Cross.

¹²¹ Ibid., 38.

¹²² Ibid., 50.

¹²³ Ibid., 53.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 81-82.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 82.

Before leaving this year, acknowledgement should be made of a letter to John Harris (1958). It identifies Pasternak as a "sign of hope" and "the first star of a new dawn for humanity."¹²⁶ It invites all to become prophets of advent — just as Pasternak in Russia is a prophet of a new age.¹²⁷

In Seasons of Celebration, an article, "Easter: The New Life," (1959) takes note of the source of hope and of despair. Its basic message is that "the law without Christ is a source of despair, and the cross of Christ and His Easter Victory are our hope — our only hope."¹²⁸

Remarkably, during the year 1959, the theme of hope surfaces in no less than seven letters.¹²⁹

¹²⁶ HGL, 385.

¹²⁷ The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers, selected and ed. by Christine M. Bochen, New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1993, 182.

¹²⁸ SCb, 150. Also, see 157

¹²⁹ A letter to Milosz (Feb. 28, 1959) speaks of a conviction of the final victory, which is based on the Cross and Resurrection of Christ. This movement from "darkness to ... light can only be found by passing through apparent despair" (CT, 57-58). Another letter to Milosz in the same year (Sept. 12, 1959) has this thoughtful reflection on the challenge of hope in a totalitarian society.

"The only thing that is to be regretted without qualification is for a man to adapt perfectly to totalitarian society. Then he is indeed beyond hope. Hence we should all be sick in some way. We should all feel near to despair in some sense because this semi-despair is the normal form taken by hope in a time like ours. Hope without any sensible or tangible evidence on which to rest. Hope in spite of the sickness that fills us. Hope married to a firm refusal to accept any palliatives or anything that cheats hope by pretending to relieve apparent despair. And I would add that for you especially hope must mean acceptance of limitations and imperfections and the deceitfulness of a nature that has been wounded and cheated of love and of security: this too we all feel and suffer. Thus we cannot enjoy the luxury of a hope based on our own integrity, our own honesty, our own purity of heart" (STB, 52).

A letter to Suzuki (Apr. 11, 1959) makes reference to original sin and paradise as basic concepts related to Christian hope (HGL, 562-566). A letter to Cuadra (June 13, 1959) notes that when confronted by the great international problems of the world, many people situate their hope in violence (Ibid., 184-185). A letter to Paul Tillich (Sept. 4, 1959) labels hope a correlative to Gospel faith (HGL, 577). Cardinal (Oct. 14, 1959) is told that hope and desire authenticate true and sincere service to God (CT, 118). A letter to Dom Jean Leclercq (Nov. 19, 1959) reiterates the writer's hope of becoming a hermit near the Benedictine monastery of Cuernavaca, Mexico; the writer confesses he has been looking forward to this for a long time (SCh, 123).

By way of summary, the writings from the years 1958-1959 are not systematically conceptualized, either in Merton's own mind or in the several genera used. Still, the hope that stirs Merton is evident. They approach hope as a dynamic related to many facets of life: spirituality, union with God, detachment, freedom, nearly always in counterpoint to despair. The publications of the period offer ample evidence that Merton's understanding of hope has broadened its spiritual and personal dimensions and moved into the socio-political milieu.

C. MERTON'S MATURE UNDERSTANDING OF HOPE: 1960-1968

Merton's mature grasp of hope more or less coincides with the emergence of the "theology of hope" that began in Europe with Pannenberg, Moltmann and Metz. This chronological correlation should not be seen as ideological identity. His concerns differ from theirs in that they are distinctly American, monastic in character and aimed at the non-professional reader. Yet, for all that, Merton's essays of reflection at this period embody the intense political concerns that run through the early work of Moltmann and Metz.

From 1960 to 1968 Merton's horizons on hope undergo further expansion. His approach remains intensely critical, while his insights become more incisive. A survey of his writings in this period supports the contention that hope has in fact become a primary catalyst of his thought.

Three distinct phases of Merton's outlook emerge: an outspoken sociopolitical critique, a clear commitment to monastic and ecclesiastical renewal, and a dialogical existentialism grounded in the spirituality of hope. In this eight-year period each phase expands and reinforces the previous thrust. The result is a richer, fuller set of vectors. We may here borrow a concept that illustrates the continuities in these various aspects of

Merton's thought from Erik Erikson's *epigenesis*.¹³⁰ All three trajectories, it will be argued, are vectored by a discernible theology of hope. This section will focus on these three distinct yet overlapping developments in Mertonian hope.

1. Sociopolitical Critique Grounded in Hope: 1960-1968

From 1960 to 1968 the Merton writings exhibit an intensification of his sociopolitical critique. A bibliographical perusal will not only bear this out, but also demonstrate that each of these three areas of engagement were not coterminous.

In 1960, three works were published: Spiritual Direction and Meditation, The Wisdom of the Desert, and Disputed Questions.

The first of these, as noted above,¹³¹ consists of notes written for Sponsa Regis as early as 1951. But they are collected and published in book form at this point. The four steps in meditative prayer have already been outlined above.¹³² Only a sincere hope makes possible a union with God. Even earlier, in No Man Is an Island (1955) Merton had presented hope as a postulate to experience God. Now, in Spiritual Direction and Meditation hope becomes a *sine qua non* in attaining union with God.

The Wisdom of the Desert (1960) also points to Christian hope as the substructure

¹³⁰ Erik H. Erikson develops his concept of "epigenetic development" using organ development. Erikson states that embryology now understands epigenetic development as the step-by-step growth of the fetal organs. In this sequence of development each organ has its time of origin. This time factor is as important as the place of origin. If the eye, for example, does not arise at the appointed time, "it will never be able to express itself fully, since the moment for the rapid outgrowth of some other part will have arrived, and this will tend to the less active region and suppress the belated tendency for eye expression." After the organ has begun to arise at the right time, still another time factor determines the most critical stage of its development: "A given organ must be interrupted during the early stage of its development in order to be completely suppressed or grossly modified. After an organ has arisen successfully from the Anlage, it may be lamed or runted, but its nature and actual existence can no longer be destroyed by interrupting the growth." (Erik H. Erikson, Childhood and Society, second edition [New York: W. Norton, 1963], 65). Erikson summarizes epigenetic growth process as follows: (1) each critical item of psychosocial strength is systematically related to all others; (2) all stages depend on the proper development in the proper sequence of each time; and (3) each stage exists in some form before its critical time normally arrives (Ibid., 271).

¹³¹ See p. 71 of this thesis, n. 70 above.

¹³² Idem. It may briefly be recalled that, even at that early time in his monastic experience, numbers 3 and 4 of Merton's outline of contemplative prayer unequivocally center on acts of hope.

of the life-style of the desert writers. Writes Merton: "One of the main motives that impelled them to embrace the angelic gift of solitude and poverty in the desert was precisely the hope that by so doing they might return to paradise."¹³³ Among the many motives that impelled the desert writers to abandon the world, "salvation" was presented as the ultimate goal of Christian hope. This salvation took its focus from the exclusive discovery of the true self in Christ. Thus, from the outset the desert writers rejected outright the false, formal self, fabricated under social compulsion in the world. They felt compelled to immerse themselves in the inner, hidden reality of a self that is transcendent, mysterious, half-known, and lost in Christ. This felt need to die to the values of transient existence as Christ did on the cross induced a correlative "need" to rise from the dead with Him in the light of an entirely new wisdom.¹³⁴

Merton develops his understanding of salvation in "The Recovery of Paradise." This 1960 article identifies the concepts of paradise and the kingdom of God as essential components of Christian hope.¹³⁵

Disputed Questions (1960) is especially noteworthy in that it is Merton's first book-length discussion of the problems of the world in which he lives. Twelve essays on varying topics make up the collection. While the work does not address hope as its primary concern, it does identify the Kingdom of God as an essential feature of Christian hope. The task of the Christian in our time, notes Merton, is to build the kingdom of God in this world – an engagement that is ultimately spiritual and eschatological.¹³⁶ The Kingdom of God cannot be established by the power of money, the noise of slogans, the spin of dynamos, or the marching of armies. It can only be established by people who

¹³³ ZBA (New York: New Directions, 1968), 116.

¹³⁴ WD, selected and trans. by Thomas Merton with his notes (New York: New Directions, 1960), 3-7.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 7.

¹³⁶ DQ (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Cudahy, 1960), 127.

have attained genuine maturity as well as supernatural stature in Christ.¹³⁷ Over all, the book outlines strategies of hope for contemporary society. Its author once again returns to time-honored monastic traditions and reexamines their relevance for contemporary society.¹³⁸

In 1961, The Behaviour of Titans and The New Man were published. The first contains "Atlas and the Fat Man," a prose poem which excoriates capitalistic and technological society as spiritually corrupt, in apocalyptic terms and images such as 666.¹³⁹

Now this Fatman had been brought up on oats and meat and his name was secret. His father was a grocer and his mother was a butcher. His father was a tailor and his mother ran a train. His father was a brewer and his mother was a general in the army. He had been born with leather hands and a clockwork mind in order to make a lot of money. He hated the country and loved stadiums: a perfect, civilized man! His number was six hundred and sixty-six and he worked hard building up the stadium Atlas had destroyed.¹⁴⁰

Fatman is America. Atlas is God. By the poem's end, a new earth comes into view where Fatman has been forgotten. This presentation of paradise borrows images from Isaiah.¹⁴¹

One prose-poem letter from 1961, the "Letter to an Innocent Bystander," offers passing reflections on hope, waiting, and despair. A sample quote — a striking juxtaposition of hope and despair — will suffice:

I am still able to hope that a civil exchange of ideas can take place between two persons -- that we have not yet reached the stage where we are all hermetically

¹³⁷ Ibid., xii.

¹³⁸ Cf. ibid., 68-93, 151-62, 204-49. Two letters from 1960 are especially significant here. One written to Herbert Mason (in June) touches on a hope of union with the Arabs (WF, 267). Another to Dorothy Day (dated Aug. 17) depicts the poor as a sign of hope (HGL, 138).

¹³⁹ CPTM, 684.

¹⁴⁰ Idem.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 691.

sealed, each one in the collective arrogance and despair of his own heart.¹⁴²

This intimation of hope as mutual trust points to a deeper confidence in ourselves as persons that can save us from devolving into mere numbers. The term hope in this prose-poem admittedly denotes a simple conviction regarding social concerns. Eventually, Merton will equate hope with active participation in, even intense passion for, specific socio-political issues. In his words:

I am no longer certain that it is honorable to stand by as the helpless witness of a cataclysm, with no other hope than to die innocently and by accident, as a non-participant.¹⁴³

The same prose-poem delves into the relationship which connects waiting, hope, and despair. It confronts the passive waiting of innocent bystanders who think their nondescript resistance is a form of action. "[U]nless waiting connotes knowledge and action, [we] will find ourselves waiting for our own destruction."¹⁴⁴ The plea is here made on behalf of an activism that calls for wisdom, even if it need not foresee its own end. Despair, in this context, is either a worthwhile program or valued outcome. In a tightly reasoned paragraph, Merton sets forth the boundary between hope and despair:

The very difficulty of our position comes from the fact that every definite program is now a deception, every precise plan is a trap, every easy solution is intellectual suicide. And that is why we are caught on the horns of a dilemma: whether we "act" or not we are likely to be destroyed. There is a certain innocence in not having a solution. There is a certain innocence in a kind of despair: but only if in despair we find salvation. I mean, despair of this world and what is in it. Despair of men and of their plans, in order to hope for the impossible answer that lies beyond our earthly contradictions and yet can burst into our world and solve them if only there are some who hope in spite of despair.¹⁴⁵

The New Man, also published in 1961, is a heart-stirring profile of hope. "Hope," Merton announces, "is a gift from God, total, unexpected, incomprehensible.

¹⁴² Ibid., 51.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 52.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 54.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 62.

undeserved."¹⁴⁶ His description of hope is a virtual carbon copy of his description of contemplation, already found in New Seeds of Contemplation. There Merton had stated

Contemplation is always beyond our own knowledge, beyond our own light, beyond systems, beyond explanations, beyond discourse, beyond dialogue, beyond our own self.¹⁴⁷

Here Merton asserts:

Contemplation is the sudden intuitive penetration of what really is. It is the unexpected leap of the spirit of man into the existential luminosity of Reality Itself, not merely by the metaphysical intuition of being, but...¹⁴⁸

In Merton's view, hope and contemplation are characterized by such common features as: "sudden," "unexpected," and "beyond knowledge and explanations."¹⁴⁹ Since, for Merton, hope, like contemplation, cannot be expressed in kataphatic terms or images, an apophatic exposition of hope must be sought.

The Christian hope that is 'not seen' is a communion in the agony of Christ. It is the identification of our own *agonia* with the *agonia* of the God who has emptied Himself and become obedient unto death. It is the acceptance of life in the midst of death, not because we have courage, or light, or wisdom to accept, but because by some miracle God Himself accepts to live, in us, at the very moment when we descend into death.¹⁵⁰

In Merton's description of Christian hope one hears a resonance of 1 Cor 10: 16: a communion with the suffering of Christ — a "yes" to life immersed in human suffering. Here the clear and explicit development of hope in NM proceeds at two levels.

First, hope points to a divine dimension in human suffering. Merton had already asserted a link between hope and human suffering in his 1959 letter to Herbert Mason.

¹⁴⁶ NM, 4.

¹⁴⁷ NSC (New York: New Directions, 1962), 2.

¹⁴⁸ NM, 14.

¹⁴⁹ "Beyond knowledge and explanations" is equivalent, of course, to "incomprehensible" in Merton's description of hope.

¹⁵⁰ NM, 5.

I want to say how deeply moved I am at this idea of Louis Massignon's that salvation is coming from the most afflicted and despised. This, of course, is the only idea that makes any sense in our time. It is the key to our time or to any other time. It is the great idea of the Bible, the Prophets, everything. I have been obsessed with it for a long time....¹⁵¹

A Merton meditation on a certain statue of the Blessed Virgin draws upon the same correlation:

The Holy Mother is the Indian Woman of the Andes, the representative of all that is most abject, forgotten, despised, and put aside.... As for the Child, however — the Christ, the resurrection to be born from the despised peoples of Mexico and the Andes.¹⁵²

Secondly, hope, accepted theoretically and even thematically up to this point, is now concretely integrated into the reality of human life. Merton's early monastic experience had led him to search for the meaning of hope in the discovery of the true self and mystical union with God. Meaning, Merton contends, is not something we discover by ourselves, or in our lives. Because it has to be revealed, it has to be "given." And the fact that it is gift highlights the greater part of its significance.¹⁵³

The inference that follows seems unavoidable: "Life is a light that arises when God summons it out of darkness. For this there are no fixed times."¹⁵⁴ By linking hope to the discovery of life's authentic meaning, Merton has broadened the horizon of hope. The detailed exposition of contemplation in NM makes hope conceptually anterior to contemplation: without hope contemplation is not possible.

Contemplation is at once the existential appreciation of our own nothingness and of the divine reality, perceived by ineffable spiritual contact within the depths of our own being. Contemplation is the sudden intuitive penetration of what really is. It is the unexpected leap of the spirit of man into the existential luminosity of Reality Itself, not merely by the metaphysical intuition of being, but by the

¹⁵¹ Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis, selected and ed. by William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994), 263.

¹⁵² Ibid., 264.

¹⁵³ NM, 10.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 10-11.

transcendent fulfillment of an existential communion with Him Who is.¹⁵⁵

In sum, Merton situates contemplation within a framework of hoping. Even more, contemplation brings Christian hope to fulfillment in this world; hence contemplation is a foretaste of the definitive victory of life over death in our souls. Without contemplation people only believe in the possibility of this victory, and they “hope” for it. This ambiguous statement achieves clarity if one realizes that the “hope” here referred to connotes a purely passive sense of undefined expectation.

In “Called out of Darkness,” the final section of this book, Merton underscores the significance of Christian hoping. Christian life, he notes, is a life of waiting for the Bridegroom’s arrival in the night of this world. The night of this world is made up of the confusion, routine, mediocrity, and inertia of everyday existence with its distractions.¹⁵⁶ The year 1961 is noteworthy for its many letters which highlight the hope motif.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 14. Choan-Seng Song, an authority on Asian Theology, offers a comparable view of hope for attaining Satori:

Satori is enlightenment of the mind as the mind is touched by the truth. It is an experience that leads us to the sudden realization of being in the presence of the truth we have been seeking.... Intuition overcomes the normal framework of reason and rationality, breaks into the mystery of mysteries, and enables men and women to come to the presence of the reality they seek. (Choan-Seng Song, Third-Eve Theology, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979, 6).

¹⁵⁶ NM, 227.

¹⁵⁷ A letter to Archimandrite Sophrony (Jan. 26, 1961) contrasts hope and despair. Despair is the dark side of the truth which is the beauty of wisdom which seems to be hidden in the chaotic disorder of sin. Thus, we must “keep our hearts in hell and not despair” (HGL, 559-560). A letter to Czeslaw Milosz (March 28, 1961) declares that hope is not to be found in humanity, for only the faithfulness of God can give us hope (CT, 73). A letter to Evora Arca De Sardinia (May 15, 1961) speaks of some hopes and illusions raised by political strategies, but because they are false and faltering they stand in sharp contrast with the positive hope God shows us (WF, 77-78). A letter to Sr. M. Emmanuel (Aug. 9, 1961) finds in hope elements of oxymoron. Because hope is aspiration to the truth of Christ, the Savior’s Resurrection in the midst of a troubled world serves as a source of hope, and in fact one might even venture to call the Third World the hope of the world (HGL, 185-186).

A number of letters (nearly all of them written in the year under consideration) deal with the U.S. involvement in war. Understandably, hope is a recurring theme. A letter to a Pakistan Muslim ascetic Abdul Aziz (Sept. 24, 1961) cites resistance to political aggression and development of a strong and coherent “third world” as a source of hope (Ibid., 50-51). While this is the first Merton letter to Abdul Aziz that speaks of hope, it should be noted that “Throughout the 1960s, up to Merton’s death in 1968, Merton and Abdul Aziz carried on their correspondence... In the end, there are some seventeen Merton letters ... Sixteen of Abdul Aziz’ letters are extant, but none of them are yet published” (Sidney H. Griffith, “As One

In Original Child Bomb (1962), Merton calls upon his poetic powers to challenge the USA military decision to drop the first atomic bombs in Japan. Though not the theme of this poem, hope plays a decisive role. Ironically, religious nomenclature was used to identify various facets of this venturism into the nuclear era. For example, the operation was called "Trinity." The thermonuclear technicians expressed their satisfaction in a biblical statement: " Lord, I believe, help thou my unbelief." The bomb was named "Baby," while "Papacy" was used as a code name. Throughout, the poem castigates the false hope saddled to the atomic bomb, and then strikes an ominous note of despair. Admiral Leahy, a key figure in the poem, is made spokesperson for those who do not trust the atomic bomb. A chilling piece of irony is interjected: "Others may have had 'faith' but he had his own variety of 'hope'."¹⁵⁸

In "Nuclear War and Christian Responsibility" (Feb. 9, 1962) Merton labels our times apocalyptic insofar as the entire hidden history of salvation has resolved into a final, decisive crisis. While we may not be able to fathom what the world's end means, Merton incisively states that we are helping to unveil the symbols of the last New Testament book. Those symbols unmask our very selves as individuals whose destiny is to live at a time when the destruction of human history has become a distinct

Spiritual Man to Another" in Merton and Sufism, ed. by Rob Baker and Gray Henry [Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 1999], 103).

A letter to Sr. Helen Jean Seidel (Oct. 9, 1961) makes reference to faith, hope, and love (SCh, 140). A letter to Erich Fromm (written in Dec. 1961) distinguishes genuine optimism from false optimism: the truly hopeful image is one that confronts the objectively evil force of war (HGL, 318). A letter to Ethel Kennedy (also written in Dec. 1961) looks to an active hope concerning more realism in peacemaking (Ibid., 444-445)

A letter to Daniel Berrigan (Dec. 7, 1961) expresses a hope that people will come to understand the criminal nature of nuclear war (Ibid., 72). Hope as a pathway to peace is explored in a letter to Walter Stein (written either in Dec. 1961 or Jan. 1962) (WF, 28). In the face of a seemingly hopeless situation, there looms a contrastive dimension of real hope, "a hope that is not seen" (Idem). A letter to Ernesto Cardenal (undated, but written in 1961) points to a hope that the truth can be found and vindicated (CT, 125).

¹⁵⁸ CPTM, 297.

possibility.¹⁵⁹

Merton also labels "apocalyptic" the twentieth-century attitude toward Bolshevism. Since the west was once predominantly Christian, the cause of the western nations is naively linked with the cause of God. Hence, "the incentive to wipe out Bolshevism may well be one of the apocalyptic temptations of twentieth-century Christendom."¹⁶⁰

Combatants on either side of the iron curtain, Merton infers, share common characteristics. On the moral level, they are blinded by a determinism which, in effect, drives human beings to complete irresponsibility. Hence, moral obligations and decisions have become practically meaningless; at best they are mere words, a rationalization of pragmatic decisions already dictated by the needs of the moment.¹⁶¹ On the level of political, economic and military activity, this moral passivity yields to a demonic activism, a frenzy of the most varied, versatile, and utterly brilliant technological improvisations. Politics presumes to speak of this force as its servant, to control it for social purposes, for the "good of man." Admittedly, the intention is good and the technology is not intrinsically evil,¹⁶² but in actual fact, no one any longer exercises full control of technological development.

Two proposals speak to our common rationality. (1) The remedy might be to slow down our activity, especially all activity related to the production and testing of weapons of destruction. Since it is not a solution, disarmament may be only a relief without a cure. Being at least perhaps feasible, it should at all costs be attempted.¹⁶³ (2) Equally important, and perhaps even more difficult than disarmament, is the recovery of some

¹⁵⁹ Passion for Peace: The Social Essays, ed., with introduction by William H. Shannon (New York: Crossroad, 1995), 39.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 40.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 41.

¹⁶² Ibid., 42.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 43.

moral sense and the resumption of genuine responsibility. Without this, it is illusory for us to speak of freedom and "control."¹⁶⁴ The situation forces a crucial question: Can the moral norms developed by scholastic theologians in the day of hand-to-hand combat still carry meaning?¹⁶⁵

In the face of this crisis, Merton laments the lack of genuine optimism. Our contemporaries yield to irresponsible determinism and vague historic forces which drive us to demonic activism in politics and technology. The compounding of evil — a reality rather than a chimera — does not escape Merton. We face the material evil of universal destruction. The actual destruction of the human race, while an enormous evil, is still in itself only a physical evil. More than the material evil of universal destruction, we face the moral responsibility of global suicide. This moral evil is the inevitable choice which will be made in desperation by the world's leaders and ratified by the consent and cooperation of all their citizens. Such a scenario will gradually move us towards the "logic of circumstances" that will leave us no choice but to choose the course that leads to destruction. Such circumstances choke off any future hope.¹⁶⁶

In "Red or Dead: The Anatomy of a Cliché" (March, 1962) Merton dissects "the climax of despair" in the West. He delineates five steps in the Western attitude toward communism:

First, the very survival of democracy hinges on total nuclear war. Without recourse to the threat of total nuclear war and, without the ability to annihilate the enemy by a "first strike," western civilization is no longer capable of surviving. Second, it is not possible for democracy, for western civilization, to survive by peaceful means. The west has exhausted the resources of humanity and reasonableness which would make negotiation thinkable except on a basis of terror.

¹⁶⁴ Idem.

¹⁶⁵ Idem.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 46.

Third, if the west survives at all, it can only survive as communist. The choice is between surviving and becoming communist, or dying in defense of the ideals of democracy, the American way of life. This implies that the American way of life can survive only through war, while communism can survive without recourse to total nuclear war.

Fourth, since survival for the communists automatically means victory, they must be prevented at all cost from surviving. Since for the West survival without nuclear war practically means defeat, to reject nuclear war in order to survive is purely and simply to admit defeat.

Fifth, if we are reduced to a choice between the survival of the communists and the destruction of the entire human race, the heroic and even Christian course is to choose the destruction of the human race.¹⁶⁷

By way of response, the assumption must be seen as a pure surrender to irrationality and to hysteria.

First, this kind of thinking reflects *a mentality of defeat*. It presumes that democratic values are not strong enough to prevail by peaceful means. *It could not survive except by recourse to war*, and that *it would resort to any extreme* in order to crush opposition.

Second, it adopts a logic of *despair*. While professing to believe in democratic ideals, freedom, and the creativity supposedly inherent in our way of life, it admits in reality *a radical doubt of all these values*. Only nuclear weapons can do the trick. This attitude, the result of the secularist, irreligious pragmatic spirit, springs from the emptiness, the resentment, the sense of futility and meaninglessness which gnaw secretly at the heart of western man.

Third, it is finally nothing more than *a mentality of suicide*. As the self-destructive resentment that follows from the accumulated petty humiliations, repeated errors and stupidities, these pent-up and desperate pressures of our self-hate are now ready to destroy ourselves and the whole world with us in one grand explosion.¹⁶⁸

In the article "Christian Ethics and Nuclear War" (March 1962), Merton contemplates the possibility of the complete destruction of human society and even the extinction of life on the planet. He contends that these fears have generated a climate of widespread uneasiness and even of implicit desperation. Nevertheless, these fears are not

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 49-50.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 50-51 (original emphasis).

“without certain correlative hopes.”¹⁶⁹ Merton argues that the church could not be presented a desperate situation which did not also contain a challenge and a promise.

The possibility of defending the west with a nuclear first strike on Russia is accepted easily enough as “necessary” and a “lesser evil.” No price is too high to pay for our religious liberty. But the stark fact remains that genocide is too high a price to pay and no one, not even a Christian, has the right to take measures — not even on behalf of the highest ideals — that may destroy millions of innocent noncombatants and whole defenseless populations of neutral nations.¹⁷⁰ This position is both psychologically irresponsible and immoral, according to all Christian standards. Owing to the slow corruption of the Christian ethical sense by theorizing in a vacuum, confusion, inertia, indecision, and even culpable silence have shaped the stance of many Christian spokespersons.¹⁷¹ Even worse, some Christian leaders call on God to justify the moral blindness and hubris of generals and industrialists, and even to bless nuclear war as a “holy and apocalyptic crusade.”¹⁷²

In “Christian Action in World Crisis” (June, 1962) Merton targets his anger at apocalyptic determinism and dark pessimism. Conceding the possibility of the real destruction of humanity, he turns to apocalyptic imagery and gestalt psychology for a scenario: “we see the many-crowned and many-headed monsters rising on all sides out of the deep, from the ocean of our own hidden and collective self.”¹⁷³ The enemy is not just on one side or the other — not just Russia, or China, or Communism, or Castro, or Krushchev, or Capitalism or imperialism. The enemy is war itself. And the root of war is

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 56.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹⁷¹ *Idem.*

¹⁷² *Idem.*

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 81.

hatred, fear, selfishness, lust. Merton insists that we first fight the demon in ourselves.

Throughout his analysis of the religious and moral dimensions of war, Merton's priority is not to establish a moral code or to use it to determine an extrinsic morality of war. Rather his approach is to use apocalyptic images to characterize contemporary society. Such a construal invites a look into the depth of the self from which all our actions spring. The demonic forces that besiege us pursue us relentlessly even into absurd little caves fitted out with battery radios and hand-held blowers. Security escapes us even "in the spiritual cave of forgetfulness, in the anaesthesia of the human mind that finally shuts out an unbearable truth, and goes about the business of life in torpor and stoical indifference."¹⁷⁴

No one dares predict what is about to be born out of our confusion, our frenzy, our apocalyptic madness. Yet, the monsters do not have to come to life. They do not have the substance which is given to things by the creative power of God. They are merely the spiritual emanations of our sick and sinful being. "They exist in and by us. They are from us. They cannot exist without us. They are our illusions." Not only are they nightmares which our incredible technological skill can all too easily actualize, they are also dreams from which we can awaken before it is too late. They are dreams which we can still, perhaps, choose not to dream. In such a desperate struggle, it is good to remember: "A death struggle can be a struggle for life, a new birth. Perhaps the present crisis is the birth agony of a new world."¹⁷⁵

Passion For Peace embodies some of Merton's most tightly reasoned prose on the untenability of nuclear war. His logic focuses on the terror of global annihilation and the desperate need for hope.

Selected poems from this era enrich the scenario. In 1963 Merton published

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 80.

¹⁷⁵ Idem.

Emblems of a Season of Fury.¹⁷⁶ "Why Some Look Up to Planets and Heros" submits American and Russian patriotism to critical scrutiny. Optimism concerning technology has given birth to religion with "true believers." Delusion and ignorance of technology's goal have awakened a hopelessness which blinds far too many to the causes and reasons for doing things: a haunting refrain recurs in the thrice-repeated: "Nobody knows."¹⁷⁷

"The Moslem's Angel of Death (Algeria 1961)" arguably borrows "a million fueled eyes" from Rev 4:6, but there is no doubt the apocalyptic imagery targets the scourges of human death and suffering which the French government introduced into Algeria.¹⁷⁸

"Song: In the Shows of the Round Ox" chooses technology and capitalism as its subject and allows the poet to vent his scorn of capitalism.¹⁷⁹ "Advice to a Young Prophet" alerts the inexperienced herald of true vision not to be misled by bad prophets who appear to be strong.¹⁸⁰ It is not unlikely that the poet is taking to task church authority which has uncritically defended government policy.

In NSC (1962) Merton broadens his understanding of hope.¹⁸¹ Incremental developments, especially of a sociopolitical character, occur between SC (1949) and NSC (1961). In "Seeds of Contemplation" in NSC a key sentence has been added — one calling for thoughtful reflection:

No man who ignores the rights and needs of others can *hope* to walk in the light of contemplation, because his way has turned aside from the truth. from

¹⁷⁶ CPTM, 303-392.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 305-307.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 307-308.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 311-313.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 338-339.

¹⁸¹ New Seeds of Contemplation (NSC). New York: New Directions, 1961.

compassion and therefore from God.¹⁸²

"Sentences," a new section in NSC, contains an inaugural statement: "To hope is to risk frustration."¹⁸³ "The Root of War," in NSC, is very much expanded. Earlier, SC had discussed war, but with a relatively simple approach to solving war issues. There Merton had noted:

Will you end wars by asking men to *trust* men who evidently cannot be *trusted*? No. Teach them to love and *trust* God; then they will be able to love the man they can not *trust*, and will dare to make peace with them, not *trusting* in them but in God.¹⁸⁴

NSC deals with the issue very differently. Before talking about trusting God,

Merton scans the reality of the world:

There is very little hope that the world will be run according to [universally accepted principles].... It is useless and even laughable to base political thought on the faint hope of a purely contingent and subjective moral illumination in the hearts of the world's leaders.... But outside of political thought and action, in the religious sphere, it is not only permissible to hope for such a mysterious consummation, but it is necessary to pray for it.¹⁸⁵

An extended commentary on the intersection of trust and hope yields this

sequence:

... it would be sentimental folly to expect men to trust one another when they obviously cannot be trusted. But at least they can learn to trust God.... If they can trust and love God, who is infinitely wise and who rules the lives of men, permitting them to use their freedom even to the point of almost incredible abuse, they can love men who are evil...

If we can love the men we cannot trust (without trusting them foolishly).... then there is some hope of a kind of peace on earth, based not on the wisdom and the manipulations of men, but on the inscrutable mercy of God.... As a result, it is absurd to hope for a solid peace based on fictions and illusions.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸² Ibid., 18-19 (emphasis added).

¹⁸³ Ibid., 104.

¹⁸⁴ SC, 72-73 (emphasis added).

¹⁸⁵ NSC, 117-118.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 118-122.

From "Hell as Hatred" emerges a macabre picture of hell, as a place or condition where no one has anything in common with anybody else except the fact that they all hate one another and cannot get away from one another and from themselves.... all recognize in one another what they detest in themselves, selfishness and impotence, agony, terror and despair.¹⁸⁷

The description is worthy of Dante's provocative sign posted at the gate of Inferno: "Leave here all hope, you who enter."

"Humanity against Despair." a new section in NSC, intersects pride and despair, with powerful effect. Interpreting humility as antithesis to despair. Merton notes:

Despair is the absolute extreme of self-love.... (In every man) there is hidden some root of despair because. ...there is pride that vegetates and springs weeds and rank flowers of self-pity as soon as our own resources fail us.... Despair is the ultimate development of a pride so great and so stiff-necked that it selects the absolute misery of damnation rather than accept happiness from the hands of God....¹⁸⁸

An inevitable inference follows: "But a man who is truly humble cannot despair, because in the humble man there is no longer any such thing as self-pity."¹⁸⁹ Indeed, "There is no hope more cruel than the vain hope for a supreme fulfillment that is so misunderstood as to be utterly impossible."¹⁹⁰ The writer here comes close to Paul's "hoping against hope," namely, arriving at a new level of assurance in God's power to save and God's will to deliver.¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 123. Note the similarity to Sartre's definition of "hell" (as "other people").

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 180.

¹⁸⁹ Idem.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 184.

¹⁹¹ Walter Holden Capps, Hope Against Hope: Moltmann to Merton in One Theological Decade (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976).

Merton warns against inducements to despair: e.g., the very desire for a spiritual gift which "enslaves us to the idol of our exterior self, and binds us, like blind Samson, to the mill of vain hopes and illusory desires."¹⁹² Such a vain hope is "in reality a temptation to despair," because it presents itself as an illusory promise.¹⁹³ Merton extrapolates:

how many people there are in the world of today who have "lost their faith" along with the vain hopes and illusions of their childhood. What they call "faith" was just one among all the other illusions. They placed all their hope in a certain sense of spiritual peace, of comfort, of interior equilibrium of self-respect.¹⁹⁴

Hence he exhorts:

Place not hope in the feeling of assurance, in spiritual comfort.... Place no hope in the inspirational preachers of Christian sunshine, who are able to pick you up and set you back on your feet and make you feel good for three or four days — until you fold up and collapse into despair.¹⁹⁵

Merton's quarrel is with all purveyors of an illusory faith, a vain hope. In the ultimate analysis, a dynamic hope engenders authentic humility, and a humble person has no fear of failure. In fact, such a person is not afraid of anything, even of self, since perfect humility implies authentic confidence in the power of God, before whom no other power has any meaning and for whom there is no such thing as an obstacle.¹⁹⁶

Humility has here been clearly tied into a traditional understanding of hope.

Together humility and hope offer an effective antidote to the combined arrogance of self-love and despair. NSC pleads for a fuller understanding of faith.

Faith is primarily an intellectual assent. But if it were only that and nothing more, if it were only the "argument of what does not appear," it would not be complete. It has to be something more than an assent of the mind. It is also a grasp, a

¹⁹² NSC, 186.

¹⁹³ Idem.

¹⁹⁴ Idem.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 187.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 190.

contact, a communion of wills, "the substance of things to be hoped for."¹⁹⁷

In the correspondence for 1962, at least fifteen published letters return to the theme of hope and hopefulness.¹⁹⁸

After his Cold War Letters were denied publication, Merton returned to the study of the early church writers and wrote Life and Holiness (1963). The introduction notes that the work is directed to those engaged in the active life. Merton does not see Christian action "in opposition to contemplation, but as an expression of charity and as a necessary consequence of union with God by baptism."¹⁹⁹ The book lays out Merton's ever expanding understanding of hope. "Christian faith," he explains, "is a total surrender

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 128.

¹⁹⁸ Catherine De Hueck Doherty (Jan. 4, 1962) is reminded of the twilight of dawn in our time, a dawn that will serve as a harbinger of hope (HGL, 19). A letter to Sr. M. Emmanuel (Jan. 16, 1962) speaks of God the Lord of History and ventures the hope that Christian social activism will prove fruitful in the Brazil crisis (Ibid., 186-187). In a letter to Mary Childs Black (Jan. 24, 1962), a reference to the Shakers faults the "deceptiveness of the secular hope" which poses against their eschatological vision (WF, 30-31). A letter written on Feb. 4, 1962, to John Tracy Ellis, dean of American Catholic historians, voices a cautious hope for Vatican II's deliberation on war issues (Ibid., 176-177). Evora Arca De Sardinia (Feb. 27, 1962) is advised to set aside human hope for dependence on God alone.

You have to gradually give up the hope of the kind of support you used to know in the past and depend upon God alone in spiritual poverty and naked faith. It is hard and bitter, but it is necessary, for this is God's will for you. In the depths of your soul you will have peace but on the surface you will have restlessness and conflict. Continue peacefully to give to others as to Christ Himself, realizing that He will reward you in His own good time.... (Ibid., 79-80).

The correspondence of March 1962 comes back again and again to the topic of hope. A letter to Herbert Mason (March 9, 1962) notes the inherent hopefulness in the non-violence movement (Ibid., 272). A letter to Frank J. Sheed (March 10, 1962) voices a steadfast hope in the Ecumenical Council (Ibid., 45). A second letter to John Tracy Ellis (March 19, 1962) refers to the illusion of limited nuclear war: this "pious hope" lacks the solid prospects of actual realization (HGL, 180). Among its comments on the spiritual night, a letter to Etta Gullick (March 30, 1962) censures the collective stupidity and crime in contemporary society and speaks of Julian of Norwich as an agent of hope in her time and ours (Ibid., 351).

To Jeanne Burdick a letter of June 11, 1962 expresses hope concerning the forthcoming Council (Ibid., 110). Evora Arca De Sardinia (Aug. 17, 1962) is urged not to entertain an "undue hope in impossibilities" (WF, 82). A letter to Leslie Dewart (Sept. 19, 1962) brands as false a secular hope which stands in opposition to Christian hope (Ibid., 282). A letter to the Mayor of Hiroshima (simply dated 1962) holds up the people of Hiroshima as a symbol of the hopes of humanity (HGL, 380). Etta Gullick 1962) is advised to contrast genuine despair with false optimism (Ibid., 355). Finally, Ernesto Cardenal (Nov. 17, 1962) is invited to look forward to Christmas as a season of hope (Ibid., 54).

¹⁹⁹ LH (New York: Herder, 1963), vii-viii.

to Christ which places all our hopes in him and strength and sanctity from his merciful love."²⁰⁰ In Christ, as the source of the authentic meaning of the faith, all life, all truth, all hope, all reality may be sought and found.²⁰¹

During this period hope has become an essential component of Merton's spirituality. "We cannot bring hope and redemption to others," he writes, " unless we are ourselves filled with the light of Christ and his Spirit."²⁰² Since Christian hope depends on grace, "acting that is based on the frenzies and impulses of human ambition [is] a delusion and an obstacle to grace." and consequently contravenes hope.²⁰³

The conclusion to this work makes Christian perfection interchangeable with confidence in God. Perfect Christians are no longer troubled by the sorrows and frailties of the present life. So firm is the confidence one experiences in a God who cannot fail that the mercy of God is received in unwavering trust. In support of this outlook, Rom. 5:3-4 is cited: "... we are confident even over our afflictions, knowing well that affliction gives rise to endurance, and endurance gives proof of our faith and a proved faith gives ground for hope."²⁰⁴ Clement of Alexandria, who roots perfection in hope, is cited in support:

Such perfect Christians, perfect in hope and in the knowledge of divine mercy, are always present to God in prayer for even when they are not explicitly praying they are seeking him and relying on his grace alone.²⁰⁵

This same year (1963) saw the publication of a key article on hope. "Advent: Hope or Delusions?" aims to interpret the essence of Christian hope. From the outset the

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 69.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 100.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 27.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, x.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 118.

²⁰⁵ *Idem.*

primary thesis is announced that the certainty of Christian hope transcends passion and knowledge. It therefore becomes necessary at times to realize that our hope will be confronted by darkness, desperation, and ignorance. Since Christian optimism and genuine Christian hope are interchangeable, Christian optimism is not an ongoing sense of euphoria nor an indefectible comfort that excludes anguish or tragedy nor even the suppression of tragedy — rather it is a hope of victory that transcends tragedy.²⁰⁶ Merton searches for and finds the true meaning of Christian hope in the mystery of Advent. This liturgical season centers our faith on "the very meaning of life, of the history of man, of the world and of our own being."²⁰⁷ As the season which looks to the coming and the presence of Christ in our troubled world, Advent highlights Christ's influence in the world as a source of hope.²⁰⁸

In his exploration of the mystery of Advent Merton looks for eschatological signs. Two types (both attestations of life) capture his attention. The first is the eschatological sign of renewed physical life. the second is the community of the poor who have no hope but the Lord. Since the Gospel is preached to the poor, their identification with Christ makes them an eschatological sign of Christ. Advent, the article concludes, serves as a liturgical axis for the Christian understanding of hope: we place our hope in the God of history, and God is at once in us and history.

Passion For Peace: The Social Essays (1995) contains Merton's review of Ignace Lepp's book, The Christian Failure (1963). The critique takes note of the "almost total lack of protest on the part of religious people and clergy, in the face of enormous social evils."²⁰⁹ It focuses on the collective psychology of the French clergy who collaborated

²⁰⁶ Seasons of Celebration (SCb) (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964), 88.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 89.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 90.

²⁰⁹ PaP, 127.

with the Nazi regime in the domination of Europe. While they had no special love for the Nazis, the French clergy passively accepted Hitler's totalitarian power, preferring it as the lesser of two evils to communism. Such a psychology of evasion, irresponsibility, and negativism amounted to a subterfuge in its appeal to grandiose concepts such as "defense of freedom and religion," "obedience to civil authority," and "self-sacrifice." This psychology of subservient opportunism is branded anti-Christian — destructive in fact of both Christianity and democratic liberty, and features a latent despair of freedom and of democratic government. The either/or complex which fatalistically addresses the supposed "choice" between Nazism and Communism is ultimately a flight from the difficulties and responsibilities without which democratic life and freedom are impossible. The chief criterion of moral values thus becomes "survival." Not just that of the individual but also of the freedom of religion. The net result is that people shut their eyes to monstrous evils and acquiesce in an unjust and tyrannical system. A corollary is the contemptible servility of a psychology which appeals to good reasons, even religious truth, to excuse its defection. According to Merton, Father Ignace Lepp argues that the Church's authoritarian character is responsible for this tendency in many Catholics.²¹⁰

At least ten letters from the year 1963 make mention of hope as a significant concern. Seven of them deal with the topic in passing.²¹¹ Three others call for detailed

²¹⁰ Ibid., 129.

²¹¹ A letter to Evon Arca De Sardinia (Jan. 1, 1963) anticipates a firm hope of the restoration of peace, justice, and order in an age of revolutionary turmoil (WF, 83). A second communication to her (Feb. 22, 1963) urges not to invest any hope in American action regarding the Cuban exiles: immediate hopes and actions only induce frustration (Idem).

Merton has a healthy respect for the poet Vellejo. He writes to Clayton Eschleman (June 1963): "Vallajo is a great eschatological poet, with a profound sense of the end (and yet of the new beginnings that he does not talk about) (CT, 255). A communication to Jean and Hildegard Goss-Mayr (Oct. 28, 1963) testifies to a hope and trust in the greatness of individuals like Martin Luther King (HGL, 334). Jacqueline Kennedy (Nov. 27, 1963) is invited to hope that clarity and reason can emerge from the tragic and cruel explosion of irrationality that assassinated a president (Ibid., 450). A letter to Kilian McDonnell (Dec. 20, 1963) makes several references to the writer's continued hope for the future (SCh, 188-189). A letter to James Baldwin (no date, 1963) praises him for his published work on the harsh realities of racism and discrimination. At the midpoint of his observations Merton strikes a dismal tone. "Sometimes I am convinced that there cannot be a way out of this. Humanly there is no hope... We still see the whole things

examination. Leslie Dewart (Apr. 27, 1963) is asked to draw a careful distinction between genuine pessimism and naive optimism. Whereas naive optimism leads to temporal hopes,²¹² genuine pessimism does not depend upon “any kind of prognostic on the results.”²¹³ Merton explains:

Frankly I am rather indifferent to the results as such, I mean as the “anticipated fruit” of my gallant efforts. I think we must all be perfectly ready to make all kinds of efforts and even get destroyed into the bargain, without particularly worrying about any fruit that we can anticipate. The Lord has His ideas and they will not fail to bring forth the fruit He wants, which is also what we want. We should be exercised ... I mention the above points not as an ascetic sermon fit for novices, but as one of the most basic tenets on which genuine non-violence is based. Without indifference to immediate fruits, non-violence is powerless. And I would tend to think that it does not matter whether we can continue to keep the world in a “Christian Era” or not. Certainly we should try, it is absurd to throw out the last hope of order that does remain, as far as I can see: a society based on rational norms, natural law, and all that Catholic philosophy sees, teaches and calls for.²¹⁴

A letter to Miguel Grinberg (June 21, 1963) advocates a basis for positive hope in the efforts of political, cultural, and spiritual renewal in the West.²¹⁵ It warrants extended citation:

Yet the West is not beyond redemption: there are faint and confused stirrings of human hope, as also in the East with some of the revisionists. I think Pope John [XXIII] was one of those who intuitively sized up the situation and reached out for the elements of positive hope that he was able to see. ... I am warmly attached to my friends in Nicaragua who are writing fine poetry, and I have many friends all over the hemisphere in whom I think there is great hope of an awaking of life. I wish I had more time and more leisure to communicate with everyone, but the limitations of my vocation do impose restraints which I cannot always ignore! However, do believe me in deep union and agreement with the forces of life and

as a sort of abstract exercise in ethic, when we see it at all. We don't see we are killing our own hope and the hope of the world” (CT, 255).

²¹² Ibid., 284.

²¹³ Ibid., 283.

²¹⁴ Ibid., 283-284.

²¹⁵ CT, 196-197.

hope that are struggling for the renewal of the true cultural and spiritual vitality of the “new work” which is sometimes so tired, so old and so shabby. It is what pretends to be most “new” that is often the oldest and weariest thing of all.²¹⁶

A third letter to Evon Arca De Sardinia (July 25, 1963) emphasizes that prayer and hope are validated only in the victory of God which is already given.²¹⁷

Your words that we must pray to God and hope for the victory to be given us over and above everything else, are quite correct. And furthermore, we must seek only His victory. This is most important. When we insist that our victory is His victory just because it pleases us or is profitable to us, we are mistaken. Yet the sufferings of all those who have been killed and tortured for His love must not be in vain: but it is not our part to punish the ones who did these things. We must leave that to God.²¹⁸

Seeds of Destruction (1964), a work of critical importance, consists of five essays and thirty-five letters.²¹⁹ The letters are addressed to a variety of individuals, from a Jewish Rabbi to the mayor of Hiroshima. A unity of theme surfaces in the articulation of a proper Christian stance toward a world overrun with malevolent movements (hence the title). The work vents a passion for various social issues, each approached from the standpoint of hope or such hope-related perspectives as Kairos, the Kingdom of God and Salvation.

The introductory remarks contain some of Merton’s most lucid insights into hope. A monastic community, the author argues, is deeply involved in the economic, political, and social structures of the contemporary world.²²⁰ Christianity, therefore, cannot negate time, for it is based on an existent reality which has transformed the meaning of history. The freedom of the Christian contemplative is, therefore, not freedom from time, but rather freedom in time. Such freedom will go out and meet God here and now in the

²¹⁶ Idem.

²¹⁷ WF, 84.

²¹⁸ Idem.

²¹⁹ Seeds of Destruction (SD). (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964).

²²⁰ Ibid., xi.

inscrutable mystery of the divine Will. These affirmations imply a thoroughgoing eschatological hope. The monastic withdrawal from secular time accordingly is not an escape into an abstract eternity, but rather a leap from the cyclic recurrence of inexorable evil into the eschatological kingdom of God in Christ, the kingdom of humility and of forgiveness.²²¹

“Letter to a White Liberal” (undated) takes a basic theological stance from which to counter current situations of injustice. Beginning with the concept of God as the hidden Lord of Ages, and a rich understanding of Kairos, the discussion soon moves into the orbit of Christian hope. Christianity, it is argued, is essentially concerned with human crises, inasmuch as Christians are called to testify to the mercy and truth of God in history.²²² The Church then must so manifest Christ to the world as to make the hidden Lord of Ages visible in her charity, her love of truth and her love of humanity.²²³

White liberals lack a true understanding of the experience, motives and feelings of African-Americans.²²⁴ Even when espousing their cause, white liberals are actually fighting for themselves. The nub of the issue is ambiguity.²²⁵ Only African-Americans can liberate themselves, without help and permission from Whites.

Having set down these preliminary considerations, Merton moves on to consider the hour of freedom as the hour of freedom for Whites. The African-American offers the white race a “message of salvation,” but the white people are so taken up by their self-sufficiency and self-conceit that they do not recognize the risk they incur by ignoring the

²²¹ *Ibid.*, xii-xiii.

²²² *Ibid.*, 10.

²²³ *Ibid.*, 11.

²²⁴ Reflective of the terminology of his time, Merton uses the term “Negroes” or “Blacks.” These terms are replaced here with the politically correct designation, African-Americans.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 34.

offer.²²⁶ Merton calls this providential hour *Kairos*.²²⁷ It is God's hour — a critical moment in which God signifies the divine will through African-Americans. This will is a call to reform. It is the hour of Calling.²²⁸ The entire piece, based on the notion of *Kairos*, finds its rationale in the dynamic of hope.

In the article that follows, "The Legend of Tucker Caliban," Merton highlights another concrete instance of *Kairos*: the time has come for both Blacks and Whites.²²⁹ Whites, however, have forfeited the power to hear any inner voice other than that of their own demon who urges them to preserve the *status quo*.²³⁰

By way of a preliminary to discussing the possibility of hope in world crisis, the article "The Christian in World Crisis, Reflections on the Moral Climate of the 1960s" adopts this key premise from John XXIII:

... unfortunately the law of fear still reigns among peoples.... There is reason to hope, however, that by meeting and negotiating men may come to discover that one of the most profound requirements of their nature is this: between them and their respective people it is not fear that should reign, but love — a love that tends to express itself in collaboration. (John XXIII. Pacem in Terris)²³¹

The significance of hope is unmistakable.

Of the article's five sections, the first three are especially relevant here. The first section, concerned with human responsibility in the climate of irrationality, confusion and violence, makes several significant points on hope.²³²

²²⁶ Ibid., 63-64.

²²⁷ Ibid., 44.

²²⁸ Ibid., 65.

²²⁹ Ibid., 83.

²³⁰ Ibid., 84. In this same article Merton speaks of God as the Lord of history (SD, 85: cf HGL, 186-187).

²³¹ Ibid., 93.

²³² Ibid., 95, 102, 112.

The second section, "The Christian as Peacemaker," discusses the true meaning of Christian peace. Biblical passages, in overview, weave a tapestry of two themes, hope and the Kingdom of God.²³³

The third section, "War in Origen and St. Augustine," undertakes a critical review of the just war theory. Favoring Origen and critical of St. Augustine, Merton outlines the weakness of the just-war theory. The analysis is based primarily on the eschatological teaching of the New Testament, the early Church writers and a study of Pacem in Terris.²³⁴ Merton notes approvingly that Pope John "dared to hope in the goodness placed in human nature by God the Creator."²³⁵ The pontiff's optimism is compared to that of St. Thomas Aquinas. In presenting the concept of Christian optimism Merton steers wide of shallow sentiment in addressing the agonizing questions of the day. Christian optimism, he underscores, "embraces all the best hopes and intuitions of the modern world of science and technology, and unites them with the spiritual vision of Christianity."²³⁶ The power for peace as set forth in the great encyclical lies in its profoundly optimistic Christian spirit and in its radical belief in people. Merton opportunely declares his own confidence in humanity.²³⁷ According to Givey, the essayist finds in this uncompromising belief in the ultimate possibility of peace and unity one of Pope John's greatest gifts.²³⁸

A shift in focus can be detected in the rest of Seeds of Destruction. The author's preoccupation with the major sociopolitical issues of the early 1960s is nuanced by his involvement in the issue of renewal, monastic and ecclesiastical. This, the present writer

²³³ Ibid. See esp. pp. 116, 117, 125-134.

²³⁴ Ibid. See esp. pp. 165, 167, 170, 174, 210.

²³⁵ Ibid., 174.

²³⁶ Ibid., 178.

²³⁷ Ibid., 180.

²³⁸ David W. Givey, The Social Thought of Thomas Merton: The Way of Nonviolence and Peace for the Future (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1983), 71.

is prepared to argue, comes in the form of a modified trajectory rather than a discontinuity in Merton's thought. Hence the topical heading of the section that follows.

2. Monastic and Ecclesiastical Renewal Grounded in Hope: 1964-1968

The specificity of Merton's hope, when compared with the other exponents of hope, becomes especially incisive in the article "The Christians in the Diaspora." For the first time, Merton seems to come to grips with the full challenge of hope from the standpoint of individual Christian commitment. A fullness emerges beyond his earlier work on the topic. Its focus comes from Rahner's concept of diaspora.²³⁹ Here is a term, rich in biblical associations and solid in theological background, that carries the full weight of Merton's thought.

Merton sees the Church committed to a much-needed process of challenging an unknown future. Because Christians cannot find security and stability in familiar human structures, they must look to the promises of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. Christian hope would be meaningless if there were no risks to face and the future were definitively mortgaged to an unchanging present. Hence, Christian hope awakens "confidence not in metaphysical immobility but in the dynamism of unfailing love."²⁴⁰ Because an "optimism" that denies evident realities is unchristian, true hope commits itself to quest and find motives for confidence in the face of crisis. Given such circumstances, the Church will come to know and experience truth and freedom.²⁴¹

Merton rejects a false hope based on conservative triumphalism in the Church. He endorses Rahner's rejection of an unrealistic triumphalism. Such a shallow optimism supposes that a little more zeal, a little more energy, will enable the Church to subdue the political order and definitively convert the city of humanity into the city of God according

²³⁹ Merton's dependence on Rahner's idea of diaspora will be more fully developed below (page 187). See also page 116, footnote 259.

²⁴⁰ SD, 184.

²⁴¹ Ibid., 185.

to the medieval pattern.²⁴² Rahner, however, postulates first of all that the culture of clericalism, a medieval carry-over, must be set aside. This achieved, the mission of the Church in the world will redound with greater resources and become the work of the laity.²⁴³ Moreover, the Gospel can (and should) be proclaimed by means of one's life rather than through the institution. Comments Merton, "the only thing that can give meaning to such an apostolate is the purity of eschatological hope."²⁴⁴

Rahner may appear pessimistic in foreclosing on a hope of preserving the Church's medieval status, or of recovering a status of power and preeminence in modern society. Rahner does not consider this solution to be in fact a valid Christian hope. Merton infers: "It must be abandoned in favor of a *true* hope, hope not in 'Catholic power' but in the eschatological victory of Christ."²⁴⁵ We must not hope therefore to restore and maintain a kind of religio-cultural autonomy in today's secular world. If we live our lives and build our apostolate on the theory that medieval Christendom is the norm for Christianity in the world we are inviting serious trouble.²⁴⁶

At this point, Merton, attuned to Rahner's thought, proceeds to examine the concept of diaspora. Several points germane to the theology of hope call for a summary review here. According to Merton, Rahner takes our present diaspora situation as the starting point — an indispensable premise — for our behavior as Christians in the modern world.²⁴⁷ Rahner further contends that the diaspora condition is especially conducive to salvation, in that it is, in fact, at once a challenge and a promise of hope and of victory for

²⁴² Ibid., 187.

²⁴³ Idem.

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 188.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 189.

²⁴⁶ Idem.

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 193.

equipping one to Christian faith.²⁴⁸

"The Monk in the Diaspora" takes up the question of monastic renewal. The study takes its point of departure from the origins of monastic life. Early monastic life did not depend on elaborate organization, but on the uncompromising dedication of the individual's response to God's call.²⁴⁹ The beginning of monastic history and the nature of the vowed community as a small eschatological gathering should shape the strategy for future renewal.²⁵⁰ The spirit of monastic life is not meant to be institutionalized.

Overall, this essay underscores two factors in the experienced shortcomings of current monasticism. One relates to the individual vocation, the other to the structural ambiguities of present-day monasticism.²⁵¹ It is an unreliable assumption to believe that monasticism can solve all the problems of the Church in diaspora. In fact, Merton dares to hope that monasticism can offer a creative solution to its own problems. If in fact the monastic community can resolve its own difficulties, then there is hope for the wider Church to do likewise. Merton situates his hope for monastic renewal in eremetical solitude, the biblical movement, monastic prayer, liturgical renewal for monks, and monastic presence in and to the world. This last factor calls for a separation by way of Gospel witness and dialogue with the world.²⁵²

The article "Monastic Thought in the Russian Diaspora" identifies the monk as a contemplative who shares the fruits of his life-style, as a pilgrim en route from this world to God, as a sign of the world to come. Monastic contemplation is ultimately grounded in

²⁴⁸ ibid., 194.

²⁴⁹ ibid., 200-201.

²⁵⁰ ibid., 201.

²⁵¹ ibid., 202.

²⁵² ibid., 210.

the eschatological kingdom of God.²⁵³

In "A Tribute to Gandhi" two propositions stand out: that Gandhi knew the New Testament thoroughly, and that he was a rare visionary who applied Gospel principles in a religiously and politically integrated way to contemporary problems.²⁵⁴ For Merton, Gandhi's whole religio-political enterprise drew strength from an ancient metaphysics of humanity, a philosophical wisdom common to Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity: namely, that the way of peace is the way of truth, of fidelity to wholeness and being, and this implies a basic respect for life, in its deepest, most secret and most frontal reality.²⁵⁵ Merton not only applauded but also shared this optimistic view of human nature. Gandhi inalterably clung to the conviction that "in the hidden depths of our being ... we are more truly nonviolent than violent."²⁵⁶ and thereby never lost an opportunity to proclaim that "truth is the law of our being."²⁵⁷ Merton uses Gandhi's optimistic view of human nature to comment on the traditional doctrine of original sin: "the doctrine of original sin, properly understood, is optimistic. It does not teach that man is by nature evil, but that evil in him is unnatural, a disorder, a sin."²⁵⁸ Meanwhile, the correspondence dated to this period continues Merton's preoccupation with eschatological concerns, and optimism as dynamic hope.²⁵⁹

²⁵³ Ibid., 219.

²⁵⁴ Ibid., 226.

²⁵⁵ Cf. ibid., 232.

²⁵⁶ Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander (CGB), Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966, 85.

²⁵⁷ Idem. Merton takes up the refrain: "Truth is the inner law of our being" (SD, 231).

²⁵⁸ Idem.

²⁵⁹ In his Letter to a Rabbi (undated), Merton unreservedly asserts that "the Jews are the great eschatological sign of the twentieth century" (SD, 273). The Letter to the Mayor of Hiroshima (undated) warns that there is no hope for humanity unless truth prevails in us. It is essential, therefore, that we purify and open our hearts to the light of truth and mercy (Ibid., 296). "The people of Hiroshima," Merton confidently declares, "stand today as a symbol of the hopes of humanity" (Ibid., 297).

In "Message to Poets" Merton maximizes an opportunity to reflect on hope.²⁶⁰ The article expresses great hope in the prophetic vision of the Latin and North American poets. This association of poets marked, for Merton, a spontaneous explosion of trust, supported and financed as it was by no foundation but rooted in their own hopeful vision of reality and the future. Our future, Merton notes, will be shaped by love and hope, not by violence or calculation.²⁶¹ The article, in conclusion, issues a call to obey life, that very spirit of life that calls us to be poets, so that we can harvest the many new fruits of hope for which the world hungers.²⁶²

Hope in liturgical renewal motivates the article "Liturgical Renewal: Open Approach" (1964) in Seasons of Celebration.²⁶³ The appeal to hope is vintage Merton:

There is much hope for liturgical renewal if it can somehow be carried out in a spirit of play... It is in play that the human heart is at once open, engaged, joyous, serious and self-forgetful.²⁶⁴

A variety of hopes finds expression in no less than eighteen letters dating to 1964. Thirteen of these contain at least a passing reference to hope.²⁶⁵ Five others take a strong

The letter to Jean and Hildegard Goss-Mayr (undated) brings Merton back to the topic of false optimism and hope regarding racism (Ibid., 307-312). The letter to a priest (also undated) speaks of true Christian hope, as a summary of Rahner's views on the diaspora is presented in "The Christian in the Diaspora" (Several explicit references to hope occur in the letters collected in this book: see SD, pp. 318, 319, 321, 322, 323).

²⁶⁰ Excerpts from this article, written in 1964, first appeared in America (16 April 1964). It was subsequently published in Raids on the Unspeakable, (New York: New Directions, 1966) and later included in LETM, ed. by Patrick Hart (New York: New Directions, 1981).

²⁶¹ LETM, 371.

²⁶² Ibid., 373.

²⁶³ SCb, 247-248.

²⁶⁴ Idem.

²⁶⁵ A letter to Pope Paul VI (Feb. 6, 1964) entertains extraordinary hopes for monastic reform and renewal, as these relate to the renewal of the Church (HGL, 488). A letter to Ernesto Cardenal (March 10, 1964) expresses a great hope in the great spiritual awakening in South America, Africa, and Asia (CT, 144). A letter to Mother Benedict Duss (March 26, 1964) censures a false Christian optimism in the Church today, but hastens to add that there is life and hope in the genuine monastic movement (SCh, 211-212). A letter to A. M. Allchin (April 25, 1964) speaks of a faint hope in ecumenism, in particular the relationship

focus on the subject of hope. Brother Francis Tapparra (March 2, 1964), a Cistercian monk at Lan Tao, who after his novitiate at Gethsemani transferred to the Hong Kong, is told:

We live in a time of change and trouble and we cannot plan on having things go the way they perhaps ought to go. There will be innumerable surprises and as long as the world stays in one piece I think we can be grateful, because *where there is life there is hope*. Meanwhile we must trust God and realize that the monastic life is a renunciation of earthly security.²⁶⁶

About this time (March, 1964), William Ferry, then Vice-president of the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions at Santa Barbara, CA, sent Merton a copy of The Triple Revolution. Published by the Santa Barbara Center, the booklet systematically explores the cybernetic revolution, the “weaponry revolution,” and the “human rights’ revolution.” A copy of the slim work was also sent to President Lyndon B. Johnson on March 22, 1964. Deeply impressed by the work. Merton on March 23, 1964, wrote to “Ping” Ferry:

Triple Revolution is urgent and clear ... We are in for a rough and dizzy ride, and though we have no good motive for hoping for a special and divine protection, that is about all we can look for. I have recently been accused again of pessimism because I refuse to equate hope in God with an unbounded trust in our economic

between Anglicanism and Roman Catholicism (HGL, 26). A May 29, 1964, letter to William Johnston, the noted Jesuit scholar on spiritual theology, affirms Merton’s hope in the ecumenical dialogue with Zen (CT, 239). A letter to Pablo Antonio Cuadra (June 30, 1964) confesses to frustration concerning the progressive hopes visited the second session of the Council (CT, 192). A letter to Alejandro Vignati (July 12, 1964) compliments his books and articles for their message of hope (Ibid., 233). A letter to Jose’ Coronel Urtecho (Aug. 31, 1964) argues the futility of materialistic hope (CT, 175-176). A letter to Dom Damasus Winzen (Sept. 8, 1964) expresses reluctance to draw hope from a unified pattern of monastic life and organization (SCH, 233).

A letter to Dom Jean Leclercq (Sep. 28, 1964) reiterates the writer’s hope of becoming a hermit. The years did not erode this recurring hope (Ibid., 243). In this connection, see the letters of Oct. 29, 1964 (Ibid., 249); June 2, 1965 (Ibid., 283); and June 10, 1965 [Ibid., 284]. See further the letter of July 13, 1965 (Ibid., 287) which, though it does not contain the term hope, unequivocally deals with that very issue. Here Merton substitutes the term ambition to express his hope of becoming a solitary. This hope of course finally came to be realized within the Gethsemani community.

A letter to Robert Lawrence Williams (Nov. 21, 1964) speaks of a strong hope concerning the civil rights movement on the occasion of Dr. King’s reception of the Nobel Peace Prize (HGL, 592). A letter to Father Illtud Evans (Dec. 17, 1964) calls into question the widespread naive hope in monastic renewal (SCH, 253).

²⁶⁶ SCH, 207 (emphasis added).

structures.²⁶⁷

A letter to Cintio Vitier (May 26, 1964) berates the illusory optimism that invariably spark a minor victory.²⁶⁸

I have been busy, but not so busy that there is not in me a profound and permanent revolt against activism and against the false and elated optimism that are always enjoying some kind of shallow triumph over a headline or a meaningless editorial or the shadow of a program.²⁶⁹

A letter to Rafael Squirru (July 22, 1964) praises The Challenge of the New Man for its emphasis on the role of the intellectual in society and laments the restriction of Catholic "ideology" in its European dress. A mutual understanding and spiritual communication between the North and the South is called for. This tremendous task seems at times impossible. "Fortunately books like yours and articles like some of those in America are there to give one hope."²⁷⁰

A letter to Daniel J. Berrigan (Aug. 4, 1964) differentiates true hope from false hopes and expectations and uses the metaphor of a trolley for a particular kind of false hope constructed on worldly expectations. A second image (i. e., leprosy) depicts aspects of false hope, especially the kind of temporal hope which shields the illusions of religious people.²⁷¹

Merton's journal entry of October 31, 1964, reflects a vibrant sense of hope:

These nights I have been spontaneously remembering the days when I first came to Gethsemani twenty-three years ago: the stars, the cold, the smell of night, the wonder, the *Verlassenheit* (which is something other than despondency), and above all the melody of the *Rorate Coeli*. That entire first Advent bore in it all the

²⁶⁷ William H. Shannon, Thomas Merton's Paradise Journey: Writings on Contemplation (Cincinnati, OH: St. Anthony Messenger, 2000), 260-261. Ferry, it might be recalled, introduced Merton to the publications of Lewis Mumford, a staunch critic of technology, and Jacques Ellul, a no less adamant opponent of modern technology.

²⁶⁸ CT, 239.

²⁶⁹ Idem.

²⁷⁰ Ibid., 233.

²⁷¹ HGL, 83-84.

stamp of my vocation's peculiar character.... My fiftieth year is ending.... It is enough that there is the same mixture of anguish and certitude, the same sense of walking on water, as when I first came to the monastery.²⁷²

Vow of Conversation (a journal written in 1964–1965 but not published until 1988) has much to say about hope. The work includes one of Merton's clearest statements about the concept of realized eschatology, and closely resembles the eschatological thought of our European theologians of hope, who were writing at about that time. A summary is in order.

Realized eschatology stands at the heart of a genuine Christian (incarnational) humanism and is grounded on the living presence of the Holy Spirit. Belonging to the last age in which we are now situated, realized eschatology calls forth a here-and-now Christian peace-making mission and avoids apocalyptic frenzy.

The lack of a sense of eschatology is what makes so many Christians fail to see the importance of this Christian duty in the world. Eschatology, having been conceived as purely apocalyptic, having to do only with the end of the historical world, has antagonized Christians. They have turned their back on it in incomprehension and fear, not aware of the true thrust of eschatology, which is here and now.²⁷³

Three other perspectives on hope may be noted here. First, Merton calls attention to the great hope of our time – a hope not directed at recovering ecclesiastical and institutional power but relying on the power of faith and spirit which will shake the world.²⁷⁴ Secondly, Merton subsumes his ecumenical concerns under an eschatological perspective. In the Second Vatican Council's new, proposed statement on Judaism, Merton finds a lack of spiritual and eschatological dimensions. Futility, he notes, marks any so-called "hope" for the assimilation of Jews into the Church.²⁷⁵ Thirdly, Merton

²⁷² The Intimate Merton: His Life from His Journals (IM), ed. by Patrick Hart and Jonathan Montaldo, New York: Harper San Francisco, 1999, 225-226.

²⁷³ VC, ed. Naomi Burton Stone (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1988), 32.

²⁷⁴ Ibid., 9-10; cf. also p. 30.

²⁷⁵ Ibid., 76.

assesses technology from the standpoint of Christian hope: "Where impiety begins is in the hypostatizing of mechanical power as something to do with the incarnation as its fulfillment, as its Epiphany."²⁷⁶ The absence of the term hope here does not compromise Merton's unmistakable view that fulfillment and Epiphany are essential components of Christian hope. The discussion that follows on nuclear war and social issues affirms that the source of our hope must unequivocally be God: there is no salvific moment in the temporal and secular messianism of technological and political progress.²⁷⁷

At least five published letters of this period provide insights into some aspect of hope, which are consistent with his formal, more public affirmations.²⁷⁸ The well-known letter to the American Hierarchy, "The Second Vatican Council: Schema XIII" (September 1965) calls for extended comment at this point. Merton urges that the Church, through the Council, proclaim the hope of the Gospel to the world. The letter articulates a number of issues calling for a response of hope.²⁷⁹ For example, the message of love and of salvation is not bound to any particular time or culture. The Christian is called to a decision for Christ, not to a decision to expend one's energies on behalf of a nation, party, class, or culture. The message of the church to the modern world is essentially eschatological.²⁸⁰

This letter addresses the moral issue of warfare and the use of force to resolve

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 99.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 173.

²⁷⁸ A letter to Ludovico Silva (March 13, 1965) laments that "Under the mask of power in this land is a great hopelessness" (CT, 224). A letter to Dom Jean Leclercq (May 11, 1965) candidly acknowledges: "Nor do I have any hope left of making complete sense out of my existence, which must remain paradoxical" (SCH, 280). Here hope surfaces as a key to the mystery of Merton's own being. A letter to James Douglas (May 26, 1965) stresses the inadequacy of materialistic hope to meet the real needs of people (HGL, 161-162). A letter to Ernesto Cardenal (Nov. 17, 1965) brands as a false hope the view that the war will give life more meaning and people a fuller identity (CT, 152).

²⁷⁹ WF, 88-92.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 88. (The term "eschatological" is used to denote its traditional meaning, beyond time and culture.)

conflict. The American bishops are urged not to permit or condone any form of official approval for certain modern weapons. If the church acquiesces, governments on this earth, as well as every military and political opportunist, will abuse the church's declaration. In this context hope makes common cause with every individual's struggle for survival.

The common man, the poor man, the man who has no hope but in God, everywhere looks to the Church as a last hope of protection against the unprincipled machinations of militarists and power politicians. Would it not be a dreadful thing if the Council were to say something, even by implication, to destroy the hope of the defenseless and thrust them further into despair?²⁸¹

The task of the Council, then,

is to affirm the church's eschatological message of love and salvation in terms which are most relevant to the modern world. In this instance, then, the problem is that of stating the church's view of modern war in the light of the eschatological message of salvation.²⁸²

A May 21, 1965 letter to Stefan Baciu, professor of literature at the University of Hawaii, engages in modulating Baciu's "sweeping" rejection of North American poets. From his perspective Merton has some laudatory things to say about the Latin American poets ... who "seem to me to be alive, to have something honest to say, to be sincerely concerned with life and with humanity." The letter-writer does not hesitate to say "there is some genuine hope left in them..."²⁸³

The journal entries of this period reflect moments of self-criticism buoyed up by a vibrant spirit of hope. Some examples are illustrative. Under the date of August 10, 1965:

The solitary life... awesome, wonderful. ... I see I have no strength of my own for it. Deep sense of my own poverty and, above all, awareness of the wrongs I have allowed in myself together with this good desire.... The need to *pray* ... the need to be entirely defined by a relationship with and orientation to God... Distractedness here is fatal — it brings one inexorably to the abyss.... By reading, meditation, study, psalmody, manual work, including also some fasting.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 90.

²⁸² *Ibid.*, 91.

²⁸³ *CT*, 241.

etc. Above all the work of *hope*, not the stupid, relaxed, self-pity of boredom, of *acedia*.²⁸⁴

Under the date of August 17, 1965:

My supreme affliction is to see my unbelief, my distrust of the Lord, my refusal to "let myself go" in *hope*. But to see this at last is also a joy. I can begin to *hope* He will cure and transform me.²⁸⁵

Under the date of August 25, 1965 (the Feast of St. Louis):

Over and over again I see that this life is what I have always *hoped* it would be and always sought.²⁸⁶

Under the date of October 6, 1965:

Obedience to God means first of all *waiting*, having to wait, "wait for the Lord." The first thing then is to accept the fact that one will have to *wait*. Otherwise obedience is undermined by an implicit condition, which destroys it.²⁸⁷

CGB, though published in 1966, was in incubation from 1956 to 1965.²⁸⁸ Here we find the standard theses: Christian hope is based on the Kingdom of Christ; although already established, the Kingdom is not yet definitely revealed; the Kingdom confronts us "in a time of development, of choice and of preparation:" the Kingdom will achieve final victory in the *parousia*.²⁸⁹

In this work Julian of Norwich is called an agent of hope, a messenger of hope to her own time and to ours. In her dictum, "All manner of thing shall be well." Merton finds an eschatological secret, a dynamic of mystery already at work.²⁹⁰ This eschatological, victorious grace, already present in our midst, sustains the hope at the

²⁸⁴ IM, 254 (original emphasis).

²⁸⁵ Ibid., 255 (emphasis added).

²⁸⁶ Ibid., 256 (emphasis added).

²⁸⁷ IM, 261 (original emphasis). The dynamic of waiting as a facet of hope needs no elaboration.

²⁸⁸ CGB (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966; reprinted 1973).

²⁸⁹ Ibid., 123. (Image Book)

²⁹⁰ Ibid., 211-212. (Image Book) See Grace M. Jantzen, Julian of Norwich: Mystic and Theologian: "Thomas Merton, after a study of Julian, ranked her with the greatest of all theologians [CGB, pp.191-192][Hard Cover]: unfortunately he died before he could write about her in any detail." (New York: Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1987; new ed., 2000), p. 90.

heart of Christian faith. Merton links hope with the incarnation of Christ and of love in the world. For him, then, the incarnation is a foundation of hope which enables us to disarm and make peace with our brothers and sisters.²⁹¹ As already noted above in the remarks on NSC,²⁹² Merton speaks of his retrieval of hope in the political dimensions of personal life.²⁹³ But this work points out still another aspect of Christian hope: namely, that hope is dialectical. Although Christian hope is oriented to the future, future hope cannot stand apart from the present hope, an elementary hope that belongs to the here and now. In fact, the source of Christian hope is in “the nearness of the hidden God, and of His Spirit, in the present. What future can make sense without this present hope?”²⁹⁴

Some insights are memorable: “Those of whom God demands the most perfect hope must look closely at their sins.”²⁹⁵ “Our glory and our hope: we are the Body of Christ. Christ loves and espouses us in His own flesh.”²⁹⁶

The book does not bypass the great secular hopes of the periods of the enlightenment and the industrial revolution. It was taken for granted that a “‘better world’ was now at hand, and that what had for centuries stood in the way of its discovery was the obscurantism of faith.”²⁹⁷

Merton considers “the new, aggressive secular faith” spreading far and wide. Christians themselves have “adopted this faith as part of their own, but it has taken more than a century to identify the world of technology with the “new creation” spoken of in

²⁹¹ Ibid., 214.

²⁹² NSC, 18-19. See footnote 182 above.

²⁹³ CGB, 214.

²⁹⁴ Ibid., 184.

²⁹⁵ Idem.

²⁹⁶ Idem. Other valuable insights abound but are not examined here: e. g., 23, 40, 52, 53, 67, 94, 115-116, 123-124, 172, 184-185, 192, 202, 208, 213-214, 348-350.

²⁹⁷ Ibid., 52.

the New Testament.”²⁹⁸ Still this hope was not altogether new, Merton argues. Already from the thirteenth century Europe had been in ferment, however obscurely, with a new outlook on eschatology — not the traditional hope of the end-time coming of Christ, but of the revelation of eschatological finality worked out within history itself.²⁹⁹ In this context, Merton sees in Joachim of Fiore (1130/1135-1201/1202), a medieval Cistercian apocalypticist, something of a forerunner of Teilhard de Chardin proclaiming a new and definitive age of perfect human and Christian fulfillment, the “Third Kingdom,” that of the Holy Spirit. This was to be a kingdom in which the world would be totally transformed by Mendicants living in absolute poverty — a form of the religious life which the ecclesiastical establishment of the day regarded as impracticable.³⁰⁰

In this same work, Merton notes that just at the point where “eschatology in the old sense seems more credible than ever. Christians are turning to the hope of a technological golden age.”³⁰¹ His analysis of the various assumptions concerning the relationship between the kingdom of God, church, the world and their resulting agendas is intriguing:

If one is conservative, then the Kingdom of God on earth is the Church as a sociological entity, an established institution with a divine mandate to guide the destinies of culture, science, politics, etc., as well as religion. If one is a liberal or radical, then one admits that the progressives and revolutionaries of “the world” have unconsciously hit upon the right answers and are building the Kingdom of God where the church has failed to do so. Hence, the Christian must throw in his lot with revolution — and thus guarantee that Christianity will survive and rediscover itself in a transformed society.³⁰²

The struggle to seek truth in the present life is therefore coincident with living in hope.

²⁹⁸ Idem.

²⁹⁹ Idem.

³⁰⁰ Idem.

³⁰¹ Idem.

³⁰² Ibid., 53.

Life is, or should be, nothing but a struggle to seek truth: yet what we seek is really the truth that we already possess. Truth is mine in the reality of life as it is given to me to live: yet to take life thoughtlessly, passively as it comes, is to renounce the struggle and purification which are necessary. ... The work of understanding involves not only dialectic, but a long labour of acceptance, obedience, liberty, and love.... The worst temptation, and that to which many monks succumb early in their lives, and by which they remain defeated, is simply to give up asking and seeking.³⁰³

Practical conclusions are ready to hand:

To leave everything to the superiors in this life and to God in the next – a hope which may in fact be nothing but a veiled despair, a refusal to live. And it is not Christian to despair of the present, merely putting off hope into the future. There is also a very essential hope that belongs in the present, and is based on the nearness of the hidden God, and of His Spirit, in the present. What future can make sense without this *present* hope?³⁰⁴

3. Dialogical, Spiritual Existentialism Grounded in Hope: 1966-1968.

Raids on the Unspeakable (1966) features an article entitled "The Time of the End Is the Time of No Room!" which delves into biblical eschatology. An eschatology which undergirds hope, according to Merton, finds expression in distinct types of future-oriented thought: one of secular anxieties and anticipations, the other of revealed fulfillment. The first sometimes results from a complete denial and despair of the second. The fear of violence in the first type of eschatology becomes a thinly disguised hope for the violent end, and this contributes to the climate of confusion and despair in which the more profound hopes of biblical eschatology are revealed.

Merton's own interpretation of the birth of Jesus illustrates his understanding of eschatology. The Word emptied himself but did not lose himself. "That there should be no room for him in a crowd that that been called together" is "an eschatological sign."³⁰⁵ Therefore Jesus' coming is announced to shepherds who live in the open fields apart from

³⁰³ Ibid., 184.

³⁰⁴ Idem (original emphasis).

³⁰⁵ Raids on the Unspeakable, New York: New Directions, 1966, 68.

the masses. These are the remnants of the desert-dwellers, the nomads of the true Israel.³⁰⁶ Christ is with and among those who find no room in the world and for these there seems to be nothing but the world at its worst.³⁰⁷ These are the people who remain imprisoned “in other hopes, and in more pedestrian despairs, despairs and hopes” which weigh them down to the earth, down to street level, even to the pavement.³⁰⁸ These are the marginalized who “desire to be at least half-human, to taste a little human joy, to do a fairly decent job of productive work, to come home to the family ... a desire for which there is no room.”³⁰⁹ Among these who have no room Jesus hides himself.³¹⁰ Here again we are put in touch with a bit of “realized eschatology.” In the final analysis, eschatology is not, for Merton, a *finis* and punishment, the winding up of accounts and the closing of the books. Rather it functions as the “final beginning,” the “definitive birth” into a new creation. By no means the last gasp of exhausted possibilities, it is the first taste of all that is beyond conceiving as actual.³¹¹ Here with these terms, he comes very close to Pannenberg’s “prolepsis.”

In Raids on the Unspeakable (1966), Merton attempts to define “The Unspeakable” in terms of existential despair. The impact of existential thinkers (e.g., Camus, Sartre, Berdyaev) is unmistakable in a stirring analysis which deserves full citation:

The Unspeakable. What is this? Surely, an eschatological image. It is the void that we encounter, you and I, underlying the announced programs, the good intentions, the unexampled and universal aspirations for the best of all possible worlds. It is

³⁰⁶ Ibid., 69.

³⁰⁷ Ibid., 72-73.

³⁰⁸ Ibid., 73.

³⁰⁹ Idem. An illuminating commentary may be found in “The Exploits of the Machine Age,” CPTM, 237-238.

³¹⁰ Idem.

³¹¹ Ibid., 75.

the void that contradicts everything that is spoken even before the words are said; the void that gets into the language of public and official declarations at the very moment when they are pronounced, and makes them ring dead with the hollowness of the abyss. It is the void out of which Eichmann drew the punctilious exactitude of his obedience, the void which draws in the zany violence of Flannery O'Connor's Southerners, or hypnotizes the tempted conscience in Julien Green. It is the emptiness of "the end." Not necessarily the end of the world, but a theological point of no return, a climax of absolute finality in refusal, in equivocation, in disorder, in absurdity, which can be broken open again to truth only by miracle, by the coming of God. Yet nowhere do you despair of this miracle. You seem to say that, for you, this is precisely what it means to be a Christian; for Christian hope begins where every other hope stands frozen stiff before the face of the Unspeakable.³¹²

The poet agrees with Ionesco that man must take action against the absurd (or, in the language of the piece, the unspeakable), but he disagrees with Ionesco and other existentialists by his affirmation that Christian hope allows for a divine miracle.³¹³ The world, though stricken by the unspeakable, "is also healed in Christ."³¹⁴ Merton's strategy of counterattack against existential despair (the unspeakable) looks to Christian hope as his prime weapon.

Other published materials from the year 1966, letters as well as a personal entry, contain references to hope. Six letters may be noted,³¹⁵ and a seventh, to James Forest (Feb. 21, 1966), which urges the recipient not to depend on the hope of results, because real hope

is not in something we think we can do, but in God who is making something

³¹² RU, 4-5.

³¹³ Idem.

³¹⁴ Ibid., 5.

³¹⁵ A letter to Catherine de Hueck Doherty (Jan. 12, 1966) recommends mutual prayer as a means for growth in hope and freedom (HGL, 23). A letter to William DuBay (Aug. 21, 1966) has two references to hope as a human desire or wish (IM, 169-170). A letter to Abbot Anthony Chassagne (Sept. 21, 1966) identifies hope as a factor in individual vocations and personal spiritual needs and twice categorizing spiritual freedom as a "sign of hope" (SCH, 314). A letter to Miguel Grinberg (Oct. 8, 1966) speaks of the Christian community as a body of hope, in which hope lives in spite of hopeless situations (CT, 204). A letter to Erich Fromm (Oct. 13, 1966) attests Merton's real hope in the role of the Pope for the forthcoming peace conference (HGL, 323). A letter to Angela Collins (Dec. 1, 1966) proposes Carmel as a sign of hope to people overwhelmed by the thought that worldly life is all there is (SCH, 324).

good out of it in some way we cannot see. If we do his will, we will be helping in this process, but we will not necessarily know all about it beforehand.³¹⁶

A citation, in part, of a journal entry (dated Feb. 17, 1966) makes a dual reference to hope as reported experience and proposed action:

There are moments of great loneliness and lostness in solitude, but often there come other deeper moments of hope and understanding, and I realize that these would *not be possible* in their purity, their simple secret directions, anywhere but in solitude. I hope to be worthy of them.³¹⁷

In his tribute to Nhat Hann (1966), Merton remarks that bonds such as those between the writer and addressee augur the beginning of a new solidarity and a new brotherhood on all five continents. This solidarity, transcending political, religious and cultural lines, brings together people in every country, in a relationship that is more concrete than an ideal, more life-affirming than a program. Merton regards this unity of people as the only hope of the world. He visualizes hope in such concrete terms that it demands nothing less than the transformation of the self. Communion among people will effect the transformation of the world.³¹⁸

In 1967 Mystics and Zen Master (MZM) saw publication. A long article entitled "The Other Side of Despair: Notes on Christian Existentialism"³¹⁹ dealt with the antithesis of despair: existential theology confronts the sterility and inner hopelessness, the spurious optimism and real despair which masks themselves in the secular and positivist illusion.³²⁰ Merton is at his best in presenting ideologies in the give and take of debate. The rest of the article outlines a Christian existentialist hope which challenges this false optimism:

³¹⁶ Ibid., 297.

³¹⁷ IM, 271 (original emphasis).

³¹⁸ PaP, 261-262.

³¹⁹ MZM, (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1967), 255-280.

³²⁰ Ibid., 279.

Bultmann and other [existentialist] Christian theologians have convincingly restructured the classic theology of Christian and Gospel hope in the category of existentialist freedom.³²¹

Malcolm X's eschatology, for Merton, did not generate much political energy for change. Exploited and distorted as it was by the media, it buckled under aggravated tensions, intense polarities and rioting, and even instigated his own death. In a word, Malcolm X's early views on the subject amounted to "a foreshortened, impassioned, obsessive racist eschatology."³²²

Among the published letters from the year 1967, at least seven contain one or more important Merton statements on hope.³²³

Monastic Journey (1977) takes up the "death of God" issue.³²⁴ Merton sees in this catchword a disturbing modern phenomenon: namely, contemporary humanity's inability to believe which results in the death of supernatural faith. Human beings, notes Merton,

³²¹ Idem.

³²² PaP, 273.

³²³ Hope in relationship to monasticism is broached in a letter to Paul Bourne (June 30, 1967) with a warning against placing hope in the institution (SCH, 388). A letter to Charles Dumont (July 19, 1967) comments on the psychedelic movement among the young, classifying it as a kind of mass movement of hope and desperation (Ibid., 338).

Sr. M. Emmanuel (July 31, 1967) was asked to consider the primitive messianic and prophetic cults in Africa, and to find in them a broad human hope common to every culture (HGL, 199). Merton was especially concerned about the Cargo Cults of Malanesia. (See also the letter of February 27, 1968, WF, 151). A letter to Colman McCarthy (Aug. 15, 1967) points to a real hope for monasticism in the overall world picture, a hope verified by African monasticism (in addition to such projects as the Dom Bede Griffiths ashram in India). Merton is not hopeful about the established monastic institution in America, inasmuch as it suppresses people's spirituality and cannot function as a dynamic and eschatological sign (SCH, 341). A hope for an integrated effort between the contemplative and the atheist finds expression in a letter to Filiberto Guala (Dec. 28, 1967) (Ibid., 360).

Two other letters were written in 1967 and included in The Monastic Journey, ed. by Patrick Hart. Mission, KS: Sheed, Andrews and McMeel, 1977. The first letter addressed to the Abbot of the Cistercian monastery of Frattocchie near Rome was in response to a request of Pope Paul VI for a "message of contemplatives to the world." The second letter was sent to the Synod of Bishops, which met at Rome in October 1967. It is the joint work of Dom J. B. Porion, Procurator General of the Carthusians, Dom Andre Louf, Abbot of Mont-des-Cats, and Thomas Merton. They offer an expanded view of hope. The message of hope, it is noted, emanates from the courage to penetrate our own silence. This enables one to recover the light and the capacity to understand reality which transcends words and explanations because it is too close to be explained. This intimate union is achieved in the depths of the heart between God's Spirit and the inmost self (MJ, 171ff).

³²⁴ Merton had already dealt with this matter in OB and will again explore it at great length in FV.

have lost the possibility of experiencing God.³²⁵ Humanity's inability to believe is more fully treated in a letter to Dom Decroix (Aug 21, 1967). The communication delves into our general human condition and by a pivotal metaphor characterizes it as "the jungle of language and problems."³²⁶ Contrariwise, the contemplative life functions as an antidote to the contemporary phenomenon of atheism, in that it searches for "a desert area of man's heart in which explanations no longer suffice, and in which one learns that only experience counts."³²⁷ In such a setting one encounters genuine despair and out of this, hope is encountered.³²⁸ Hence:

it is my joy to tell you to hope though you think that for you of all men hope is impossible. Hope not because you think you can be good, but because God loves us irrespective of our merits.... Hope because Jesus is with those who are poor and outcast and perhaps despised ... No one on earth has reason to despair of Jesus, because Jesus loves man, loves him in his sin, and we too must love man in his sin.³²⁹

MJ also contains "The Solitary Life," an article which contrasts Christian hope and mundane hopes. On the one hand, "The Christian hope in God and in the 'world to come' is something drastically spiritual and pure, which jealously clings to its invisibility."³³⁰ On the other, mundane hopes lie in "myths and fictions with which social life is always full."³³¹ Merton points to the desert as a corrective mystique: "the desert is for those who have felt a salutary despair of accepted values, in order to hope in

³²⁵ The Monastic Journey, ed. by Brother Patrick Hart (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian, 1992) (MJ) 5.

³²⁶ Ibid., 173.

³²⁷ Idem.

³²⁸ Idem.

³²⁹ Ibid., 172.

³³⁰ Ibid., 152. "The solitary Life" was originally published in 1969. Cistercian Studies 4 (1969): no. 3, pp. 213-217.

³³¹ Idem.

mercy.”³³² The monk knows that to truly hope is to despair of these values. This withdrawal is not a rejection of people.³³³

Here, as Walter Capps points out, is a “version of positive disengagement.” Indeed in Merton’s dialectic, positive disengagement is “a necessary prerequisite for engaging the world as a deeper reality.”³³⁴ Paradoxically, this type of despair becomes a sign of hope.³³⁵

Faith and Violence (1968) addresses four major issues, in as many sections: non-violent resistance to evil, the war in Vietnam, racism in the United States, and belief and unbelief in the modern world. A perusal of these sections discloses the author’s interconnecting interest in hope. “Toward a Theology of Resistance” blames violence for excising hope from human experience. According to one key insight:

To make people live on a subhuman level against their will, to concentrate them in such a way that they have no hope of escaping their condition, is an unjust experience of force.³³⁶

This forthright insight calls forth several conceptual links. Trust in God engenders hope in human beings. Such hope in God empowers a human choice of peace and order. These can be realized if the right conditions are present. Christians can foster such conditions by preferring love and trust over hate and suspiciousness.³³⁷

Christian eschatological hope, moreover, allows one to see God’s presence in the world and encourages participation in the world.³³⁸ The essential groundwork which the

³³² Ibid., 153.

³³³ Ibid., 152.

³³⁴ Capps, 155.

³³⁵ MJ, 152.

³³⁶ FV (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968).

³³⁷ Ibid., 25.

³³⁸ Ibid., 26.

Sermon on the Mount set for true Christian non-violence consists of meekness and humility. Both are inseparable from eschatological Christian hope which is completely open to God's presence in the world and to the presence of our brothers and sisters who are always seen in light of the kingdom.³³⁹ In differentiating Christian humility from false humility, Merton finds in the former a positive disposition towards others. This instills not only a certain measure of wisdom regarding one's own judgments — a conviction that we are far from infallible in our ideas — but also encourages a positive and trustful expectation of others.³⁴⁰

Merton labels false humility "a supposed humility." Such a negative approach to self and the world may cling desperately to dark and apocalyptic expectations, and refuse to let go of them.³⁴¹ However, true hope, that is, hope against hope, precludes despair in the meek, the humble, the afflicted, the ones famished for justice, the merciful, the clean of heart and the peace-makers. Each of the beatitudes hopes against hope, bears everything, endures everything (cf. 1 Cor 13:7).³⁴²

Christian non-violence, in point of fact, draws its hope from the promise of Christ. The operative text is: "Fear not, little flock, for your God has prepared for you a Kingdom" (Luke 12:32). This hope of the Christian, like the hope of a child, must be pure and full of Christ.³⁴³ We cannot see the world as it is if we do not discern evils and forgive them. If we can do this, we can fully anticipate genuine hope for the future we cannot measure. In short, the entire article is premised on the Gospel message of a

³³⁹ Idem.

³⁴⁰ Ibid., 25.

³⁴¹ Idem.

³⁴² Ibid., 26.

³⁴³ Ibid., 27.

universal call to salvation and to the Kingdom of God.³⁴⁴

"Peace and Protest" profiles the hopeless situation in the world:

Sometimes the prospect seems almost hopeless, for man is more addicted to violent fantasies and obsessions now than one has ever seen before, and we are today spending more for war alone than we spent for everything, war included, thirty years ago.³⁴⁵

Because the hope of being heard has been abandoned, protest becomes desperate, Merton adds. Thus hope is a driving force for our mission.³⁴⁶ Lacking deep moral truths, however, we are alternately swept by fears and hopes. Hence, deep moral truth must serve as the foundation of hope.³⁴⁷ The basic message of the essay is that hope empowers in the face of injustice and even world wars. On Pope Paul VI's visit to the UN, for instance, Merton comments:

It was a positive and constructive witness which, together with a clear and firm protest against war and injustice, reawakened a definite hope in peaceful alternatives to war. It was a most serious and highly credible reminder that instruments for peaceful conflict solution are at hand.³⁴⁸

Merton's introduction to The Prison Meditations of Father Delp (1963)

underscores the hard-core truth that even when worldly hope is lacking, one can still hope. These prison meditations are a no-nonsense diagnosis of a gutted, faithless society in which human beings are rapidly losing their humanity, since they have become practically incapable of belief. In this wilderness "man's only hope is to respond to his inner need for truth, with a struggle to recover his spiritual freedom."³⁴⁹ Because a voice

³⁴⁴ Cf. FV, 16-18.

³⁴⁵ Ibid., 42.

³⁴⁶ Ibid., 44.

³⁴⁷ Ibid., 45.

³⁴⁸ Ibid., 46.

³⁴⁹ Ibid., 52.

cries in the wilderness, it is still possible to retain one's inner solitude and recover the mysterious sources of hope and strength.³⁵⁰

Merton finds in Father Delp's meditations a message of hope, in which "the task in the education of present and future generations is to restore man to a state of fitness for God."³⁵¹ An apocalyptic mood of general disgust and contempt for the hopes of our struggling fellow Christians would only accentuate the negativism and despair which the priest-prisoner so clearly delineates. For Delp, religious action today is all too ready to overemphasize the relatively minor problems of the religious-minded minority, sidestepping the great issues on which the very survival of the human race depends. Our technological society moreover has stifled in humans the capacity for God, and the Church has done little to replace it. Consequently, the life of the spirit and the capacity for God have surrendered to an inhuman way of life which makes the individual both "the product" and "the slave." Instead of attempting to change these conditions, we are addressed with relatively insignificant details of ritual, organization, ecclesiastical bureaucracy, the niceties of law and ascetic psychology.³⁵²

Father Delp's Advent discovery, Merton surmises, came about as he paced his cell in harrowing desolation. The discovery occurred by his own spiritual efforts, but germinated in the darkness of defeat and degradation, from the seeds of light being sown.³⁵³ Father Delp became a prophet of hope. His prison meditations present the ruin of Germany and the Western world as an "advent" in which God's messengers are preparing for the future. Like Julian of Norwich, Father Delp sees hope in the future in truly desperate situations. But, cautions Merton, this golden future is not so much a

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 52-53.

³⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 53

³⁵² *Ibid.*, 60-61.

³⁵³ *Ibid.*, 61.

product of certainty, as an object of hope. Hence the realization of hope is hastened by spiritual alertness. We must begin by acknowledging and accepting our desolation, in all its bitterness.³⁵⁴ Father Delp finds in whole-hearted adoration of God the road to hope for the world. Only by such renewal can hope sustain our society and the human race.³⁵⁵

FV (1968) provided Merton the opportunity to expound the hope of the experience of God in the modern world, even as the death-of-God theologians were proclaiming that the standard formulations about God were devoid of meaning in people's lives today.³⁵⁶ The same holds true about the Church today: her efficiency at making God unbelievable eliminates the need for atheists to erode credence in God. Understandably, Merton placed little, if any, hope in conventional Christianity. What is more, he concurs with the idea of Martin E. Marty's "institutionalized" unbelief as a "permanent cultural phenomenon" in American religion.³⁵⁷ The logic of consistency demands that we produce a prophet of our own godlessness or unbelief who can at least discourse about the reasons for one's unbelief, as Sartre does.³⁵⁸

Merton does not mince words: "The intentness with which official Christianity seeks to make God relevant to man makes Him so irrelevant."³⁵⁹ All we can do then is declare God dead, so that the true God, who is "absent," can come to life again. But, warns Merton, while these theologians presume God will come back to life as soon as the official God is interred, it cannot be assumed that the absence automatically produces

³⁵⁴ Idem.

³⁵⁵ Ibid., 62.

³⁵⁶ Ibid., 195.

³⁵⁷ Ibid., 200. Cf. Martin E. Marty, Varieties of Unbelief (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1964).

³⁵⁸ Idem.

³⁵⁹ Ibid., 197.

presence.³⁶⁰

To reconcile human with human and not with God is to reconcile no one at all. The old problem of the social Gospel resurfaces. In short, a basic critique of the death-of-God theology is that it does not live up to its own prophetic standards: lacking prophetic genuineness, it reverts to sophomoric antireligion and anticlericalism.³⁶¹ At this point Merton relates Bonhoeffer's insights to the death-of-God theologians. The death-of-God theologians fail to recognize the presence of evil in the world and the need to resist it.³⁶² Despite their efforts to regain full humanity by subordinating human beings to the massive domination of post-Christian secularism, they end up embracing political totalitarianism, either of the capitalist or communist variety.³⁶³ Hence

when God is "dead" in the lives of humans, we see that the void left by God's absence is filled with a variety of demons, such as ruthless exploitation, genocide, cynical and barbarous travesties of justice, perversions of every human and natural instinct.³⁶⁴

This results in nullifying in Christianity the distinction between God and humanity.

It is not a matter of either God or humanity, but of finding God by loving humans, and discovering the true meaning of humanity in our love for God. Neither is possible without the other.³⁶⁵

Merton asserts that the God which radical theology claims to be dead is, in many respects, a God who never lived at all: a God of hypothesis, a God of pious clichés, a God of formalistic ritual.

³⁶⁰ Ibid., 148.

³⁶¹ Ibid., 197.

³⁶² Ibid., 265.

³⁶³ Idem.

³⁶⁴ Ibid., 263.

³⁶⁵ Ibid., 262.

To sum up, FV argues that, contrary to the death-of God theologians, a restored relationship between God and humanity is the only source of our hope. In that glimmer of hope to be found in all human suffering lies a hidden promise waiting to be revealed. Because it is not a human construct, authentic hope is given by God in absolute darkness.

At least five letters written in 1968 speak to Merton's firm belief in the importance of hope.³⁶⁶ A letter of Jan 26, 1968, to Ludovico Silva bemoans the "revolutionary impulse" which has given rise to "some terrible events in the United States..." and may "establish the reign of the police and of violence – and of lies. It is tragic. The only hope is in the Third World."³⁶⁷

In the year under consideration Cables to the Ace reflects a deep-rooted concern with hope.³⁶⁸ The unorthodox nature of this poem mirrors Merton's own unconventionality. Experiencing poetry as the best form of self-expression, Merton speculated throughout his life on the destiny of the world. As a recurring feature of his poetic giftedness and his self-definition, hope enriched his speculation about the world's eschatological trajectory.

³⁶⁶ A letter to Felix Donahue (Jan. 13, 1968) voices a fervent hope in the appointment of Fr. Flavian as abbot, in that his commitment to true monastic piety is not based on power (SCh, 361-362). A letter to Walter A. Weisskof (April 4, 1968) offers a hope-based eschatological outlook:

In the deepest depths that we cannot possibly see lies an ultimate ground in which all contradictories are united and all come out "right." For a Christian this ultimate ground is personal — that is to say, it is a ground of freedom and love, not a simple mechanism or process (WF, 338).

A letter to Abdul Aziz (April 24, 1968) speaks of hope in the mercy of God, whose gifts of light and peace result in the recovery of peace and wisdom (HGL, 467). A letter to Agnes Smith (April 28, 1968) returns to an insight on hope from an early piece in Figures for an Apocalypse, i. e., "Freedom as Experience":

And all the hopes that seem to founder in the shadows
of a cross
Wake from a momentary sepulchre, and they are blinded
by their freedom! (WF, 340. See CPTM, 187).

³⁶⁷ CT, 232.

³⁶⁸ Cables to the Ace: or Familiar Liturgies of Misunderstanding. New York: New Directions/Toronto:McClelland & Stewart, 1968.

Cables to the Ace deals with the poet's life in terms of hope. He writes:

...The bare tree. The faithless vow. We make the best of bad beginnings and hope the end will do better. Come, Dark-Haired Dawn!³⁶⁹

This is the core of Merton. "Eschatological in its intent," the observation overarches all human history, according to Padovano. Checked by a bad beginning in the Fall, humanity, singular and collective, is destined for an ultimate, redemptive resolution.³⁷⁰ Hope is steadily articulated in Cables to the Ace through numerous images of Christ's death and resurrection.³⁷¹

Cable 78, "The Harmonies of Excess," leads us to scenes of the earth's rebirth: "the hidden lovers in the soil," life-giving "rain," "the wet sun's poem."³⁷² Kilcourse writes, "The life force of these hidden lovers in the soil testifies to an indefatigable creative force. Merton reorients us from 'Love's wreckage' ...to a higher spiritual principle at the heart of life."³⁷³ From the mystery of life growing underground, the poet unearths faith and hope.³⁷⁴

...
The seed is not afraid
Of winter or the terrible sweetness
Of the spring's convivial nightmare
Or the hot surprised and dizzy spark
Of their electric promise

For the lovers in the sleeping nerve
Are the *hope* and the address
Where I send you this burning garden

³⁶⁹ CPTM, 410.

³⁷⁰ Padovano, Human Journey: Thomas Merton: Symbol of a Century, 105. A resonance of Julian of Norwich can be detected. (See footnote 290 in this chapter.)

³⁷¹ CA, 206.

³⁷² Kilcourse, 182

³⁷³ Idem.

³⁷⁴ Idem.

My talkative morning-glory
My climbing germ of poems.³⁷⁵

Merton ends cable 80 with a reflection on the death and resurrection of Christ, imaging hope in terms of Christ's conquest over history and death.³⁷⁶

In its four parts, the long prose-poem Geography of Logaire (1968) explores the suffering of Christ experienced vicariously in different human contexts. While Cable focuses on western culture and its inability to communicate, Logaire explores universal hope in different oppressed cultures. Merton resorts to certain images, rituals or songs which speak to a common hope in all those cultures. According to Padovano, this final poem is universal in scope, taking "the entire world into its compass."³⁷⁷

Merton's Logaire tackles nothing less than the entire scope of human misery, as well as its "resilient hope."³⁷⁸ Starting with Cain and Abel, moving through a kind of history of degradation, of the poor and miserable sinners, he presents humans bereft of their dignity. "From exploitations he moves to the lamentations and aspirations for a savior in each specific historical and cultural context."³⁷⁹

The East canto and the West canto focus on cultural conflicts. These poems deal with people's dispute not because of skin colors but because of different traditions and values. The Cain and Abel myth surfaces once again, but this time in another key.

The third poem in the East canto resources a unifying theme in its Cargo Songs. These Cargo songs deal with the White Race's exploitation and presumption of superiority over the natives of New Guinea. They also explore the natives' hope for their own human dignity and resurrection through the acquisition of cargo. The canto ends in

³⁷⁵ CPTM, 448. (emphasis added)

³⁷⁶ Ibid., 449.

³⁷⁷ Padovano. The Human Journey, 136.

³⁷⁸ Kilcourse, 185.

³⁷⁹ Idem.

the collective despair of the natives.

The final two poems in the West canto deal with the Ghost Dance which originated in 1869 among the Pariotso (Paiute) Indians near Walker Lake, Nevada. More of a religious movement, the dance spread throughout the native American nations in the West. These dances were a combination of hope and desperation. Observes Padovano:

The Ghost Dance was a messianic and apocalyptic ritual. The dances invited the end of history, pleaded for the return of the dead, hoped for the restoration of lands.³⁸⁰ They were a sign of desperation developed by those who could no longer hope in the present.³⁸¹

Padovano suggests both ghost dancing and cargo songs burn with the same energy and hope which underlie Christian eschatology. In this respect, the native nations nurtured a similar hope for the future — a hope in which

there will be a time of universal retribution, of community and justice that cannot be undermined. There will be one family at the end of history when no further evil will be possible and no breaking of the bonds allowed.³⁸²

Contemplative Prayer (1969) keeps a significant focus on hope. Here hope is linked with the desert experience and interwoven into the pattern of our being. True prayer calls for praying in a certain existential dread—a sense of insecurity, of lostness, of exile, of sin. The monk, claims Merton, confronts his own humanity and centermost point where the void seems to open out into black despair. There the monk confronts the absurdity and rises above it by his freedom. At this critical turning point, absolute despair is turned into perfect hope by the pure and humble supplication of prayer

The monk faces the worst, and discovers in it the *hope* of the best. From the darkness comes light. From death, life. From the abyss there comes, unaccountably, the mysterious gift of the Spirit sent by God to make all things new, to transform the created and redeemed world, and to re-establish all things in

³⁸⁰ Padovano, The Human Journey, 161.

³⁸¹ Ibid., 162.

³⁸² Idem.

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141

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1937,

where in all that year we were, in fact, talking about the deepest springs of human desire and hope and fear; we were considering all the most important realities, not indeed in terms of something alien to Shakespeare and poetry, but precisely in his own terms, with occasional intuitions of another order.³⁸⁹

CWA explores "the predicament of modern man ... his peculiar hopes, his chances of attaining these hopes."³⁹⁰ Its interpretation of twentieth-century humanity takes its core from its desperation and despair, its hopeless quest of identity, perhaps its renunciation of identity. We may, in fact, even have to restore to humanity a basic hope in its capacity to be human, to have an identity before, and to dedicate itself fully to the service of, God.³⁹¹ Merton finds in the desperation and hopelessness of humanity an epistemological key:

elaborate conventional structures of thought, language, cult, etc., are all doing the exact opposite from what they originally pretended to do: instead of bringing man in contact with reality, and helping him to be true to himself, they are standing between man and reality, as veils and deceptions.³⁹²

Merton further notes that for some writers, personal identity itself is called into question. This induces a systematic, destructive questioning of all that seemed, to late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century writers, to undergird an authentic identity. For recent writers, however, it is perhaps true that "the only authentic identity is the recognition that identity itself is an illusion." The best we can do with our freedom therefore is to accept and take responsibility for our own despair.³⁹³

In "Vocation and Modern Thought" Merton delves into the existential experience

³⁸⁹ SSM, 180.

³⁹⁰ Contemplation in a World of Action, introduction by Jean Leclercq, Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1971, 32. [Hard Cover]

³⁹¹ Cf. idem.

³⁹² Ibid., 35.

³⁹³ Cf. idem.

of despair and hope of the contemporary person in the monastic context. How has the conflict between modern thought and traditional monastic ideas exacerbated the vocational problems of monks? At issue is the monastic crisis, the significance of traditional monasticism. The crisis is triggered by "a psychological incapacity to accept as authentic the climate of thought in which the monks appear to live."³⁹⁴ Some trace the crisis to an intervention of the devil and a loss of faith. The real issue however is that

communication tends to break down under certain pressures that arise when the young monk suddenly takes a critical and objective view of the monastery and of his fellow monks.³⁹⁵

The monastic crisis ultimately comes back to the subject of vocation. Three questions arise: 1. Has one simply relinquished commitment to a way of life and to a belief that now does not seem to matter? 2. Is one now "discovering" identity in a secular and psychological sense, in an attempt to avoid the severe demands of God's word? That is to say, is one avoiding real spiritual challenge in one's life? 3. Is one hearing that word clearly for the first time and in obeying its demand surrendering as inadequate any complacent security that one had embraced passively?

The questions are driven by true yet hidden values: Individuals who have been satisfied with old formulas and conceptions lack awareness of, and sensitivity for, these formulas. These need to be rethought, and that, from a new angle. Merton identifies several "unrealistic expectations, superficial expectations, superficial optimism," and then notes that "what is hidden is suspicion, self-doubt, inferiority feelings, resentment, cynicism and despair."³⁹⁶

Some enter monastic life because they think they do not want to be a part of a

³⁹⁴ CWA, 47. [Image Book]

³⁹⁴ Cf. *idem*.

³⁹⁵ CWA, 47.

³⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 49.

system in which they have to sell themselves superficially. Such persons, however, eventually tend to develop problems and dissatisfaction, because they come eventually to regret their monastic peace and order as unsatisfactory. Even though we have many images and sayings, our mind remains shallow, dissatisfied, frustrated. Merton scans the thinkers who have revolutionized thought and society over the last hundred and fifty years:

Marx, Darwin, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and later Freud, Jung, Adler, etc., Lenin. Mao Tse-tung (rather than Stalin who was no thinker; Mao's thought has not reached us, but it is seminal in Latin America, for instance in the ideology of Castroism). We should also mention Bergson, Dewey, Croce, Ortega de Gasset; then Sartre, Heidegger, Buber and other leading existentialists. Finally we find Teilhard de Chardin, mediating much of modern thought to Catholics, with Mounier, G. Marcel and on the evangelical side men like Bultmann and Tillich.³⁹⁷

These individuals have great significance because they are concerned with the predicament of modern humanity with its special needs, peculiar hopes, chances of attaining these hopes.³⁹⁸

In his summary review of both the nineteenth-century liberal human being and the twentieth-century counterpart, Merton sketches the optimism of the former and hopelessness of the latter. A dual portrait emerges. The nineteenth-century liberal person possessed a naive belief in self-realization through freedom in a free economy governed by inherently reasonable laws.³⁹⁹ The twentieth-century person was subjected to a streak of despair — a hopeless quest of an identity, perhaps his renunciation of identity. We must restore a basic hope in this very capacity to be a person, to have an identity, and to dedicate oneself fully to the service of God.⁴⁰⁰ This, Merton opines, is why contemporary humanity has lost a basic grip on hope. The most serious problem of twentieth-century

³⁹⁷ Ibid., 51.

³⁹⁸ Idem.

³⁹⁹ Ibid., 52.

⁴⁰⁰ Idem.

humanity is the passivity and indifference which may make serious concern for truth impossible on any level. In short, the greatest problem is the despair and apathy of a depersonalized human being incapable of authenticity.⁴⁰¹

Merton's study of several modern philosophers challenges the generalizations we have of such thinkers. After considering Marx and Freud, Merton turns to T.S.Eliot, who tried to find true identity in traditional spiritualities and symbols with a view to achieving personal deliverance from the commonplace and a fictitious identity. With other later writers, the only authentic identity is a recognition that identity itself is an illusion and hence the best one can do is to accept and take responsibility for one's own despair.⁴⁰²

The nineteenth-century belief in progressive evolution has coexisted with existentialist pessimism. In the USA and also in communist countries, the prevailing climate has been one of "official optimism."⁴⁰³ For this reason the optimism of Christian eschatological hope has taken on evolutionist expectations, in its push toward a spiritual and religious climax at the end of the evolutionary process. Therefore, a combined Christian and evolutionist optimism confronts the pessimism of a worldview trapped in entropy, meaninglessness and self-destruction.⁴⁰⁴ Both Darwin and Teilhard de Chardin were concerned with the true developmental fulfillment of humanity historically and biologically. Teilhard, in particular, combined Marxist and Darwinian thought with Christianity, and looked forward to the restoration of all in Christ, the eschatological and supernatural goal to which the human individual has been destined by God.

Despite the ideological diversities, the similarities between Marx and Freud and Christianity must be recognized. In effect Merton is arguing that some Christian

⁴⁰¹ Ibid., 53.

⁴⁰² Ibid., 55.

⁴⁰³ Idem.

⁴⁰⁴ Idem.

situations spawn arguments like those found in Marx and Freud. Marxist anthropology, for example, states that religion, being essentially a mystification, prevents human beings from achieving the ideals which it proposes to them. Therefore, to abandon the mystification is to fulfill the spirit and genuine claims of religion.⁴⁰⁵

The article "The Identity Crisis" returns to the same themes found in "Vocation and Modern Thought." The conditions which dehumanize the human race in the world of the machine become the primary question. Since humanity flounders before massive organization, it is imperative to ask how we can recover our authenticity and true identity. Since modern thinkers have intersected conventional forms of religion with the forces which have diminished and depersonalized humanity, monastic renewal must more than ever aim at authenticity. Concludes Merton, "our first task is to be fully human."⁴⁰⁶

The article "Dialogue and Renewal" identifies the role of the monk in terms of monastic renewal. "The monk should be in the world of his time as a sign of hope for the most authentic values to which his time aspires."⁴⁰⁷ The monastic call and the vocation to hope are, in effect, one.

"Contemplation and the Atheists," another article, defines Christian contemplation from an eschatological standpoint, and looks to the "pull" of hope.

Christian contemplation is not merely lost in God. It also includes in its vision an eschatological understanding of the world redeemed in Christ. It sees the world transformed in the divine light, it sees all things recapitulated in Christ.⁴⁰⁸

The article that follows, "Ecumenism and Renewal," elaborates:

⁴⁰⁵ CWA, 56-57.

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid., 81. [The hard cover edition], [100, Image Book]. One cannot help wondering whether Merton's conclusion is grounded in the famous aphorism: "Man fully alive is the glory of God." It might be noted that the Bishops Conference at Puebla, Mexico, 1979 explicitly went on record in its final document as stating that the most basic vocation underlying the call to Sacred Orders and religious life, and indeed the call to baptism-based ministry is the call to become fully human!! (Evangelization in the Latin American Church: Communion and Participation, # 854).

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid., 93. [Hard cover]

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid., 179-180.

The monk sees and experiences the Kingdom of Promise as already fulfilled. The monastic life is at once a recovery of paradisaic simplicity, of wilderness and obedience.... Monastic contemplation is not merely reposeful consideration of eternal verities but a grasp of the whole content of revolution, albeit obscurely, in the deep experience of a fully lived faith.⁴⁰⁹

In a word, monastic contemplation as the experience of eschatological promise already affords some measure of realization. Merton applies this contemplative experience to the monastic community. "The monastic community," he states, "is a covenant community whose gaze is fixed on the definitive eschatological truth."⁴¹⁰

Merton proposes in closing that contemporary persons desperately need spiritual depth and authentic hope. Such hope aspires to transcendent and final truth, which is neither dead nor dying in the modern world.⁴¹¹ Monastic life, within this frame of reference, is a sign of hope and spiritual depth. Monks can insure a recovery of hope through contact with primitive sources. Hence,

The monastic spirit is above today, seeking new ways to express its eschatological hope and to become vitally aware of its own latent potentialities.⁴¹²

"Final Integration," an essay on Reza Arasteh's book on the notion of rebirth and transformation, examines the context of religious traditions. This rebirth consists in the final integration, the authentic goal which draws one into a deeper life of prayer. Herein, argues Merton, lies the final integration of a state of transcultural maturity far beyond merely social adjustment, which always implies partiality and compromise. The analysis situates this final integration in an eschatological context, and even attributes to Christian transcultural integration an eschatological aim:

The rebirth of man and of society on a transcultural level is a rebirth into the transformed and redeemed time, the time of the Kingdom, the time of the Spirit.

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid., 188.

⁴¹⁰ Ibid., 192.

⁴¹¹ Cf. ibid., 196.

⁴¹² Idem.

the time of the end. It means a disintegration of the social and cultural self, the product of merely human history, in the mystery of redemption, in the Pentecostal new creation but this means entering into the full mystery of the eschatological church.⁴¹³

Three pieces in Thomas Merton on Peace (1971) develop disparate insights into hope. The article "Christianity and Defense in the Nuclear Age" brands the obsession with nuclear defense as false hope.⁴¹⁴ The article "Breakthrough to Peace," after considering the possibility of future hope, cautions against its loss by the neglect of humanistic perspectives in the deepest and most spiritual sense of the word.⁴¹⁵ "Christian Action in World Crisis." muses on genuine Christian action, which must be nonviolent and decisive, since good intentions and fond hopes are not enough. The notion of hope must be called into question when it is reduced to a purely human possibility.⁴¹⁶

Asian Journal, written in 1968 but published in 1973, continues Merton's peregrination across the panorama of hope.⁴¹⁷ Walter Capps pays the work a lofty compliment.

Merton's Asian Journal will serve the immediate future in much the same way that Bonhoeffer's Letters and Papers From Prison has intrigued and informed the present and the recent past.⁴¹⁸

AJ contains one of Merton's most significant testimonials to hope. During his Asian trip, Merton delivered a major address on monasticism. Its opening remarks were a veritable celebration of hope. By this point in his career, hope had become an overriding concern. In this signature lecture, Merton underscores two signs of hope: persons

⁴¹³ Ibid., 216.

⁴¹⁴ Cf. Thomas Merton on Peace. New York: McCall, 1971, 89.

⁴¹⁵ Cf. ibid., 81.

⁴¹⁶ Ibid., 221.

⁴¹⁷ Asian Journal, ed. Naomi Burton, James Laughlin, and Brother Patrick Hart, New York: New Directions, 1973.

⁴¹⁸ Capps, Hope Against Hope, 155.

voluntarily marginalized in society and persons whose genuine communication achieves its deepest expression through communion.⁴¹⁹

The deepest level of communication is not communication, but communion. 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.⁴²⁰

Such a view of unity proclaims a powerful message of hope to contemporary society.

A lecture delivered just before Merton's death in 1968, "Marxism and Monastic Perspectives," compares both ideologies and boldly announces that the concept of alienation is common to both.⁴²¹

Cistercian Life (1974) also points to Merton's ongoing preoccupation with genuine Christian hope.⁴²²

Love and Living (1979) is a collection of disparate articles. Part I has seven articles; Part II, seven distinct themes; Part III, seven articles on Christian humanism.⁴²³ Throughout, the collection is marked by an undercurrent of hope.

The article "Learning to Live," for example, analyzes education as a process that invites authentic self-discovery and brings one in direct touch with the world.⁴²⁴ Using the medieval monastic concept of the inner paradise as a basic premise, the essay argues that the inner paradise was the ultimate ground of freedom in one's heart.⁴²⁵ To find it,

⁴¹⁹ AJ, 307-308.

⁴²⁰ Ibid., 308. Merton's lecture on "Monastic Experience and East-West Dialogue" returns to the deepest level of communication as communion (AJ, 309-317).

⁴²¹ Ibid., 335-336.

⁴²² Cistercian Life (Spencer, MA: Cistercian Book Service, 1974). Pages unnumbered.

⁴²³ Love and Living, ed., Naomi Burton Stone and Brother Patrick Hart, New York: Farrar, Straus, 1979.

⁴²⁴ Ibid., 3.

⁴²⁵ Ibid., 8.

one must travel not by steps but with yearnings. The conceptual motifs of freedom, yearnings, and search for the radical self, in pursuit of the educational goal, not only recall key patterns in the writer's earlier thinking; they form more importantly a tapestry of Mertonian hope.⁴²⁶

At yet another level, "the inner paradise" motif triggers a broad-ranging inquiry into the inner self. In quest of the ground of one's own personality vis-à-vis the center of all created being, the inner self discovers in itself the light and the wisdom of the Creator. This is the light and wisdom in which everything comprehensible can be grasped in the darkness of contemplation by direct, existential contact.⁴²⁷ Understandably, such a metaphysical reflection on education looks for the fruit of education in the activation of that inmost center, that *scintilla animae*, that "apex" or "peak" which is a freedom beyond freedom.⁴²⁸ Here Merton uncovers layer by layer a stratification of human nature and the world and, so to speak, reconstructs an archeology of his hope.

"Creative Silence" delineates the human summons to silence, listening and waiting. The purest faith has to be tested by silence. Therein one listens for the unexpected, is open to what is not yet known, and slowly and gradually prepares for the day when a new level of being with God is reached. Faith affords a human being a new level of being with God through silence. Indeed, faith and hope become interchangeable. "True hope is tested by silence in which we have to wait on the Lord in the obedience of unquestioning faith." Citing traditional texts, Merton adds: "In silence and *hope* shall your strength be."⁴²⁹

"Cargo Cults of the South Pacific" proposes that, while Westerners think they are

⁴²⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, 7.

⁴²⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴²⁸ *Idem.*

⁴²⁹ *Ibid.*, 42 (emphasis added).

actually objective, logical people, they really live immersed in an enormous amount of mythology. Western mythology does not fundamentally differ from the mythology of the "Cargo Cults."⁴³⁰ A Cargo movement is a messianic or apocalyptic cult movement which decodes a crisis of cultural change by magical, religious idioms in sum, by a dual response:

- a) complete rejection and destruction of the old culture with its goods and values
- b) adoption of a new attitude and hope of immediate Cargo, as a result of and reward for the rejection of the old.⁴³¹

The goal of the Cargo Cults is the destruction of something old as a pledge of faith in the future.⁴³² In such cult activities, participants abruptly and completely forsake the past and perform ritual acts in preparation for the future.

Merton takes up Paul's eschatological thought. He adopts the apostle's correctives about a form of apocalyptic thinking which attempts "to substitute the speculations of pseudomysticism for the everyday task of the Christian in the world (1Thess 4:11; 2 Thess 3:6-15)."⁴³³ On the premise that eschatological Christian hope and human activity in this world are closely linked, Merton argues that "eschatological *Christian* hope is inseparable from an incarnational involvement in the struggle of living and contemporary man."⁴³⁴

In his effort to construe an eschatological Christian hope, Merton discovered a kindred spirit in Teilhard de Chardin.⁴³⁵ In him Merton finds that "the great question is

⁴³⁰ Ibid., 85.

⁴³¹ CPTM, 604.

⁴³² Idem.

⁴³³ Ibid., 143. In Merton's time the distinction between the proto-Pauline and deutero-Pauline writings had not come to be commonly accepted in Roman Catholic biblical study.

⁴³⁴ Ibid., 156 (original emphasis).

⁴³⁵ See ibid., 171-191.

It should be recalled here that Teilhard de Chardin, in The Future of Man, retreated from his focus as a paleontologist and crossed over into theology in an effort to speculate on the progress of the human

not whether this hope is laudable but whether it is purely and simply the theological hope of the Gospels and of the Church." He addresses Teilhard's anticipation of the future as a "superficial eschatological hopefulness based on evolution."⁴³⁶ Teilhard, concludes Merton, did not emphasize a here and now human existential reality.

Literary Essays of Thomas Merton (LETM, 1981) contains an article on "Why Alienation Is For Everybody." Alienation is here understood as a cultural phenomenon which separates us from our true identity. Alienation was clearly a significant Merton concern in later life.

LETM includes several articles on Albert Camus. If the concept of hope ranges beyond the purview of these articles, the notion of absurdity stands at their very core. Camus unequivocally preaches the absurd as a way of life.⁴³⁷ Both Camus and Merton wrestle with the search for reality. On the one hand, Camus insists that this reality might be obscured by absurdity; on the other, Merton discovered that the lucid realization of the absurd is at least a preliminary step toward a kind of modest hope.⁴³⁸

Thomas Merton on Alaska (1988) delves into several sources of Christian hope and deals with human alienation as an antithesis of hope. The reflections pivot on God's

species and the evolution of the cosmos. In his "Remarks on a New York Congress of Science and Religion" [unpublished], Peking, 30 March 1941, Teilhard boldly addressed "the march" or "the advance into the future" in these terms:

If indeed an almost limitless field of action lies upon to us in the future, what shall our moral dispositions be, as we contemplate this march ahead? I can think of two, which may be summarized in six words: *a great hope held in common*.

a. First, the hope. This must spring to life spontaneously in every generous spirit faced by the task that awaits us; and it is also the essential *impulse*, without which nothing can be done... Life is ceaseless discovery. Life is movement.

b. A hope held in common. Here again the history of life is decisive... Our hope can only be realized if it finds its expression in greater cohesion and greater human solidarity. This double point is firmly established by the verdict of the past. (See further Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, The Future of Man [New York: Harper & Row, 1964, 72; French original, 1959].)

⁴³⁶ George Kilcourse, Ace of Freedom, 117.

⁴³⁷ LETM, 197.

⁴³⁸ Idem.

covenant, Christian life as covenanted life, and God's promise of faithfulness and presence as preliminaries to human action. Although never formally introduced, hope in God's covenant with humanity finds expression through its implications.

On the subject of human alienation, Merton begins an extended discussion on the Holy Spirit in "The Spirit of Freedom, the Spirit of Response and Sonship."⁴³⁹ The discourse continues into "Prayer, Personalism and the Spirit." Both essays center on the Holy Spirit as the sign of the presence and the work of God in us. The result is a broad portrait of hope. The Holy Spirit overarches all the dimensions of Christian hope in relation to past, present, and future events; born of the Savior's Passion, hope points to our final victory and risen life; the future is in gestation in the present through the work of the Holy Spirit within us.⁴⁴⁰

The article, "Prayer and Priestly Tradition," returns again to the topic of the realized Kingdom. After sketching the premises of Christological hope, Merton defines Christians as "people who have placed all their hope in Christ."⁴⁴¹

Two remaining works, one late, the other early, speak to Merton's continuing interest in hope. The Springs of Contemplation (1992) focuses on two implicit dynamics of hope: the reality of Christ living in us and the concept of alienation.⁴⁴² In Monastery of Christ in the Desert Merton presents hope as an integral aspect of the experience of *metanoia*.⁴⁴³ The Merton fascination with hope runs broad, clear and steady.

D. SUMMARY

⁴³⁹ TMA, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: New Directions, 1988), 76.

⁴⁴⁰ Cf. TMA, 84.

⁴⁴¹ Ibid., 161-162.

⁴⁴² SpC, ed. Jane Marie Richardson (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1992).

⁴⁴³ Monastery of Christ in the Desert (Abiquiu, New Mexico). Unpaged brochure. See Malits, The Solitary Explorer, 68.

Chapter II has explored the content and components of hope in all of the writings of Thomas Merton published to date. The exploration has followed a diachronic pattern. While the date of publication is not always the date of composition, it does at least reflect the author's decision to submit his material for publication. Other factors of course may disrupt the submission of the material to the publisher and thereby to the reader (e. g., the need to revise, or to create a body of homo-homogeneous material). Still the working assumption is that the order of publication will reflect the author's innate pattern of consciousness, concern and composition. While a writer's body of work cannot be expected to follow a unilinear development, a sequence that is attuned to the writer's productivity will at least lessen the margin of bias which the reader is likely to introduce. Nor does this line of reasoning argue that a writer, every writer, indeed a prolific writer, is necessarily the best interpreter of his own work. In any event, a diachronic analysis can be assumed to safeguard a reliable hermeneutical procedure.

In the first period (from 1915 to 1954) hope is not the presenting issue for Merton. It is subordinated to several other concerns, primarily a perception about the need for union with God and a corresponding concern about the discovery of the true self.

In the second period (from 1955 to 1959) the statements on hope in Merton's work reveal personal and spiritual dimensions by their linkage to contemplative prayer. (spiritual) freedom, detachment, and solitude. Such day-to-day dynamics provide a barometer for self-evaluation, according to the rhythms and patterns of the daily order. Even so, at this point Merton's hope-based thinking surfaces in the form of an embryonic socio-political awareness.

The third period (from 1960 to 1968) presents a full-scale spectrum of social and political issues. While he does not declare that he is presenting a theology of hope, Merton clearly develops thematic perspectives on these issues: monastic renewal, ecclesiastical renewal, and the challenge of Christian existentialism. One detects a pattern of centrifugalism — a movement from a basic center of concern to ever broadening

ramifications. Monastic renewal can hardly stand apart from ecclesiastical renewal.

Our trajectory has highlighted thematic connections. The associative dynamics have led, on the one hand, to the introduction of such themes as the Kingdom (or reign) of God, salvation, *kairos*, perfection and contemplation, and, on the other, to despair, isolation, alienation, and dread.

The research embodied in chapter II, it is here argued, supports the thesis that hope is a primary, if not primordial, category in Merton's thought. Hope surfaces early as an experiential concern. Even more, it serves often and well as a criterion of assessment. An appeal to hope as a pivotal idea characterizes much of Merton's published work at this time.

Interestingly, by the late-60s an earlier period of prosperity in the United States was leading to a more realistic assessment of America's true stature on three counts: the realization of American vulnerability in the long Vietnam War, a developing unity of the oil-producing nations forcing dependence on this commodity, and the mounting inflation with rising unemployment leading to a new kind of recession. By the mid-60s, much of the theological fascination with hope found in the work of Pannenberg, Moltmann and Metz, can be found independently in the work of Merton. One of Merton's sterling contributions to spiritual theology is the insistence that hope must be given a pivotal significance in the Christian life.

CHAPTER III: ANALYSIS OF MERTON'S UNDERSTANDING OF HOPE

The preceding chapter has critically traced the published Merton canon in pursuit of a thematic of hope. A careful reading of the text has allowed identification of distinct stages of elaboration on hope. The interweaving of life and writings has been ascertained on several occasions. A move from presentation of the relevant data to analysis of the Merton understanding of hope is here called for.

A. Sources of Merton's Understanding of Hope

The word sources – rather than principles – is used here because the development of Merton's thought in his writings moves along genetic rather than architectonic lines. And yet, for all of the consecutive flow of thought in Merton's writings, especially his prose, he was clearly dependent on a broad range of other writers. These he read, pondered, assimilated. A careful reading of the Merton texts points to four categories of sources: (1) biblical; (2) spiritual-mystical; (3) literary; (4) theological.

1. Biblical Sources

Merton's intellectual pursuits and writings were not based on formal academic study of Sacred Scripture. He himself admitted on several occasions that while he had studied theology and its various branches, he had never become a professional academic, much less a technical biblical exegete. It is necessary, in light of this fact, to interpret carefully his remarks about Biblical study and its role in the monastic experience. He writes:

Monastic theology will be above all Biblical. The Bible should have first place in the formation and education of the monk from the earliest days of his postulancy. His liturgical and patristic studies will be also Biblical. The study of monastic history, of early monastic rules and ascetic literature should be seen in the relation of all such documents to their Biblical sources.¹

¹ CWA, 214. [Image Book]

More specifically the life of the Christian monk should be molded by the ideas and ideals of the New Testament.² Merton came to his understanding of hope primarily through biblical concepts and images. His few books and several essays on Sacred Scripture³ were not based on technical biblical criticism. His approach to the Scripture followed the *Lectio Divina* tradition, which, as personal reflection on the Biblical texts, significantly influenced his eschatological outlook.⁴

Merton's Early Poems (written between 1940 and 1942) used biblical figures and images of hope (e.g., Easter rain, crucifixion, resurrection) while apocalyptic images from the Bible are conspicuously absent. The first published poem with explicit eschatological images is found in Thirty Poems. In "The Blessed Virgin Mary Compared To a Window," there occurs the line "My light...the Lamb of their Apocalypse."⁵ The Man in the Divided Sea has several biblically apocalyptic images of hope. "Dirge" and "The Peril" contain explicit allusions to the Book of Revelation. "La Salette" builds on clear apocalyptic images from Rev 12 and 20.

As epigraph to "Figures for an Apocalypse" Merton used Matt 25:6.⁶ Labrie

² Idem.

³ OB (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1970). Also PP (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press) 1956.

⁴ Merton distinguishes two kinds of Biblical interpretation, the literal and typical sense of the Scripture (BW, 21). The typical sense derives the full meaning of a figure or event in light of a later reality to which it points and in which it finds fuller application. The major events of the Old Testament, as read from a Christian perspective, point to "the one great redemptive act in which God destroyed sin: Christ's passion and death" (Ibid, 53) This typical interrelation between intra-biblical realities "is a special manifestation of God: it is the testimony of His continuous providential intervention in human history" (Idem). Using this type-based pattern of interpretation Merton hardly ever remained locked within the text for its own sake. He moved quickly from Scriptural events to contemporary occurrences. Such a procedure, technically, is designated a figure or image. Merton was anxious to move from the spiritual understanding of Scripture to an awareness of the Spirit of God living and working in society at large or individual souls, carrying out the same salvific actions which we can see prefigured and realized in the Old and New Testament (Ibid, 29)

⁵ CPTM, 48.

⁶ Ibid, 13.

characterizes Merton's apocalyptic vision as a perspective that offers "a heady synthesis of biblical and secular images punctuated by a vision of the fall of New York -- the modern Babylon."⁷ In "Figures for an Apocalypse," an eight-part poem, Part IV, though untitled, uses Rev 14: 14. Part VII entitled "Landscape: Beast," is an obvious reference to one of the major apocalyptic images in the book of Revelation. Part VIII, "The Heavenly City," depicts the descent of the city of God in terms borrowed from the book of Revelation.⁸

The Tears of the Blind Lion (1949) has two strong eschatological poems based on biblical imagery of apocalyptic expectation. They are "On a Day in August" and "Senescente Mundo." Thus, glimmers of a concern with hope already surface in such early materials.

Merton's eschatological vision is based on St. Paul's theological world-view. The citation of Rom 8: 19-21⁹ at the beginning and toward the end of No Man is an Island creates a ringing composition of apocalyptic expectation:

The beasts and the trees will one day share with us a new creation and we will see them as God sees them and know that they are very good... [T]he goodness of creation enters into the framework of holy hope. All created things proclaim God's fidelity to His promises and urge us, for our sake and for their own, to deny ourselves and to live in hope and to look for the judgment and the general resurrection.¹⁰

Merton adopted the Christological perspectives of the Church Fathers and the New Testament itself to explain humanity's hope for its future fulfillment or divinization.¹¹ Ironically, this involves a "reorientation of all human life in a direction

⁷ Ross Labrie, The Art of Thomas Merton (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University Press, 1979), 120.

⁸ CPTM, 147-148.

⁹ NMI, 19. In this same chapter Merton also quotes Rom 8: 24 "For we are saved by hope. But hope that is seen, is not hope. For what a man seeth, why doth he hope for?" NMI, 15.

¹⁰ Ibid., 19-20. See also NMI, 115-116.

¹¹ NM., 134. in Koch 74.

which is not immediately perceptible to the natural intelligence of man.”¹² Merton’s interpretation of Christ as the Second Adam places humanity into its original existential communion with God, so that the incorporation of Christians into their new life in Christ becomes “a prolongation of his Resurrection.”¹³ Merton is drawing upon the broad schema of Pauline Christology, and through it all there pulses a firm sense of hope. It is a hope which speaks to a responsibility to work for the Kingdom, “for we, in fact, are all the New Adam. We must never forget this active and dynamic view of the kingdom of Christ.”¹⁴ This hope which envisions intimate union with Christ involves a transformation of ourselves here and now, not in the future.¹⁵

Merton does a *lectio divina* on the Nativity story in a Bible Today article. His reading attempts to be sensitive to modern biblical criticism but primarily focuses on the Church’s initial eschatological awareness:

The Gospel of nativity...is a solemn proclamation of an event which is the turning point of all history.... It is the announcement of the decisive eschatological event. a liberation from all incomplete and fragmentary religious forms: a deliverance from what Paul called mere "elements" of worldly religion and philosophy.¹⁶

Through his use of Gal 4:4-5 Merton states that the coming of the Son of Man is an invitation to the Church to celebrate the completion of God’s plan. In the mystery of the Incarnation as commemorated in the Christmas liturgy, Merton unearths striking eschatological features.¹⁷ Such is “the truth of the merciful God revealing Himself in the

¹² Ibid., 148. in Koch 74.

¹³ Ibid., 152. in Koch 75.

¹⁴ Ibid., 155. in Koch 75.

¹⁵ Ibid., 159. in Koch 75.

¹⁶ LoL, 223. See also “The Good News of the Nativity: A Monastic Reading of the Christmas Gospels.” Bible Today (December 1965): 1367-1375.

¹⁷ E. g., “We are created anew in the incarnation of the Word. Our humanity has been sized up and taken up by the Person of the Word. Humanity can never be the same after this fact. The possibilities of life and fulfillment which had been closed in Adam, and to which no religious philosophy, no mystery cult, no mystic wisdom could reopen the way, can become ours again simply because we are men, now that

eschatological event which is mercy and salvation.”¹⁸ It is imperative that eschatological mercy have a social, even political dimension, that the true believer steer clear of a naïve optimism in utopian designs.¹⁹

Merton pleads for an eschatological mentality that, at the close of the second Christian millenium, leads to a true millennial period:

Such is the eschatological climate of the new creation, in which pardon replaces sacrifice (Osee 6:6; Mt 9:13) and the whole world is filled with the mercy of God as the waters cover the sea.²⁰

A biblical motif which recurs constantly through Merton’s spirituality is the recovery of paradise and other biblical themes as described in MJ (1977).²¹ The “cold war” between the United States and the Soviet Union, for example, becomes for him the battle between Gog a lover of power and Magog who is absorbed in the cult of money (Ezek 39-40).²²

In Raids on the Unspeakable (1966), a meditation on the Christmas mystery, Merton once again presents “the more profound hopes of biblical eschatology,” especially as found in the book of Revelation (cf. 16:14; 18:3,4; 19:18,19). Is 65:16-18 highlights the concept of *novitas* [newness], through which will come *nova per carnem Nativitatis Domini* [the new things through the birth in the flesh of the Lord]. Out of this longing

Christ has become man” (Ibid., 203).

¹⁸ Ibid., 184.

¹⁹ Ibid., 197.

²⁰ Ibid., 219.

²¹ E. g., “The theme of a call into the wilderness, a vocation to recover the paradise life after suffering temptation with Christ in desert solitude, is but a variant of the fundamental themes of all Biblical theology: the pascha Christi, the call of the People of God out of Egypt, through the Red Sea into the Desert and to the promised land; the theme of the Cross and Resurrection; dying to sin and rising in Christ; the theme of the old and new man; the theme of the fallen world and the new creation” MJ, 145.

²² Cf. CPTM, 375.

for the renewal of the whole world “grown old in sin,” Merton looks to a hope-engendered dynamic of newness.²³

2. Spiritual/Mystical Sources

In developing his grasp of eschatological hope, Merton delved into the early and medieval Church Fathers, the woman mystics and even a pre-Christian mystic. These included a. Herakleitos, b. Origen, c. John Cassian the Hermit, d. St. Gregory of Nyssa, e. St. Bernard, f. Julian of Norwich, g. St. John of the Cross.

a. Herakleitos (c. 500 B.C.)

Merton wrote extensively on Herakleitos in The Behavior of Titans (1961). Flourishing in the 69th Olympiad, at the time of the Greek tyrants during the Persian wars, this Greek philosopher is remembered for about sixty acknowledged (or essential) fragments and about seventy (disputed) ones.²⁴ Herakleitos was a tight-lipped pessimist who launched contempt on the political philosophy of his contemporaries and refused to be confined by the narrow horizons of his society.

Herakleitos was held by Merton in high esteem for his mystical, non-rational approach. His acuity equipped him to grapple with the hidden order in reality. This “seer” aimed to awaken others to dimensions of reality accessible to but *de facto* unseen by them. Aristotle, on the other hand, differentiated between human wisdom that confronts the reality of the world and divine wisdom which opens the way to a more mystical course. Were human wisdom empowered to organize the world completely, it would paralyze the world.²⁵

²³ SS, 145.

²⁴ Richard G. Geldard, Remembering Heraclitus. Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne, Books, 2000. W.H.S. Jones, trans. Hippocrates Vol. 4, Loeb Classical Library. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1931). Martin Heidegger and Eugen Fink, Heraclitus Seminar (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970). T. M. Robinson, Heraclitus (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987). Sri Aurobindo, Heraclitus (Pondicherry, IN: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1941).

²⁵ BT, 82. See also 75.

Human wisdom aims at universal movement by reducing it to order. Divine wisdom summons one from individual slumber to universal truth. Merton adds another factor to the equation — deception is common to all humans.

Herakleitos mystically foreshadows Christianity. In his mystical intimations of *logos* Merton finds an image for resurrection.²⁶ Even more, a few of Herakleitos' mysterious insights "suggest" New Testament texts about the risen life. One Fragment, among others, affirms: "Man kindles for himself a light in the night time when he has died but is alive... he that is awake lights up from sleeping."²⁷

According to Merton who stresses Herakleitos' "*intuition préchrétienne*" Herakleitos has in mind only a spiritual, intellectual awakening which lifts the experience of the enlightened one to the discovery of the *logos*. But the mystical quality of this experience makes this awakening a figure of resurrection and new life, in which Herakleitos evidently believed.²⁸ Merton highlights a remarkable statement in Herakleitos: "When they (men) die, they will find things that they do not look for and things that they do not dream, when they were living."²⁹

Herakleitos never affirms that the after-life will be positive or negative, merely that the future will be different. Without hope, urges Herakleitos, one cannot find that which cannot be hoped for, that which cannot be found or reached. Therefore, (real) hope looks for those things which are beyond normal expectations, typical anticipations.³⁰

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 92.

²⁷ *Idem.* The translation of Fragment 40, in Richard Geldard carries a different sense: "At night man kindles a light for himself when his eyes fail to see; thus in life, he is in contact with the dead when asleep and with the sleeper when awake" (*op. cit.*, p. 160).

²⁸ *Idem.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 93.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 75.

b. Origen (c. 185-c. 254)

In elaborating his understanding of Christian nonviolence, Merton found a significant eschatological outlook in Origen:

Christians have been taught not to defend themselves against their enemies; and because they have kept the laws which command gentleness and love to man, on this account they have received from God that which they would not have succeeded in doing if they had been given the right to make war.³¹

Celsus, a pagan traditionalist censured in Contra Celsum, had directed a violent attack on Christianity for being “completely subversive of the old religious and social order.”³² His chief grievance was the Christian “claim to exclusiveness, to the possession of a special revealed truth which forms no part of the socio-religious heritage of the various nations. ... [I]n particular they refuse to fight in the army.”³³ Celsus interprets “the other-worldly Christian spirit as a concrete, immediate physical threat.”³⁴ Origen takes issue with Celsus’ basic position that there have to be wars, because men cannot live together in unity. In this context, “Origen announces the Christian claim that a time will come for all men to be united in the Logos, though this fulfillment is most probably eschatological (realized only after the end and fulfillment of world history).”³⁵ In point of fact, Merton offers an apologetic of Origen’s underlying philosophy. “Origen does not take the categorically unworldly view of the Apocalypse.”³⁶

³¹ Origen, Contra Celsum, III, trans. by Chadwick (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 133, as quoted in Merton, SD, 137.

³² SD, 135.

³³ Ibid., 135-136.

³⁴ Ibid., 136.

³⁵ Ibid., 137.

³⁶ For example, Merton argues that Origen “has a great respect for Greek and Roman civilization at least in its more spiritual and humane aspects. The unified Roman world is the providentially appointed scene for the Gospel Kerygma” (SD, 137). “Origen as a matter of fact was far from anti-social, still less anti-intellectual. A man who united in himself profound learning, philosophical culture and Christian holiness, Origen took an urbane, optimistic view of classical thought and of Greco-Roman civilization” (Ibid., 137-138). “Origen ... sees that human society has been radically transformed by the Incarnation of the Logos. The presence in the world of the Risen Savior, in and through His Church, has destroyed the

Merton is especially intrigued by Origen's "spiritual weapons" of the Church:

The weapon of prayer is not directed against other men, but against the evil forces which divide men into warring camps. If these evil forces are overcome by prayer, then both sides are benefitted, war is avoided and all are united in peace³⁷

Merton found Origen's stance on war more relevant to the contemporary issue of nuclear weapons than Augustine's just-war theory. He queries: could it be argued that the needed "significant new developments in Christian thought on nuclear war" will depend on freeing ourselves from the overpowering influence of Augustinian assumptions and moving to a new view of man, of society and of war itself? "A renewed emphasis on the earlier, more mystical and more eschatological doctrine" of "the New Testament and the early Fathers" seems to be in order. Though not necessarily a return to an imaginary ideal of pure primitive pacifism, it would also "require a more optimistic view of man."³⁸

c. John Cassian the Hermit (360? – 432?)

Perhaps the pivotal role of hope in Merton's own monastic vocation derives in part from his analysis of *puritas cordis* (purity of heart) by Cassian in his influential *De Institutis Coenobium* (Of the Rules of Monks) written in 12 books, between 419 and 426. Merton does not hesitate to call Cassian the most influential writer in Western monasticism: "It was he who, in the early fifth century, transmitted to the West the Origenist and Evagrian doctrines on monastic life and prayer which were, and remained, dominant in Hellenistic monachism."³⁹

Between 426 and 428 Cassian wrote the controversial *Collationes Patrum* (Discourses of the Fathers) in 24 books. The later work details the spiritual combat which one must endure to attain purity of heart. Merton treasured St. Benedict's encomium of

seeing (sic!) validity of all that was in reality arbitrary, tyrannical or absurd in the fictions of social life. He has introduced worship and communal life of an entirely new kind. "in spirit and in truth" (*Ibid.*, 138-139).

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 141.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 145.

³⁹ *MJ.*, 90.

this work as *speculum monasticum* (“a monastic mirror”) and his instruction that it be read daily in his new monasteries.

Merton cites Cassian:

It is for the sake of this purity of heart that we must do all that we do and seek all that we seek. For the sake of purity of heart we seek solitude, fasting, vigils, labors, poor clothing, reading and all the other monastic virtues. Through these practices we hope to be able to keep our heart untouched by the assault of all passions, and by these steps we hope to ascend to a perfect love.⁴⁰

Merton ascribed to Cassian’s view that while the structure and spirit of the monastic life is dictated by this inner purity, monastic asceticism finds its axis in the virtues of humility and obedience. Merton’s oxymoron of humility as “saving despair” is explained by Anne Carr:

The heart of the battle is the saving “despair” in which humility finally conquers one’s attempt to be one’s own god and in this despair there emerges the victory of the real over the unreal.⁴¹

It takes no great feat of logic to see that the “despair” here at work is actually a dynamic hope. Obedience detaches one from a stubborn insistence on living “as a self-assertive and self seeking individual.” Renouncing one’s deepest illusions about oneself not only banishes the false self, but induces the “emptiness of self.” This brings Merton back to the Cassian *point vierge*. “the purity of heart.”⁴² Taking his cue from Cassian, Merton remarks that purity of heart is not a psychological state, nor a human achievement, but a new creation, a superlative reality that is true gift, a new being.⁴³

⁴⁰ Cassian, *Conference* I. vii. Migne PL, 49:489 (emphasis added).

⁴¹ Anne E. Carr, *A Search for Wisdom & Spirit: Thomas Merton’s Theology of the Self* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 37.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 38. The term, of course, is found frequently in the Merton writings.

⁴³ Cf. Cassian, *Conference* I. vii. Migne, PL 49: 489, as cited in *The Silent Life*, 11.

d. St. Gregory of Nyssa (b. 331/340 – c. 394)

Among Thomas Merton's favorite authors was Gregory of Nyssa, "the true Father of Christian apophatic mysticism"⁴⁴ For Gregory of Nyssa the soul is encompassed by a divine night, during which the Spouse approaches, without revealing himself.⁴⁵ "The bride then puts the veil from her eyes and with pure vision sees the ineffable beauty of her Spouse."⁴⁶ When the soul is in the midst of darkness, it is united in and through love with the unknowable God. Hence, when there is nothing left, something appears that cannot be grasped or identified, yet it is there. Merton uses this approach often in his writings when he discourses on the mysteriousness of God, the ineffability of the Divine Being.⁴⁷

Through Gregory of Nyssa, Merton came to see that the mind must detach itself from sensible appearances and seek God in those invisible realities which the intellect alone can apprehend. The darkening of the senses is like a cloud in which the soul becomes accustomed to traveling blind, even to the highest perceptions and judgments of its natural intelligence. It must enter into pure darkness.

According to Merton, this voyage in darkness is not accomplished without anguish, or without hope. This intellectual restlessness, *spiritus vertiginis*, is the concrete experience of man's interior division against himself.⁴⁸ Merton says that this vertigo, which is not unlike the dark fear that pervades the pages of the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, is the deep anguish that seizes a soul for whom the "nothingness" of visible things is no longer merely a matter of discourse but of experience!⁴⁹

⁴⁴ AT, 320. See Merton's letter of October 9, 1950, to Dom Jean Leclercq (SCh, 24-25).

⁴⁵ As cited in Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, and Edward Yarnold, S.J., eds. The Study of Spirituality (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 167.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 168.

⁴⁷ NSC, 184. See also FV, 272-273

⁴⁸ St. Gregory of Nyssa, Hom. 7 on Ecclesiastes, P.G. 44:729, as quoted in AT, 51.

⁴⁹ AT, 51-52.

Gregory of Nyssa's teaching on *epektasis*⁵⁰ was especially helpful in Merton's elaboration of the experience of contemplation which embraces union with God and discovery of true self.

e. St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090 – 1153)

Bernard, born near Dijon, France, was the founder of the famous Cistercian Abbey at Clairvaux in France, Abbot, and Doctor of the Church.⁵¹ Merton developed his concept of Advent from the profound eschatology of the Epistle to the Ephesians as expounded by St. Bernard.⁵² The article "The Sacrament of Advent in the Spirituality of St. Bernard" finds the saint's eschatology deeply rooted in the eschatological message of Eph 1:9-10: "He has let us know the mystery of His purpose, the hidden plan He so kindly made in Christ from the beginning... that he would bring everything together under Christ, as head..." According to Merton, God's hidden plan "is not merely a manifestation of the Divine Perfections, it is the concrete plan of God for the salvation of

⁵⁰ The term *epektasis* does not connote the condition of the perfect spiritual person who has arrived at a high level of moral perfection and contemplative knowledge of God. Rather, it refers to the condition of one who has reached a high level and presses on toward still purer, more vital experiences of God's light and truth. The perfect pursuer is the human being who is ever pressing onward, moving deeper into the mystery of God. Even heaven, in this construction, is synonymous with an eternal forward thrusting into the love, light, and love of God; each fulfillment, in fact, generates a new impulse to further exploration. John Eudes Bamberger, "The Monk," in Thomas Merton: Monk, new enlarged edition (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1983), 37 – 58, esp. 54.

⁵¹ G. R. Evans, The Mind of St. Bernard of Clairvaux (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983). Leon Cristiani, St. Bernard of Clairvaux (Staten Island, NY: Daughters of St. Paul, 1977). Jean Leclercq, Bernard of Clairvaux and the Cistercian Spirit, trans. by Claire Lavoie (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian, 1976). J. Sommerfeldt, The Spiritual Teachings of Clairvaux, Cistercian Studies 125 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian, 1991).

Biographies include: Watkin W. Williams, Saint Bernard of Clairvaux. (Manchester: Manchester University, 1935); J. Calmette and H. David, Saint Bernard (Paris, 1953); and B. Scott-James, Saint Bernard of Clairvaux (London, 1957).

It should be noted that the standard introduction to St. Bernard's mystical theology is authored by one of Merton's favorite philosophers: Etienne Gilson, The Mystical Theology of St. Bernard, trans by A. H. C. Downes (London: Sheed & Ward, 1940).

⁵² According to Merton, "The twelfth century Cistercians place a special emphasis on the coming of Christ by his Spirit to the Christian person ... It is a particularly important aspect of the spirituality of St. Bernard." SCb, 61-62.

men and the restoration of the whole world in Christ.”⁵³ Merton sees this plan not merely as future prospect but as a present reality. The last things are already present though realized in a hidden manner, for the kingdom of God is already in the midst of us.⁵⁴

Merton notes that St. Bernard time and again reverts to the “three Advents” of Christ. The first occurred when Christ entered the world through his human conception in Mary’s womb, coming to seek and to save that which was last. The third will find him in the world at the end of history to judge the living and the dead, to take the faithful to himself. “The first is a promise, the third its fulfillment.”⁵⁵ But in St. Bernard Merton finds yet another Advent — the Advent of the present occurring at every moment of our earthly life as wayfarers.⁵⁶ “The middle Advent is more a time of consolation than of suffering,” since in his coming to us Christ so offers himself “that we already possess our heaven in hope.”⁵⁷

f. Julian of Norwich (c.1342-c. 1413)

Merton’s fascination with Julian of Norwich found expression in various settings.⁵⁸ Julian’s theology (as contrasted with her spirituality) has not, sad to say, been

⁵³ SCb, 63.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 64.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 75.

⁵⁶ He writes: “Meditation on the first Advent gives us hope of the promise offered us. The remembrance of the third reminds us to fear lest by our fault we fail to receive the fulfillment of that promise. The second Advent, the present, set in between these two terms is therefore necessarily a time of anguish, a time of conflict between fear and joy. But this is a salutary struggle! It ends in salvation and victory because it purifies our whole being.” (SCb, 77).

⁵⁷ “The inner purity and humility, in which we learn to distrust our own powers and to depend on God for everything, without however neglecting any effort to do His will, gives us peace and joy even while we still labor as wayfarers in the journey toward the great eschatological meeting with Christ which will end history with the third and final Advent” Ibid., 79.

⁵⁸ Merton comments on her in a letter to Sister M. Madeleva:

Julian is without doubt one of the most wonderful of all Christian voices. She gets greater and greater in my eyes as I grow older and whereas in the old days I used to be crazy about St. John of the Cross, I would not exchange him now for Julian if you gave me the world and the Indies and all

studied at any significant level.⁵⁹ In fact, it has sometimes been set aside as the unreliable, albeit sincere, reflections of an eccentric visionary. Dom François Vandendrouclea, for example, is one who decries “the accent...on the psychological aspects of ...experiences, with no great stress laid on the theological foundations or moral presuppositions.”⁶⁰

Interestingly, on the contrary, after reading Julian, Merton — with pardonable hyperbole — placed her among the greatest of all theologians.⁶¹ Merton’s unexpected death foreclosed a detailed study to support his enthusiastic assessment.

The context for Julian’s vision of “the Fiend” is quickly enough grasped. In his attempted physical assault during her revelations, the demonic adversary tried to lead her into despair by showing her guilt. Julian seems less impressed with the adversary’s common temptations of gluttony, sloth, etc. She finds the adversary’s cunning more dangerous when exploiting despair, guilt, anxiety and apathy, especially as the temptations intensified at the end of all Julian’s visions, creating the shattering possibility the whole matter had been a hallucination. Merton’s discovery consists of “an eschatological secret.”

This “secret,” this act which the Lord keeps hidden, is really the full fruit of the Parousia. It is not just that “He comes,” but He comes with this secret to reveal.

the Spanish mystics rolled up in one bundle. I think that Julian of Norwich is with Newman the greatest English theologian (SD, 274-275).

⁵⁹ See Grace Jantzen, *Julian of Norwich* (New York: Paulist, 2000; 1st ed., London: SPCK, 1987), with new Introduction, vii-xxiii. The literature on Julian continues to grow. R. H. Thouless, *The Lady Julian: A Psychological Study* (London: SPCK/ New York, Macmillan, 1924). P. Molinari, S.J. *Julian of Norwich: The Teaching of a 14th Century English Mystic* (London/ New York: Longmans, Green, 1958). D. N. Baker, *Julian of Norwich’s Showings: From Vision to Book* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994). F. C. Bauersmidt, *Julian of Norwich and the Mystical Body Public of Christ* (Chicago: University of Notre Dame, 1999). J. M. Nuch, *Wisdom’s Daughter: The Theology of Julian of Norwich* (New York: Crossroads, 1991). B. Palphrey, *Christ Our Mother: Julian of Norwich*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1989). Julian of Norwich, *Showings*. Trans. from the Critical Text with an Introduction by Edmund Colledge and James Walsh. Preface by Jean Leclercq (New York: Paulist, 1978).

⁶⁰ *A History of Christian Spirituality*. Vol. II: *The Spirituality of the Middle Ages* by Jean Leclercq Francois Vandendroucke, and Louis Bouyer (London/ Deaslie/ New York: Burns & Oates, 1963), 425-426.

⁶¹ *CGB*, 191-192. [Hard cover]. See also in *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1967), 142.

He comes with this final answer to all the world's anguish, this answer which is already decided, but which we cannot discover (and which, since we think we have reasoned it all out anyway) we have stopped trying to discover.⁶²

The wise heart, Merton recalls, lives pivoted on "this dynamism and this secret hope." One must believe and accept the fact, as Julian did, that there is a hell. One must even more firmly believe that "all manner of thing shall be well." The Christian does live, then, engulfed in contradiction: for all that, this state of affairs "gives Christian life its true scope and dimensions."⁶³

Merton personalized this insight in a reflective note, at the end of "Night Spirit and Dawn Air" in CGB (1966). Another night scene follows the opening valley scene. Merton is now walking through the monastery on night watch. He describes how his flashlight beams bounce around the study room of the novices, where he senses an ultimate reality. This presence pervades the room because Merton is experiencing the labors of love his novices were facing.

It was as if their love and their goodness had transformed the room and filled it with a presence curiously real, comforting, perfect: one might say, with Christ.⁶⁴

This nighttime intuition, as it were, was nudging Merton to recall the great eschatological secret. More significantly perhaps. Merton was edging toward the incarnational reality which at the moment suffused "the loveliness of the humanity which God has taken to Himself in love."⁶⁵ To change the figure, an afterglow of the Incarnation may have enticed him to perceive divine loveliness in humanity. Those who disincarnate Christ from the human setting forfeit a pivotal spiritual dimension in their lives. (Merton had noted instances of this in monks unfruitful in their calling.) In any case, the moment was worthy of the mysticism of Julian of Norwich, whose visionary revelations suggested a

⁶² CGB, 211-212. [Image edition]

⁶³ Ibid., 212.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 213.

⁶⁵ Idem.

quality of care issuing from God or Christ as mother.

During his years as Novice Master, Merton had kept in touch with the motivations that brought individuals to the monastery. He was thus able to recover hope for “the other dimension of man’s life: the political.” Not that it was logical to be invincibly hopeful (for Merton did not see it as a result of reasoning), but it was intuited as direct experience as Julian of Norwich had, that all manner of things shall be well.

... Because there is love in the world, and because Christ has taken our nature to Himself, there remains always the hope that man will finally, after many mistakes and even disasters, learn to disarm and to make peace, recognizing that he *must* live at peace with his brother. Yet never have we been less disposed to do this.⁶⁶

g. St. John of the Cross (1542-1591)

Merton corrects the general misunderstanding of John of the Cross, who so often is presented as “a life-denying and world-hating ascetic when in reality his mysticism superabounds in love, vitality and joy.”⁶⁷

Merton links the existentialist’s concept of dread⁶⁸ not only with the “fear of the Lord” of the early Fathers but also with the “dark nights” of John of the Cross. Merton sees dread more as a perception of our contingency, our finiteness, our ultimate “nothingness.”⁶⁹ In our depths there is not only nothingness, but also falsity. We have failed to measure up to the existential demands of our lives. The price of this failure is a general sense of failure and guilt. Merton remarks:

...this guilt is real, it is not necessarily a mere neurotic anxiety. It is the sense of

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 214.

⁶⁷ *ZBA*, 81.

⁶⁸ In his important book, *The Concept of Anxiety*, Søren Kierkegaard compares anxiety (also sometimes translated as “dread”) to the experience of dizziness. “He whose eye chances to look down into the yawning abyss becomes dizzy.... Thus dread is the dizziness of freedom which occurs....when freedom gazes down into its own possibility, grasping at finiteness to sustain itself.” Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 59.

⁶⁹ *CP*, 96.

*defection and defeat that afflicts a man who is not facing his own inner truth and is not giving back to life, to God and to his fellow man, a fair return for all that has been given him.*⁷⁰

The purpose of the dark night, Merton's study of St. John of the Cross would maintain, is not simply to afflict the human heart, but to liberate, to purify and to enlighten in perfect love. The way that leads through dread goes not to despair but to perfect joy, not to hell but to heaven.⁷¹ According to Merton, one can pass from the prayer of petition directly into contemplation when one has a very profound faith and a great simplicity of theological hope. St. John of the Cross identifies this hope with the night, or emptiness, of the memory.⁷²

3. Literary Sources

Merton's English studies and his MA thesis on William Blake, together with his teaching of literature courses, had prepared him well for reading outstanding literary writers for their religious ideas. The content and implications of their works for theological discourse continued to attract him during his later monastery years. If in earlier life they had drawn him to savor the formal values they offered, his later years found him delving into their material content.

a. William Blake (1757 – 1827)

As The SJ and The SSM acknowledge, it was William Blake who impelled Merton toward the Roman Catholic Church. Merton's M.A. thesis on William Blake and his review of Thomas Altizer's book, The New Apocalypse: The Radical Christian Vision of William Blake, resulted in something more than a passing literary experience.

In exploring Blake's influence on Merton, Michael W. Higgins underscores the

⁷⁰ Ibid., 97 (original emphasis).

⁷¹ Dark Night, II, XVI, 7.

⁷² CP, 114.

parallels between the two. According to Higgins, "Both did espouse a new way of seeing, a way of perceiving and understanding that stood in marked contrast to the prevailing orthodoxies of taste and theology, art and spirituality."⁷³ Merton wrote about the poet:

Blake saw official Christendom as a *narrowing* of vision, a foreclosure of experience and of future expansion, a locking up and securing of the doors of perception. He substituted for it a Christianity of openness, of total vision...integrating sacred vision, in and through the experience of fallenness as the only locus of creativity and redemption. Blake...calls for a "whole new form of theological understanding."⁷⁴

Higgins further compared the two. Both possessed "the spiritual qualities of the biblical prophet and rebel: righteous anger mingled with insight." Both shared a more open and integrated vision of humanity. Both opposed the constructions of abstract reason. Both developed a distinctive poetic technique in order to form their unorthodox styles of creativity and thought.⁷⁵ Both indulge a paradox sustained by deep, strange, and mystical sources, while remaining defiant and yet profoundly conservative at heart. Both accepted the reality of the Fall, emphasizing a divided humanity which must be overcome by a new and "higher unity."⁷⁶ Higgins finds himself compelled to conclude: "Merton is a Blakean character."⁷⁷

Merton's poetic and spiritual vision was similar to Blake's, which he labeled "myth-dream." Higgins summarizes Merton's myth-dream as

the disunity of the word/world and its reparation by the poet; the role of silence in this life-long act of reparation; the tyranny of intellection and its dethronement by

⁷³ Michael W. Higgins, Heretic Blood: The Spiritual Geography of Thomas Merton (Toronto: Stoddart, 1998), 76.

⁷⁴ LETM, 6, as cited in Higgins, 69-70 (original emphasis).

⁷⁵ Higgins, 70.

⁷⁶ LETM, 6, as cited in Higgins, 71

⁷⁷ Higgins, 76

“archaic wisdom”; the ultimate realization of that fourfold vision which is imaginative and spiritual integration/wholeness.⁷⁸

Chaos and integrating sacred vision found in Blake also meet in *Cables to the Ace* and *The Geography of Lograire*. *Cables* in particular, according to Higgins, underscores Merton’s Blakean and cosmic eschatology.⁷⁹

b. Boris Leonidovich Pasternak (1890 – 1960)⁸⁰

In Boris Pasternak, who was awarded but refused the Nobel Prize in literature for 1959, Merton found the spiritual and Christian dimension of an outstanding artist. States Merton: “The protest of Dr. Zhivago is spiritual. ...religious, aesthetic and mystical.”⁸¹ While Pasternak wrote his book in humanistic terms, and it contains no explicit Christian message, it nevertheless reflects, for Merton, the essence of Christian faith. However obscurely, the work points to “the mystery of history as passion and resurrection.”⁸² Pasternak portrays human suffering as the spiritual ordeal of people struggling against political totalitarianism.

For Merton, Pasternak is a paradigm of hope: (1) as a symbol of protest and hope, resisting totalitarian authority; (2) as an artist, unencumbered by any pre-determined speculative framework, appealing to the mystique of death and resurrection. Merton points to God’s revelation in time as the key to the dynamism of history common to both the Bible and Marxism.⁸³

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 75

⁸⁰ Henry Gifford, *Boris Pasternak*, (Cambridge, UK/ New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

⁸¹ *DQ*, 46.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 8.

⁸³ Merton quotes Pasternak’s outstanding novel in support of his view on God’s revelation in history.

It was not until after the coming of Christ that time and man could breathe freely. It was not until after Him that men began to live toward the future. Man does not die in a ditch like a dog, but at home in history, while the work toward the conquest of death is in full

c. Albert Camus (1913–1960)

Though an atheist, Camus the novelist, dramatist, essayist and journalist was a voice for the moral conscience of his generation. Though a post-Christian writer, he defended Christian philosophy against complete nihilism and violence.⁸⁴ Rejecting the modern view of a progression toward perfection, Camus preferred the Greek “eternal” patterns for rational conduct. As a classicist, Merton was drawn to this mind-set in Camus.

Because his novel Stranger features an “absurd” and alienated character, Camus has been labeled a pessimist. Merton however regarded Camus as an optimist, “one of the more hopeful voices of his generation,” in particular because Camus rejected an “illusory optimism of the naïve or organization men.”⁸⁵ Both Camus and Merton were deeply angered by the atomic bomb and the struggle between capitalism and communism. Merton agreed with Camus in his diagnosis of the 20th century. While most people, Camus included, view the world as chaotic, Merton finds a divinely established order.

Merton fell under the spell of Camus’ images of the Rebel and Revolt. The novelist rejected both capitalism and communism, which came to birth through the optimism of the 19th century but became bankrupt in the 20th century, giving rise to a new kind of despair with the atomic bomb.⁸⁶ For Camus, modern revolutions began with absolute liberty and ended in absolute tyranny. “The death of God” revolutions could not, in his view, replace a divine morality with something that might work at the human level.

swing; he dies sharing in this work (DQ, 66). See Boris Pasternak, Doctor Zhivago (New York: Pantheon, 1958), 3-5, 9-10.

⁸⁴The literature on Camus is extensive. Among the outstanding works mention should be made of the following: Germaine Bree, Camus (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1964); 4th rev. ed.: (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1972). Donald Lezere, The Unique Creation of Albert Camus (Hartford, CT: Yale University Press, 1973). Thomas Hanna, The Thought and Art of Albert Camus (Chicago: Regnery, 1958). Herbert R. Lottman, Albert Camus: A Biography. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1979. More recently, from a philosophical perspective, David Sprintzen, Camus: A Critical Examination (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1988).

⁸⁵ LETM, 233.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 234.

He decried the French revolution of 1789, which for all its passion for justice created a reign of terror. Revolution kept postponing perfect liberty for the future.⁸⁷ Its rejection of present/concrete man for an investment of hope in a future/abstract improved man, has resulted in a “will of the whip” of happiness.⁸⁸

The essay The Rebel (1951; ET, 1954) unfolds Camus’ specific ideology. Steering clear of formal revolution, the work articulates concepts of personal and historical revolutions in Europe since the 18th century. It avows that revolution carried to logical extremes, whether capitalism or totalitarianism,⁸⁹ or the camps of Hitler, the Soviets or countries possessing nuclear power, justifies war and murder. Moreover, by its exploitation of political powers human revolution has done away with God. Merton insists that the current despair Camus describes is induced by the absence of God.

Unlike his Catholic friends, Camus had no solution for the human dilemma. He enshrined his hope in depiction of human despair, creating the role of the individual Rebel.

CP discloses that Merton had an abiding affection for Camus, a great modern intellectual closely identified with the existential movement, though he never agreed to be identified with that group. We find a close connection between the two when Merton argues that the monk confronts his own humanity and that of his world as a “Camusian man confronts ‘the absurd’ and transcends it by his freedom.”⁹⁰

At this point, however, a sharp difference sets apart Merton and Camus. According to George Woodcock, Camus combats our senseless and brutal existence by raising humanity’s freedom and power to the level of the only solution to this condition. Merton, contrarily, finds in the absurdity of existence a nausea at one’s own human

⁸⁷ Ibid., 235.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 235-236.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 235.

⁹⁰ CP, 25.

unworthiness; an invitation into the dark night. There God, an absence in the Camusian universe, might choose to accept humanity's choice.⁹¹ In this situation Merton finds absolute paradox:

The monk faces the worst and discovers in it the hope of the best. From the darkness comes light. From death, life. From the abyss there comes, unaccountably, the mysterious gift of the Spirit sent by God to make all things new, to transform the created and redeemed world, and to re-establish all things in Christ.⁹²

For Merton, therefore, hope is a crucial concept. For Camus, hope is the product of delusion, of a mind that refuses to confront the pointless reality of the human condition. Even more, hope prevents a human being from accepting one's fate with honour and any chance of being satisfied with circumstances beyond one's calculation and control.⁹³

d. Flannery O' Connor (1925 – 1964)

The claim to fame of Flannery O' Connor is linked to the short stories and novels of the South that she wrote in the mid-third of the 20th century. Regarded as among the best in American literature in that period, O' Connor was held in high esteem by Merton for her existentialist voice.⁹⁴

For all of her uncanny ability to create grotesque characters, violence, and bizarre situations,⁹⁵ her writings are deeply moral, and stress the awareness of sin and the need for redemption. O' Connor is able to see beyond apparent situations of despair, a despair that impacted her consciousness for so long. Merton puzzles over her ability to deal with such falseness in humanity for so long without giving up. Her way of coping with hopelessness was to accept its reality. An essay in her thought-provoking collection

⁹¹ George Woodcock, Thomas Merton: Monk and Poet, 72 – 73.

⁹² CP, 25, cited in Woodcock, 73.

⁹³ Woodcock, Op. cit. 73.

⁹⁴ MZM, 260-261.

⁹⁵ Merton wrote an essay on Flannery O' Connor. "Flannery O' Connor: a Prose Elegy" RU, 37-42.

Mystery and Manners states:

At best our age is an age of searchers and discoverers and at its worst, an age that has domesticated despair and learned to live with it happily.⁹⁶

Merton responds:

The only way to be saved was to stay out of it, not to think, not to speak, just to record the slow, sweet, ridiculous verbalizing of Southern furies, working their way through their charming lazy hell.⁹⁷

e. William Faulkner (1897 – 1962)

American novelist and short story writer William Faulkner slowly rose to become one of the ranking figures in 20th century literature.⁹⁸ He became one of Merton's favorite creators of fiction and vis-à-vis his philosophical premises Merton sharpened his own points of view on time, apocalyptic, the enlightenment, contemporary experience, cosmic outlook, and prospects.

In Faulkner time does not move: over it broods the ever-present shadow of the past. It is a time that depicts existential alienation, a prevailing philosophy of post-Scriptural Christianity. For his understanding of time, Merton turned to Greek philosophy.

⁹⁶ Flannery O'Connor, Mystery and Manners, ed. by Salley Fitzgerald and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1969), 159.

⁹⁷ RU, 42. O'Connor expounds upon this entrenched alienation.

Our salvation is drawn played out with the devil, a devil who is not seemingly generalized evil, but on evil intuition determined on its own supremacy. I think that if writers with a religious view of the world excel these days in the depiction of the evil, it is because they have to make its nature unmistakable to their particular audience. The novelist and the believer, when they are not the same man, yet have many traits in common — a distrust of the abstract, a respect for boundaries, a desire to penetrate the surface of reality and to find in each thing the spirit which makes it itself and holds the world together. But I don't believe that we shall have great religious fiction until we again have the happy combination of believing artist and believing society.... [The] novelist ... may find in the end that instead of reflecting the image of the heart of things, he has only reflected our broken condition, and, through it, the face of the devil we are possessed by. (O'Connor, Mystery and Manners, 168).

⁹⁸ Cleanth Brooks, William Faulkner: First Encounters (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985). Irving Howe, William Faulkner: A Critical Study (3rd ed.: Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975). David Minter, William Faulkner: His Life and Work (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982).

which foreshadowed early Christianity and came to fulfillment in terms of the Christ event. For Merton, time is the stage on which the journey into eternity is enacted and each day is to be assessed in terms of its eternal prospects.

Merton, with Podhoretz, finds Faulkner, in opposition to the contemporary mindset, to be essentially apocalyptic. Thus, the middle class has ushered into the world an "anti-apocalyptic style of life," one which occupies itself with social changes guided by scientific ideas and leading to a golden future.⁹⁹

Podhoretz charges that the Enlightenment has passed Faulkner by. By way of response Merton notes that in the midst of the "enlightened" middle class world, we have not only Yoknapatawpha but Auschwitz, Hiroshima, the Vietnam war, Watts, South Africa, and a selection of some of the choicest atrocities in human history.¹⁰⁰

Podhoretz further impugns Faulkner for being "out of touch with contemporary experience." Accordingly, Faulkner's tragic and quasi-religious interpretation of contemporary events seems to symbolize a failure of nerve, a lack of conviction to become involved. The Podhoretz indictment against Faulkner translates into "an unwillingness or an inability either to love or hate the world of the 20th century enough to understand it."¹⁰¹

But more than one isolated critic carps at the great novelist. Many critics accuse Faulkner of rejecting history to embrace tragedy full-scale. Merton responds that to disallow tragic possibilities in history reduces history to a pure rationale of chronic development.¹⁰² Admittedly, this explains why it is easy to see Faulkner as enmeshed in pure despair from which he tries to escape by a flight in a non-descript mysticism. Merton answers that Faulkner's premier religious insight may not be the incarnation or

⁹⁹ LETM, 120.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 120 – 121.

¹⁰¹ LETM, 121.

¹⁰² Idem.

redemption, but rather something close to the Fall. Still, contends Merton, Faulkner's book A Fable, embodies a conscious and positive affirmation which replaces his early despair.

Merton finds Faulkner's early cosmology very limited. The universe of Faulkner's early work was a closed cosmos of cyclic, tragic involvement in fate rather than a universe of hope open to an eschatological redemption. During this period, Faulkner holds out no hope for historical development, or evolutionary progress. What Merton in this connection labels spiritually redemptive "religion," Thomas Hanna calls "metaphysic," that is, "a coherent view of the world and of man's struggle with destiny in the world."¹⁰³ On the other hand, Father Blehl understands "religious" in a broader context, one which Thomas Merton calls "spiritually redemptive." According to Merton, then, Faulkner (and probably Camus) had "spiritually redemptive" qualities.

In the final analysis, marked by a spiritually redemptive view of the world, Faulkner delves into the mystery of suffering. He seeks and finds a little light in this dark abyss. Merton credits Camus for seeing in Faulkner a messenger of hope.¹⁰⁴

In this web of critical outlooks, Merton's basic approach is dictated by a postulate of hope.

4. Theological Sources¹⁰⁵

a. Karl Barth (1886-1968)

Merton does not hesitate to say that "Barth is almost the one among theologians alive today that I like best."¹⁰⁶ "Merton identified Barth as a kindred spirit because of the

¹⁰³ Ibid., 94.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 92.

¹⁰⁵ There is some indication that Merton reflected on Thomas Aquinas' understanding of hope. For example, the three virtues, faith, hope and love as expressed by Merton is influenced by Aquinas (even though there is no clear evidence of it).

predominant wisdom or sapiential tradition at the heart of his theology.”¹⁰⁷ Barth is not regarded as one of the major theologians of hope, but a few scholars would put his name in contention for this distinction.¹⁰⁸ Hope and eschatology do appear as persistent and significant themes in Barth’s writings. Since Barth is Merton’s favorite theologian and he studied Barth’s work¹⁰⁹ more than any other, it would seem appropriate to sketch Barth’s theology of hope. In his very early period, Barth was introduced to the concept of hope by two Blumhardts. Influenced by the Blumhardts, Barth claims that the New Testament can be comprehended in one word, hope. Barth links this multi-faceted hope to a visible and tangible appearing of the lordship of God over the world; to radical help and deliverance from the human state of the world; to an attitude of trust and confidence for humankind; to the physical side of life as well as the spiritual side.¹¹⁰ Clearly within this period, hope is a major theological concern and is a comprehensive concept.

¹⁰⁶ SCh, 189. The remark is made in a Dec. 20, 1963 letter to Father Killian McDonnell.

¹⁰⁷ Kilcourse, Ace of Freedoms, 109.

¹⁰⁸ John Webster, “The Christian Revolt: Some Reflections On ‘The Christian Life’.” In Reckoning with Barth (ed. by N. Bigger. Oxford, UK: Mowbray, 1988). Idem. “Eschatology, Ontology and Human Action.” Toronto Journal of Theology 7 (1991): 3-18. Idem. “Assured, and Patient and Cheerful Expectation: Barth on Christian Hope as the Church’s Task.” Toronto Journal of Theology (1, 1994): 35-52. A new work by John C. McDowell, Hope in Barth’s Eschatology: Interrogations and Transformations Beyond Tragedy (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2001) has just been published.

¹⁰⁹ Merton had read Barth’s Church Dogmatics and Barth’s work on St. Anselm (and in fact had kept notebooks while studying Barth). He wrote an article on Anselm in which he significantly responds to Barth’s understanding of Anselm. Merton read some other works of Barth including his 1932 Christmas sermon. OB makes significant use of material from Barth’s The Word of God and the Word of Man. The first part of CGB is entitled “Barth’s Dream.” According to Patrick Hart, this was one of several titles for this book. As for secondary works on Barth, Merton had read Henri Bouillard’s three volumes on Barth and also much of Hans Urs Von Balthasar. In his letters to Balthasar, Merton mentions Barth. There is a small reference to Barth in a letter written to Seymour Freedgood (Feb. 25, 1950). This letter indicates that Merton was reading Barth even at an early stage in his Monastic journey (RJ, 124).

¹¹⁰ For the Blumhardts, according to Barth, hope has its foundation in the proper understanding of God and the Kingdom. This God is the living God who transforms the world, and not only religion. This Kingdom is not only in the souls of individuals or in a distant heaven, but in life here on earth. For the Blumhardts, the relation of God to the world means that God is significantly involved in the renewal of all things. Barth develops his concept of hope out of this understanding of the living God and Kingdom in the Blumhardts. Karl Barth, The Beginnings of Dialectic Theology, Vol. 1. Ed. by James M. Robinson (Richmond, VA: John Knox, 1968), 40-45. In his Church Dogmatics II/1, Barth also notes the influence of eschatology and hope in the socialist movement of the younger Blumhardt, Kutter, and especially Ragaz.

Barth's comprehensive understanding of hope had been dramatically changed in his second edition of Romans and in his dialectical theology. The eschatology of this period is characterized by a movement from above, "whose power and import are revealed in the resurrection of Jesus Christ." Jüngel describes this movement of Barth as a Christological-eschatological one.¹¹¹ Although his hope significantly changed over time, hope always remained the focal point in his theology. He states unequivocally that "a theology that is not wholly and utterly and irreducibly eschatology has nothing to do with Christ."¹¹² In Church Dogmatics II/1, Barth addresses the development of eschatology and discloses his own growth in understanding eschatology. He begins to recognize teleological aspects of Christian hope.

Barth's theology is undeniably christocentric. Any theological structure must be Christologically determined.¹¹³ Therefore Webster properly indicates that for Barth, Christian hope is understood in relation to a wider set of Christian convictions that rest entirely on a foundation of uncompromised Christology.¹¹⁴ Barth claims that Jesus Christ "is the One in whom the Christian is summoned to hope." Jesus Christ is our hope because in Jesus Christ is the promise of the world's future.¹¹⁵

For Barth, future promise comes from a very definite past, the finished work of Jesus Christ and the coming parousia. In his CD IV/1, Barth recognizes the concrete event of the resurrection and the emergence of a new history of faith based upon this event.

who anticipated the Kingdom of God in this movement. (p. 633). Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics (Ed. by G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1936-1969, 1975).

¹¹¹ Eberhard Jüngel, Karl Barth: A Theological Legacy, Tr. by Garrett E. Paul (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1989), 34.

¹¹² Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics II/1, 634.

¹¹³ Idem, Church Dogmatics, I/2, 123.

¹¹⁴ John Webster, "Assured and Patient and Cheerful Expectation: Barth on Christian Hope as the Church's task," in Toronto Journal of Theology 10/1, 1994.

¹¹⁵ Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics IV/1, 116.

Thus, for Barth, the New Testament “understands its own time, in the presence of One who was there and then, as the time of expectation of, and hope in, the One who is also future as the one that He was and is.”¹¹⁶ Though Barth had elaborated his own theology of hope, Merton’s primary interest in Barth was his theological view of the nature of revelation and the Incarnation. Merton quotes from Barth’s 1960 study *Fides Quaerens Intellectum* the aphorism: “Tell me how it stands with your Christology and I will tell you who you are.”¹¹⁷

In identifying the victory of Christ as the source of Christian hope, Merton adopts Barth’s affirmation that “Jesus is Victor.”¹¹⁸

Merton also adopts Barth’s view of the Last Judgment. In that view, a true understanding of the mystery of Christ’s second coming will need to “repress certain pictures of the world judgment.” “He that comes is He that previously offered Himself to the judgment of God.”¹¹⁹

b. Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906 – 1945)

Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s impact on 20th Century theology is traceable both to his outstanding leadership in the Confessing Church at the time of the Nazi regime in Germany and to the originality of his ideas. Merton came to a new sense of social responsibility from his adaptation of Bonhoeffer’s category of “worldliness.” Since the incarnation challenges an age in which human beings are reduced to objects of scorn or idolization, the structures and cultural developments of the world have been profoundly affected by the revelation of Christ in history. Bonhoeffer, in Merton’s judgment, took explicit note of human unfaithfulness to God’s entry into history.¹²⁰

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 323.

¹¹⁷ Kilcourse, *Ace of Freedoms*, 110.

¹¹⁸ *DWL*, 27.

¹¹⁹ *Idem.*

¹²⁰ *CGB*, 59.

Bonhoeffer implied that Hitler caused the Church to become apathetic and compliant to him for fear of losing its own future. Such a time-serving sense of church survival, Merton notes, implicitly negates the victory of Christ and resurrection faith. Merton thus rejects the notion of God viewing history “from outside.” Bonhoeffer’s emphasis on the Christian’s incarnational responsibility in the world received unequivocal endorsement.¹²¹

In Bonhoeffer’s ethic, social participation signifies participation in Christ’s redemptive work. In October, 1965, when Merton was reevaluating his earlier attitude toward the world, he was perusing Bonhoeffer’s Ethics. There he discovered Bonhoeffer’s “Christian worldliness,” a concept which neither absolved the world of all guilt nor aspired to a freewheeling, breezy optimism. Merton interpreted Bonhoeffer’s optimism as “entering into the fellowship of guilt for the sake of other men.”¹²² Even more, Merton endorsed Bonhoeffer’s placement of God’s presence in the world in humanity (1 Cor 3:17).¹²³

c. Karl Rahner (1904-1984)

Merton’s interest in the idea of diaspora came from reading Karl Rahner’s The Christian Commitment¹²⁴ in late December 1963. Rahner postulates that contemporary Christians must openly face and accept the “diaspora situation” of the Church in the twentieth century. Speaking not as a sociologist but as a theologian, Rahner described this situation as irreversible and concluded that we have no alternative but to accept it. Merton

¹²¹ Ibid., 274.

¹²² Ibid., 231.

¹²³ Ibid., 274.

¹²⁴ Karl Rahner, The Christian Commitment: Essays in Pastoral Theology, trans. by Cecily Hastings (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1963).

finds that for Rahner this was neither a matter of defeat nor of passive fatalism.¹²⁵ Seeds of Destruction states concerning Rahner.

he seeks to show, theologically, that it [the “diaspora situation”] has a crucial significance for our salvation and for the salvation of the world. In a word, Rahner emphatically rejects an unrealistic optimism of the triumphalist type, which supposes that with a little more zeal, a little more energy, a few more mass movements and a smarter use of mass-media, the Church will very likely take over everything and definitely convert the City of Man into the City of God --- on a medieval pattern.¹²⁶

In the “diaspora situation” the Church will (and indeed already does) exist to a great extent as a stone of stumbling and a sign of contradiction. The official apostolic activity of the clergy will be blocked and neutralized by the arbitrary whims of secular powers. Yet, the work of the Church in the world will be carried on with ever greater dedication and effect, chiefly through the enlightened work of the laity. Acknowledging Rahner, Merton remarks that the apostle of the diaspora can gain meaning from a purity of eschatological hope.¹²⁷

The presentation here of Karl Rahner as a source of Merton’s reflections on hope is kept deliberately brief, since the Rahner influence has been touched upon at various points in chapter II, and will be below in this chapter.¹²⁸

d. Christian Existentialists

Merton labeled himself an existentialist. George Woodcock defends Merton’s claim on the strength of at least six factors:

In his rejection of idealism; in his insistence on the individual and the particular;...in his intuitive distrust of abstract metaphysics in favor of an experiential investigation of being; in his rejection of all extreme doctrines of necessity and predestination; in his insistence on freedom of will and hence on the

¹²⁵ SD, 318.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 187.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 188.

¹²⁸ See, e. g., pp 112-113, 202.

responsibility of choice; and in his equal understanding of the limitations of choice that living in the world imposed.¹²⁹

In later years especially, notes Woodcock, Merton tended to define the human condition using familiar existentialist terms: Kierkegaard's "dread" and Sartre's "nausea" can be found in Contemplative Prayer.¹³⁰ Hence, when Merton's exposition of prayer focuses on the truth about ourselves, he borrows the views and even adopts the very words of his existentialist predecessors:

...the dimensions of prayer in solitude are those of man's ordinary anguish, his self-searching, his moments of nausea at his own vanity, falsity and capacity for betrayal. Far from establishing one in unassailable narcissistic security, the way of prayer brings us face to face with the sham and indignity of the false self that seeks to live for itself alone and to enjoy the "consolation of prayer" for its own sake...¹³¹

This inner doubt stems from an existential *angst*, a profound despair of ever finding one's place in the world. This *angst* suggests that one has not betrayed social or traditional moral norms, but that one has betrayed oneself. This moves beyond the fear of a sinner in the hands of an angry God into realizing that one really is at one's core, in the words of the old hymnbook, "a poor and miserable sinner."¹³² It reflects a profound awareness that one is capable of — even prone to — ultimate bad faith with himself and with others; in a word, that one is living a lie.¹³³ Merton's entries in his journals are telling. He reflected long and often on many existentialists such as Sartre, Kierkegaard, Nicholai Berdyaev and Gabriel Marcel.¹³⁴ His summary on existentialists is tightly woven:

Taking a broad, random view of the field of existentialism, we see on the one

¹²⁹ George Woodcock, Thomas Merton: Monk and Poet, 71.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 71-72

¹³¹ CP, 24.

¹³² The Lutheran Hymnal, St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1945, 15.

¹³³ CP, 24.

¹³⁴ See: on Sartre, DWL, 50; on Kierkegaard, MZM, 263-264, 276-277, 279; on Russian Christian existentialist Nicholai Berdyaev, RU, 5-6.

hand Camus and Sartre, both of whom explicitly class themselves as atheists. We have Heidegger, who is non-religious. On the other hand, we have Jaspers, whose thought is basically theistic and even Christian; we have the Jewish existentialism of Buber, the Orthodox and Gnostic existentialism of Berdyaev, the Buddhist existentialism of Suzuki and Nishida, the Protestant existentialism of Bultmann, Tillich, and others, the Catholic existentialism of Gabriel Marcel and Louis Lavelle, and some others we have named here, have renounced the existentialist label.... We remember also that Maritain and Gilson, while remaining faithful to St. Thomas and criticizing existentialism from a Thomist viewpoint, have themselves contributed in no small measure to a broadly existentialist Christian perspective.¹³⁵

It is not difficult to see that Merton found this to be a group with which he could, with qualifications, identify.

e. John XXIII

Merton agreed with Pope John XXIII's optimistic view of the innate goodness of human nature,¹³⁶ and that a world peace was possible if it was based on respect of human rights, and a morality-based reason—if not on Christian ideals.¹³⁷ Like the pope, Merton felt that world peace was no longer the arena of "a few cranks who did not like the bomb," or a few liberal Christians, but was a categorical imperative for every living being, regardless of race, gender or creed. The work of peace is in short "a collective obligation of the highest urgency."¹³⁸ In Matthew 25, Jesus teaches, "Whatever you do to the least of these my brothers, that you do to me."¹³⁹ This belief coaxes Christian love, which is

¹³⁵ MZM, 269-270.

¹³⁶ Merton notes that Pope John echoes the revolutionary optimism of St. Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century which linked "the created and the uncreated, nature and grace, reason and faith" in a bold and grand unity. "St Thomas gave the Church his great unified theology at a time when the division between earth and heaven, nature and supernature, philosophy and theology, reason and faith, had become so acute that they threatened to become irreconcilable." Merton further notes that the pope's optimism is not the vapid, sentimental cheerfulness of a pseudo-naturalistic religiosity. It in fact embraces all the best hopes and intuitions of the modern world of science and technology, and unites them with a spiritual vision of Christianity. The union is reached, as was that of St. Thomas' *Summa*, by going to a "deeper root." SD, 176-178.

¹³⁷ SD, 121.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 123.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 126.

An expression of eschatological faith in the realization of the messianic promises and hence a witness to an entirely new dimension in man's life.¹⁴⁰

Merton, like Pope John, believed all Christians, but most especially monks, necessarily will be involved in grass roots social movements, as Merton argued in The Silent Life (1956.) The earlier the Christian eschatology, the more tolerant it was of cultural diversity. Therefore, Merton unhesitatingly states: "The optimism of Pope John is wide open to every legitimate hope of man for peace on earth! It is willing to listen to any reasonable plan and to share any worthy human desire"¹⁴¹ for true world peace, even if those plans and desires come from non-Christians. Merton saw the basis of this desire in an eschatological vision in which "all things have been created through and unto Christ, and He is before all creatures and in him all things hold together" (Col 1:16-17). This positive view of humanity buttressed Pope John's optimism on building true peace, which befuddled many self-righteous Christians, and caused many missionaries to revisit their prejudices about these "aliens" they had been sent to convert.¹⁴²

Merton noted that in Pacem in Terris Pope John had invoked the name of humanity and reason, and not the name of Christ, to call for an end to war and to begin the construction of a peaceful and human world. This was not in contradiction to the Gospel, because in the Incarnation, the world and human society have been embraced and sanctified. The Church and the world can speak to one another about a humanness, a reason and a compassion that both understand; yet the Church possesses a deeper theological understanding of the world.¹⁴³

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 127.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 179-180.

¹⁴² Ibid., 176. Merton's extended comment on the encyclical is instructive: "...the whole climate of the encyclical, in its love of man and the world, and its radiant *hopefulness*, is Franciscan" (Ibid., emphasis added).

¹⁴³ CGB, 317. [Image edition]

The papal encyclicals Mater et Magistra and Pacem in Terris, for Merton, clearly enunciate the Christian principles upon which a world of peace and justice can be constructed.¹⁴⁴

5. Summary

Merton's reflection on hope arose primarily out of a pessimism regarding himself and the world, yet marked by an acquiescent hope in God. Moreover Merton read widely from many different classical and contemporary writings, and through them, became aware of a spirit of optimism and intimations of hope alive in his day. He intuitively responded to this spirit of optimism and brought his logic and rhetoric to its support.

This section has explored the sources of Merton's thoughts on hope: the Biblical, spiritual/ mystical, the literary, the theological. Merton developed his views on hope with the aid of these (and other) sources and shaped his presentation from his own context and concerns.

Merton's sources are easy to identify. His expectation of future hope draws upon biblical images and concepts, especially of an eschatological bent. The experience of the mystics and their self-disclosures helped Merton to grasp his own experience of hope, despair, darkness and dread in spirituality. From the descriptions of contemporary profiles of despair and hope, as found in contemporary literature. Merton came to develop invaluable insights into hope. From Christian theology, as reflected in the encyclicals, patristic and monastic writers, Roman Catholic and evangelical theologians, philosophical exponents, he developed to forge articulate outlooks on hope and its prospects for on his world.

The incidental ways in which the topic of hope is nearly always presented is highly instructive. Merton steers clear of formal introduction as a concern. It is now and then a concern that infiltrates his writings by happenstance or after thought. His

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 94.

spontaneous, almost unconscious persistence in hope points to a dynamic world-view that was the mark of an ongoing, central concern.

B. Hope and Its Correlates

1. Hope and Confidence/ Trust in Spirituality

Mertonian hope as a spiritual reality can be explored in two ways. First, as the virtue of hope, that is, the attitude and activity of expressing trust and confidence within the experience of spirituality; and secondly, as an object of spiritual expectation, which allows a dual perspective — as union with God and as discovery of true self.

Merton presents hope as one of the most significant virtues in the spiritual enterprise. He emphasizes the primacy of hope in attaining union with God.¹⁴⁵

By faith we know God without seeing Him. By hope we possess God without feeling His presence. If we hope in God, by hope we already possess Him. since hope is a confidence which He creates in our souls as secret evidence that He has taken possession of us. So the soul that hopes in God already belongs to Him. and to belong to Him is the same as to possess Him. since He gives Himself completely to those who give themselves to Him. The only thing faith and hope do not give us is the clear vision of Him whom we possess. We are united to Him in darkness. because we have to hope.¹⁴⁶

By the absence of hope our faith allows us to know God only as a stranger.¹⁴⁷

For Merton, hope must be conceptually anterior to contemplation.¹⁴⁸ Thus, vigilance becomes a particular expression of monastic purity of heart. in that it indicates the importance of recognizing multiple comings, spiritual and liturgical. of the Saviour. Explains Merton: "We wait with lamps trimmed, like wise virgins. for the Parousia. This

¹⁴⁵ Among other major twentieth century spiritual writers. Simone Weil. Henri Nouwen. Thomas Moore. recognize the primacy of hope in spirituality. But this is an area for future exploration.

¹⁴⁶ NMI, 15.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 15-16.

¹⁴⁸ NM, 14. See p. 84 above.

is a basic Christian truth, common to all, but especially emphasized by monks.”¹⁴⁹ Merton builds on this basic concept:

The true interior life is not our own life within the depths of our own being. It is the coming of God into our being, from which we have previously gone out, in order to make room for Him. God’s presence, in His purity, gives us a true interior life, *puritas cordis*. He is of course the *auctor puritatis*. By this “advent” He comes into the soul and enlightens it with His invisible presence.¹⁵⁰

Several patterns of spirituality spring from Merton’s dynamic of hope. First, spiritual freedom is attained by hope. “We are not perfectly free,” Merton advises, “until we live in pure hope. For when our hope is pure, it no longer trusts exclusively in human and visible means, nor rests in any visible end.”¹⁵¹

Paradoxically, the supernatural virtue of hope strips us of all things in order to give us the possession of all things. To live in hope is to live in poverty, to have nothing. “Hope deprives us of everything that is not God, in order that all things may serve their true purpose as means to bring us to God.”¹⁵²

Hope is furthermore proportionate to detachment. It introduces the soul into the state of perfect detachment. Thereby, it restores all values by setting them in their right order. Hope further empties our hands in order that we may work with them. It shows us that we have something to work for, and teaches us how to work for it. This articulation makes hope the living heart of asceticism. It teaches us to deny ourselves and leave the world. And this, not because either we or the world are evil, but because, unless a supernatural hope raises us above the things of time, we will not be able to make a perfect use either of our own or of the world’s true goodness.¹⁵³ Merton writes that Christ taught

¹⁴⁹ *SCb*, 71.

¹⁵⁰ *Idem*.

¹⁵¹ *NMI*, 14.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 18–19. See also *TS*, 38. Here Merton offers a similar reflection on hope as the secret of true asceticism.

us about meekness and humility which are inseparable from an eschatological Christian hope.¹⁵⁴

In "Time and the Liturgy" Merton boldly claims that hope can make Christ live among us. Liturgical time will lose its meaning if it becomes associated with the status quo. Merton writes:

The paradox of liturgical time is that it is humanly insecure, seeking its peace altogether outside the structures of all that is established, visible and familiar, in the hope of a kingdom which is not seen. It is that hope and that alone that makes Christ present among us. Outside that eschatological hope there is no meaning and no dynamism in liturgical worship.¹⁵⁵

Merton analyzes the presence of hope in a contemplative life. This form of life searches for peace in the openness of love.

It begins with the acceptance of my own self in my poverty and my nearness to despair, in order to recognize that where God is there can be no despair, and God is in me even if I despair: that nothing can change God's love for me, since my very existence is the sign that God loves me and the presence of His love creates and sustains me.¹⁵⁶

Granted this, the contemplative is the one who "has risked his mind in the desert beyond language and beyond ideas where God is encountered in the nakedness of pure trust."¹⁵⁷ Such genuine confidence crystalizes into hope. The contemplative offers the message of hope through one's understanding that "God loves you, is present to you, lives in you, dwells in you, calls you, saves you, and offers you an understanding and light which are like nothing you ever found in books or heard in sermons."¹⁵⁸ This inner journey leads into the discovery of God's indwelling Spirit within the seeker's own spirit. "It is the intimate union in the depths of your own heart, of God's spirit and your own inmost self.

¹⁵⁴ FV, 26.

¹⁵⁵ SCb, 60.

¹⁵⁶ MJ, 173.

¹⁵⁷ Idem, 173.

¹⁵⁸ Idem.

so that you and He are in all truth One Spirit.”¹⁵⁹

Merton’s attachment to the term “humanism” was one of the keynotes of his mature eschatology. While he saw all things in relation to their reintegration in Christ, this mystical outlook did not devalue the physical world and natural human needs. This perspective was addressed in an essay published in January, 1963 in Sponsa Regis. Entitled “Virginity and Humanism in the Western Fathers,” it spoke of the “eschatological humanism of Christian virginity,” and began with a definition of humanism. True Christian humanism is the full flowering of the theology of the Incarnation. It is “the full realization of man’s dignity and obligations as son of God, image of God, created, regenerated, and transformed in the Word made Flesh.”¹⁶⁰ The state of virginity is a sign of the human person transformed in Christ, “a lamp kindled with the light of Christ.”¹⁶¹ Through the free decision to remain a virgin, a Christian woman asserts “her freedom against the insistence of the flesh and the tyrannical demands of social convention.”¹⁶² This freedom, called “eschatological freedom,” witnesses to “the future state of glory promised to all the baptized.”¹⁶³

2. Hope and Eschatology

Merton’s understanding of hope is given full development in his eschatological writings. In his view, Christian eschatology invariably serves as the basis and framework of hope. Merton presents the concept of realized eschatology as his own: namely, “the transformation of life and of human relations by Christ now rather than an eschatology

¹⁵⁹ Idem.

¹⁶⁰ MZM, 114-115.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 117.

¹⁶² Idem. These principles apply to male virgins, too, but this essay was focusing on those female virgins whom St. Jerome had taught in the early centuries of Christianity.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 116.

focused on future cosmic and religious events.”¹⁶⁴ This transformation requires “the presence of the Holy Spirit, the call to repentance, the call to see Christ in man, the presence of the redeeming power of the Cross in the Sacraments.”¹⁶⁵ The emphasis of realized eschatology is on the here and now: it is completed by the activity of Christian peacemaking. Indeed, one of the genuinely eschatological characteristics of the true Church will be realized in fulfilling its destiny as the world’s bastion of peace.¹⁶⁶

Therefore, Merton finds it very important that Christians develop a proper understanding of eschatology so that they can achieve God’s purpose in the world. In RU, Berdyaev is quoted in support of Merton’s view of hope and eschatology in our world.

Eschatology is not an invitation to escape into a private heaven. It is a call to transfigure the evil and stricken world. It is a witness to the end of this world of ours with its enslaving objectification.¹⁶⁷

VC extrapolates the meaning of “realized eschatology” and sees in it a dialectic between future and present. Merton wholeheartedly adopts C.H. Dodd’s terminology. For Dodd Jesus’ eschatological teaching was grounded in his incarnate life and ministry. Indeed the “day of the Lord” of Amos had come. The future had already begun to be realized in the present. The Kingdom of God had come in Jesus’ own person and work. This relatively simple eschatology (contrary to the full-fledged apocalypticism of J. Weiss and Albert Schweitzer, and the radical “existential” understanding of Rudolf Bultmann) appealed to Merton. He affirmed that his faith is at once an eschatological faith and a contemplative one inasmuch as he believes he is presently in the Kingdom and indeed can “see” some of the glory of the Kingdom.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁴ VC, 31-32. See also DWL, 87.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 32.

¹⁶⁶ Idem.: see also DWL, 87.

¹⁶⁷ RU, 5.

¹⁶⁸ VC, 116; see also DWL, 182.

By way of further clarifying his thought, Merton announces: “If it were a matter of choosing between contemplation and eschatology, there is no question that I am and would always be committed entirely to the latter.”¹⁶⁹ This pivotal statement attests that eschatology has become a driving force in Merton’s thought. His hope finds its foundational support in his eschatology. Eventually he will affirm that contemplation and eschatology are one in Christian faith.¹⁷⁰ More specifically they complement and support each other — in point of fact contemplation prepares one for the eschatological vision.

The union of contemplation and eschatology finds expression in the gifts of the Holy Spirit, for the Holy Spirit awakens in our hearts the faith and hope through which we cry for eschatological fulfillment and vision. In this hope there is already a beginning, a promise, a pledge or guarantee of fulfillment.¹⁷¹

3. Hope and the Messianic Kingdom

Merton also attests to genuine Christian hope through his concept of the Messianic kingdom. He expresses this concept in many different ways. First, he looks at Advent which is the coming of Christ in history. This coming is not bound up with the progress of Christian culture emanating from the reality of Christ’s presence in the world, since it is not identical with that presence.¹⁷² Advent recalls the arrival of the fullness of time and therefore of the Messianic kingdom. The old world has come to an end. Merton designates the “last days” as the time of fulfillment, “the end” which in reality marks the days of beginning.¹⁷³ This evokes “a readiness to have eternity and time meet not only in

¹⁶⁹ VC, 116. This statement is also cited at p 2 of this thesis.

¹⁷⁰ Idem, 116.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 116-117.

¹⁷² SCb, 91.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 96.

Christ but in us, in Man, in our life, in our world, in our time.”¹⁷⁴ Merton seems to imply that our human reality is not just a part of the kingdom but the kingdom itself. Accordingly, “the mystery of advent centers in the fact that God is now present in man and men will be judged according to their acceptance of this crucial truth.”¹⁷⁵ The task of Christians in our time, therefore, is to build the kingdom of God in this world — a task that is ultimately spiritual and eschatological.¹⁷⁶ A caveat is in order:

there is always the false Christian optimism which tries to “experience” the kingdom in what is not the kingdom. Nevertheless, the victory of Christ makes all joy possible even in the midst of evil, for what we experience as evil is no longer serious unless we insist on making it so for ourselves.¹⁷⁷

Merton next considers the false hope which stems from a conservative triumphalism in the church. Merton concurs with Rahner who emphatically rejects a triumphalistic optimism. Merton writes that because Catholics cannot hope to restore a religio-cultural autonomy in the secular world today, “we must face the fact that ‘we do not have a complete recipe for the world’s problems in our world’.”¹⁷⁸ Merton expresses the same concern and perspective in HR. Christianity is not identified with any particular culture. “It is indeed a religion that looks to the future, but it does not place its hopes merely in human progress. The hope of the Christian is indeed a hope for man, but it places its confidence in God, not in man.”¹⁷⁹

In summary, Merton’s emphasis on realized eschatology is complemented by his concept of the Messianic kingdom. For him, the kingdom will be realized in this world: a truth and task that are ultimately spiritual and eschatological. This conviction also

¹⁷⁴ Idem.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 99.

¹⁷⁶ DQ, 127.

¹⁷⁷ DWL, 27.

¹⁷⁸ SD, 189-190.

¹⁷⁹ HR, 97.

corresponds to Barth's view of hope in this world. Neither therefore identifies any human fulfillment with the kingdom itself, and both furthermore present God as the only hope.

4. Hope and Historical Disengagement

A major aspect of Thomas Merton's contributions to the theology of hope is the element of "positive disengagement." The term was coined by James E. Dittes, Yale psychologist of religion.¹⁸⁰ Walter Capps acknowledges the origin of the term and redefines it to mean a withdrawal or release from previous engagement, commitments, and overcommitment. Seen as a positive rather than negative feature, it seeks to achieve such withdrawals so as to allow the one disengaging to affirm the appropriateness of this type of action.¹⁸¹

There are many reasons why the theology of hope can find concrete expression in this disposition. As a movement, the theology of hope sought to organize and systematize the chief tenets of the Christian faith by making change (or process) normative. As George A. Lindbeck attested during one of the earliest conferences on hope, after Vatican Council II, the basic structure of this world will not remain the same till the end of the world.

The world of human beings is changing with ever-accelerating rapidity, not as a matter of sheer flux, but in a definite direction whose end is both fascinating and terrifying, for it seems to offer the possibility of unimaginable achievements and unimaginable disasters, and is in any case beyond the possibility of empirical predictions.¹⁸²

¹⁸⁰ James E. Dittes, "When Idols Crumble: The Art and Agony of Disengagement," Presidential Address to the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, October 1973, as quoted by Walter Capps, Hope Against Hope, 51. The literature on "the now-familiar disengagement-enmeshment typology" is sparse and its primary application is to structural family therapy. (See George Colopinto, "Structural Family Therapy," Handbook of Family Therapy, II, ed. by Alan S. Gurman and David P. Kniskern. (New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1991) 417-443, esp. 426, 429, 434.

¹⁸¹ Idem.

¹⁸² George A. Lindbeck, "The Framework of Catholic-Protestant Disagreement," in The Word in History (The Xavier Symposium), ed. T. Patrick Burke (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1966, p. 107), as quoted by Walter Capps, Hope Against Hope, 52.

In addition, that which transcends the reality which we experience and know lies ahead of us in the future.¹⁸³

Positive disengagement is a strategy of withdrawal from the entanglements of change. The instant attractiveness of the new mood indicates that change has become too difficult to handle. Its great vitality possesses devastating force. As viewed by Capps, change is powerful and transforms everything. "It modulates, transposes, transfigures, and diversifies."¹⁸⁴

Positive disengagement evokes direct lines of continuity with ancient and classical mystical traditions. One of the ways of locating and interpreting positive disengagement religiously is to see it as deliberate withdrawal from a temporal, conflicted world. For the mystic, withdrawal accompanies an introversion process through which the self seeks to establish and enjoy consciousness of reality's deeper levels and fuller dimensions. As Merton explains in NA, "A Christian ought to consider whether nuclear war is not in itself a moral evil so great that it cannot be justified even for the best of ends, even to defend the highest and most sacrosanct of values."¹⁸⁵ A similar line of thought is found in SD:

The monastic withdrawal from secular time... is not a retreat into an abstract eternity but a leap from the cyclic recurrence of inexorable evil into the eschatological Kingdom of God, in Christ -- a kingdom of humility and forgiveness.¹⁸⁶

Even earlier Merton had noted that living in a monastery was the right kind of withdrawal, as it taught him how to live.¹⁸⁷ Merton described the monk's horizons as those "of the

¹⁸³ Idem.

¹⁸⁴ Walter Capps, Hope against Hope, 54.

¹⁸⁵ NA, 109.

¹⁸⁶ SD, xiii.

¹⁸⁷ SOJ, 322.

desert and of exile. But this in itself should enable him to have a special understanding of his fellow man in an age of alienation.”¹⁸⁸ In 1962 Merton had written to James Forest:

One of the most important things to do is to keep cutting deliberately through political lines and barriers and emphasizing the fact that these are largely fabrications and that there is another dimension, a genuine reality, totally opposed to the fictions of politics, the human dimension which politicians pretend to abrogate entirely to themselves.¹⁸⁹

In his admiring letter of Dec 6, 1958, to Czeslaw Milosz which began their ten year correspondence, Merton expressed the same basic idea, namely that “there has to be a third position, a position of integrity which refuses subjection to the pressures of the two massive groups ranged against each other in the world.” Thus the future lies with those who risk everything in search of this new position. This position is “the ever changing and moving ‘line’ that is no line at all because it cannot be traced out by political dogmatists.”¹⁹⁰ Robert Inchausti aptly underscores Merton’s positive disengagement:

Merton established himself as a visionary social critic, a theologian of change, and an advocate of Christian hope as an antidote to modern existential despair. He did this, however, not by replacing the unconscious politicization of the American status quo with an explicit politicization along more egalitarian lines. This was the strategy of the old left. Rather he sought an explicit depoliticization of institutions as a step toward true egalitarianism.¹⁹¹

5. Hope v. Pessimism and Evil

In his pre- and early monastic period, Merton entertained a dismal, even negative view of human nature and the world. Merton entered the monastery partially to leave behind the lashes he had sustained as a child – both personal and social – in the death of

¹⁸⁸ SD, 219.

¹⁸⁹ HGL, 272.

¹⁹⁰ CT, 54-55. See also Striving Toward Being, 4.

¹⁹¹ Robert Inchausti, Thomas Merton’s American Prophecy, 91.

his parents, his loneliness, the Great Depression and World War II. Only when he entered the monastery did he find that which he had tried to escape from the outside world was inside Gethsemani. As well, he found that very outside world was not as bad as he originally thought. In The Sign of Jonas (1953), Merton felt shame at his “very supernatural solution” to the world’s problems explained in his Journal of My Escape from the Nazis, written in 1939-40, but published in 1959.¹⁹² He wrote in SJ:

The false solution went like this: the whole world, of which the war is a characteristic expression, is evil. It has therefore to be first ridiculed, then spat on, and at last formally rejected with a curse.¹⁹³

Merton learned at Gethsemani that while war is evil, human nature is essentially good, which allowed him to empathize with the world. Despite this important shift on the nature of humans, Merton, like Augustine and St. Paul before him, regarded people with a somewhat jaded realism – though they want to do good, they do not know why they do the things that they do not want to do. Glenn Hinson explained that Merton developed from dualistically regarding evil as a monstrous entity, equal to goodness and God, to a more neoplatonic idea of evil as a lack of goodness in any concrete sense.¹⁹⁴

After he established contact with the world outside the monastery, his sense of the goodness of mankind was tainted with an ongoing battle with pessimism. He felt more comfortable with the realism of Søren Kierkegaard, Romano Guardini, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Karl Rahner than the optimistic view of Teilhard de Chardin.¹⁹⁵

Though Merton believed that God was at work in history, he also realized that there was immense evil interwoven into the fabric of history. Evil, he wrote forcefully,

¹⁹² E. Glenn Hinson, “Thomas Merton,” in A New Handbook of Christian Theologians, ed. by Donald W. Musser and Joseph L. Price (Nashville, TN: Abingdon), 291.

¹⁹³ SJ, 314, cited in Idem.

¹⁹⁴ Hinson, 292.

¹⁹⁵ Idem.

was “Auschwitz, Dachau, Solovky, and Karagahda.”¹⁹⁶ And again: “A demonic power is at work in history.”¹⁹⁷ Yet again: “I think the evil in us all has reached the point of overflowing.”¹⁹⁸ A staunch conviction moved him to write that there is some truth to his pessimism.

My task is to come to terms *completely* with the world in which I live and of which I am *a part*, because this is the world redeemed by Christ -- even the world of Auschwitz... (Auschwitz, Hiroshima, and Southern racism) too must be “redeemed.” The great task of redemption is in *America* which imagines itself Christian! That is why I am here, and must stay here.¹⁹⁹

A letter to Rosemary Radforth Ruether states:

It is not a matter of rejecting historical responsibilities and of equating the activity of the principalities and powers with history itself... hence the problem is not just one of false spirituality versus incarnation, but much more dangerously, of a false and demonic parody of creation and incarnation and redemption, a demonic parody of the kingdom.²⁰⁰

While Jean Daniélou and Jean Leclercq – Merton’s spiritual directors – chided Merton for his dim view of history,²⁰¹ he used Jeremiah in his defense: “They told Jeremiah to stress the positive side of things, too. It seems to me that there has never been such a black avalanche of negation in human society, and that if there is evil someone should point to it.”²⁰²

Merton was a mystic in the absence-of-God tradition. To designate him as such is not just to underscore his apophatic bent but also to affirm that he saw the blunt reality of

¹⁹⁶ Thomas Merton, “The Inner Experience. Some Dangers in Contemplation (VI),” Cistercian Studies, No. 2 (1984): 149.

¹⁹⁷ HGL, 347.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 146.

¹⁹⁹ Thomas Merton, Notebook #76, “1965-second half. Readings, etc.. August to November” (original emphasis), Thomas Merton Studies Center, Bellarmine College. As quoted in AF, 114.

²⁰⁰ Merton and Ruether, At Home in the World, 44-45.

²⁰¹ Mott, SMTM, 364.

²⁰² HGL, 318.

evil.²⁰³ He never relinquished a profound sense of the dark night of the soul: it was, for him, no longer just a solitary experience but one unknowingly shared by everyone.²⁰⁴ The “spiritual blackout” was, in Merton’s assessment, humanity’s collective stupidity and crime. Hence, our unconscious involvement with general evil has caused so much suffering and meaninglessness.²⁰⁵ While this is the reality of human suffering, there is a hopeful note in his words:

Surely one cannot feel comfortable or at ease in such a world. We are under sentence of death, an extinction without remembrance or memorial, and we cling to life and to the present. This causes bitterness and anguish. Christ will cure us of this clinging and then we will be free and joyful, even in the night.²⁰⁶

In the final analysis, Merton found himself in a position best described as a hopeful pessimism:

Maybe there is a *kairos* coming, but I have no notion where or when; I am in the most uncomfortable and unenviable position of waiting without any justification, without a convincing explanation, and without any assurance except that it seems to be what God wants of me and that this kind of desperation is what it means for me to be without idols – I hope.²⁰⁷

C. Summary

Chapter III has explored the contents and characteristics of Merton’s hope. First off, Merton keeps the focus of his reflections on the spiritual dimension of hope. He unequivocally sees hope as an essential element in attaining union with God. Hope also relates to the discovery of the true self which is not simply equated with an isolated self.

²⁰³ Vivian Logo, “Letters of Protest, Letters of Reconciliation: Thomas Merton’s Engagement with Contemporary History,” International Thomas Merton Society Conference Commemorating the 25th Anniversary of Merton’s Death, The Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine College, Louisville, KY, March 1994.

²⁰⁴ HGL, 350.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 351.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 350.

²⁰⁷ Merton and Ruether, 45.

There is, on the one hand, a disintegration of the social and cultural self, the product of merely human history, and, on the other, a reintegration of that self in Christ, in salvation history, in the mystery of redemption, in the Pentecostal “new creation.”

Characteristically, Merton’s understanding of hope finds clearest expression in his eschatological writings.

Merton further incorporates genuine Christian hope into his concept of the Messianic Kingdom. He presents this expanded view in various ways. For example, he looks to Advent as the coming of Christ in history; however, because this coming of Christ is not connected with the progress of Christian culture in terms of the reality of Christ’s presence in the world, it is not identical with that presence. Moreover, he finds false hope emerging from a conservative triumphalism in the church. He concurs with Karl Rahner, who rejects out of hand an unrealistic optimism which encourages the church to convert the city of humanity into the city of God according to medieval speculation. Merton is thus opposed to a religio-cultural autonomy in the secular world today. The task of Christians in our time is to build the kingdom of God in this world — a task that for him (as well as for Karl Rahner) is fundamentally spiritual and eschatological.

CHAPTER IV: SYNTHESIS OF MERTON'S UNDERSTANDING OF HOPE

A. Hope as a Theological Reality

1. The Trinitarian Foundation of Hope

Hope, in Merton's view, is first and foremost a theological reality. It derives its basic meaning and finds validation from the network of relations between God and humanity. Merton's ultimate foundation of hope is the triune God. Throughout his writings, he consistently identifies God as the source of hope. A clear distinction is made between genuine Christian hope based on God and false hope based on naïve optimism and human calculation. Christian hope always involves the reality of God. Merton usually links hope individually with (A) the crucified and resurrected Christ, (B) God the first person of the Trinity, and (C) the Holy Spirit. The presentation of these distinctive interconnections will here follow the Merton pattern.

(A) Merton links hope with the resurrection and suffering of Christ.¹

Merton's hope is grounded in the reality of the resurrection of Christ. He clearly states that, "Christ is risen. ... Christ is the Lord of the living and the dead. He is the Lord of history." "The resurrection is not a doctrine we try to prove or a problem we argue about; it is the life and action of Christ himself in us by his Holy Spirit..."² Christ lives in us and leads us to a new future called the kingdom of God, which is already established. More work needs to be done, and Christ engages us to work together towards this kingdom.³

Merton envisions the crucified Christ in the suffering of humanity, reflected in the midst of human affliction and suffering, a concrete realization of Christian hope, here and

¹ See Thomas Merton, The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns. Selected and ed. with Introduction by William H. Shannon. (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985). 185-186.

² On the significance of the resurrection in Christian life, see also RM 121-122, IM 173.

³ Thomas Merton, "He is Risen," in The Merton Annual 7 (1995): 1.

now. "Salvation is coming from the most afflicted and despised."⁴ People need to see history as a book opened and closed only by the Passion of God. "Christ continues to suffer his passion in the poor, the defenseless, ... Meanwhile, Christ is in agony until the end of time."⁵

Both Merton's and Moltmann's view of hope share a focus on the crucifixion as a source of hope. In his earlier work, Theology of Hope (1964), Moltmann evoked much criticism. A theology of hope which focused on the resurrection was seen as too abstract. Thus Moltmann "retreated" to an historical vantagepoint: in the later work, The Crucified God (1972), Moltmann refocused his hope on the crucified savior. As for Merton, as early as 1959, he had concretely come to link hope with the crucifixion of Christ, here and now. A distinction may be drawn here: Moltmann emphasizes the suffering of God "for" humanity, while Merton stresses God as suffering "with" humanity. The first leans in a vicarious direction, the second favors a concept of accompaniment.

With respect to the resurrection and suffering of Christ, Merton states that, "We cannot bring hope and redemption to others unless we are ourselves filled with the light of Christ and His Spirit."⁶ "All hope may be sought and found in Christ."⁷ In point of fact, the Christ in us "drives us through to a light of which we have no conception and which can only be found by passing through apparent despair...(victory is certain)."⁸

Merton insists that Christ is the only source of hope.

True encounter with Christ liberates something in us, a power we did not know we had, a hope, a capacity for life, a resilience, an ability to bounce back when we thought we were completely defeated, a capacity to grow and change, a power of creative transformation. For the Christian there is no defeat, because Christ is

⁴ WF, 263-264.

⁵ VC, 183.

⁶ LH, 27.

⁷ Ibid., 100.

⁸ CT, 57-58.

risen and lives in us, and Christ has overcome all that seeks to destroy us or to block our human and spiritual growth.⁹

(B) Merton also finds in God the Father as first person of the Trinity the source of hope. Hope ultimately resides in the mercy of God. "There is some hope of a kind of peace on earth, based not on the wisdom and the manipulations of men but on the inscrutable mercy of God." "Things seem close to despair and that too is all right. Total bankruptcy of everything earthly in my life – no assurance of anything else – only hope in the mercy of God. In the end, that alone is real."¹⁰ It is absurd therefore to hope for a solid peace based on fictions and illusions. Elsewhere Merton identifies grace as the foundation of Christian hope. "Any action that is based on the frenzies and impulses of human ambition is a delusion and an obstacle to grace, and therefore to hope." From this perspective Merton remarks:

Our inability to grasp the infinite riches of God's mercy and His Kingdom.... Inability above all of Christians, of priests, to realize the objective immensity and power of the Kingdom that is established, in mystery and of the great unknown liturgy that goes up to God from the darkness of the world in which the Kingdom is denied. Its citizens perhaps do not even know for sure of what Kingdom they are citizens, yet they suffer for God and the Word triumphs in them, and through them man will once again be, in Christ, the perfect Icon of God.¹¹

Seeds of Destruction (1964) also presents God's activity in history as the source of eschatological hope. Such activity in history is found in the inscrutable mystery of the divine will here and now. Thus, "Christian hope is confident not in metaphysical immobility but in the dynamism of unfailing love."¹² Moreover, he writes:

Those of whom God denies the most perfect hope must look closely at their sins and this they do, not by hunting these out for themselves, but by having God

⁹ "He is Risen," 2. See also, "There, there is Christ in my own Kind, my own Kind – 'Kind' which means 'likeness' and which means 'love' and which means 'child.' ... It is the Divine power and the divine Joy – and God is seen and reveals Himself as man, that is in us and there is no other hope of finding wisdom than in God-manhood: our own manhood transformed in God!" SS, 183.

¹⁰ Ibid., 144.

¹¹ Ibid., 143.

¹² SD, 184.

suddenly shine his lamp on the dark corners of their souls.¹³

(C) Merton relates hope to the Holy Spirit. Thomas Merton in Alaska (1992) discusses God's covenant and Christian life. The relationship to God through the word of Jesus Christ gives genuine freedom. This relationship gives us the Holy Spirit, "the Spirit of Freedom, the Spirit of Response and Sonship."¹⁴ Only this relationship to the Holy Spirit offers liberation from alienation.

From the perspective of "prayers, personalism and the Spirit" Merton continues his reflections on the significance of the Holy Spirit, who is the sign of the presence and the work going on within us. At this point Merton offers a broad portrait of hope. The Holy Spirit is essential, sustaining the comprehensive dynamic of Christian hope in so far as it overarches past, present and future events. Hope, born out of the Passion, offers us the assurance of our final victory and risen life. This future is in process of being fulfilled here and now through the dynamism of the Holy Spirit within us.¹⁵

2. As a Process View of the World

In the study of the messianic kingdom, Merton's approach to the topic was forward-moving. This concept calls for a clarification through the process view of reality and a fuller treatment of the fundamental theological issues of hope. Here, too, one finds a similarity between Merton and the professional theologians of hope.

P. Teilhard de Chardin, the French Jesuit paleontologist-theologian, had envisioned a strong optimism about the future of the human race, based on the theory of

¹³ SS, 70

¹⁴ TMA, 76.

¹⁵ Barth and Merton are close in their description of the role of the Holy Spirit vis-a-vis Christian hope. Barth devotes an entire section on "The Holy Spirit and Christian Hope" in CD, IV/3, II, the Doctrine of Reconciliation (1962). Barth starts from the premise that God as the Holy Spirit, and therefore truly awakens the Christian to life in hope. Barth claims that objective hope becomes subjective hope through the Holy Spirit. In linking hope with the Holy Spirit, Barth affirms that God does not deal with a human being as a mere object, but treats and sustains him as a free subject. Karl Barth, CD, IV/3, II, 941.

evolution and a dynamic reading of Paul. According to this view, humankind would be coming ever closer together into the unity of a suprahuman person, all one day subject to Christ, and Christ to God, so that God would finally be all in all. This expanded evolutionary concept is believed to move all creation toward “Christogenesis,” i.e., the integration of human personality with Christ as the supreme victory of cosmogenesis, the Parousia. From Teilhard de Chardin, Merton adopted an overarching process view of reality. Two significant essays on the topic “The Universe as Epiphany” and “Teilhard’s Gamble.” in Love and Living.¹⁶ Both reflect Merton’s appeal to process thinking.

According to Merton, process orientations had attempted to supplant the conception of the universe as a “cause and effect mechanism which is regulated by a supreme being outside or above the world who stands to the world primarily as First Cause or Prime Mover.”¹⁷ This process view is placed in contrast to the hierarchical, non-process view of reality, according to which deity is defined as “the Uncaused Cause, guiding, planning, willing every effect down to the tiniest detail.... He delegates to men a secret and limited share in His activity in so far as they are united with Him.”¹⁸

Merton believes this idea of God as micro-manager of the world is passé. In the post-Newtonian world, this lacks scientific reliability, and therefore is not plausible philosophy. But the primary problem is that this classical viewpoint places God outside of a dynamic relationship with his world, and is, according to Merton, “religiously uninspiring.”¹⁹ Instead of being placed outside or above the world, God is depicted as being immanent in life processes. Undergirding — and even guiding — this movement

¹⁶ Love and Living (1979), 171-184, 185-191, respectively.

¹⁷ Walter Capps, Hope Against Hope: Moltmann to Merton in One Theological Decade (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 118. See also, CWA, 174. [Image Book]

¹⁸ CWA, 174.

¹⁹ Walter Capps, Hope Against Hope, 119.

towards what is yet to be is a basic postulate of hope. "God is at work in and through man, perfecting an ongoing creation."²⁰

After Merton defines his process view of reality, he challenges the idea of Godhead as a living process, i.e., as historical process. He quotes from Altizer: "Christian mysticism must know the Godhead as living and forward-moving process."²¹ In this form of process theology, then, God is by nature a historical process.²² Here Merton sets this concept of God over against that of the death of God. "He [God] has now to be seen, apprehended, understood as dead in his transcendence in order that he may manifest himself immanently in historical process and there only."²³ In such a theology, God is not dead, but the stagnant God must die that the dynamic God may emerge. At this point, Merton questions how this emergence occurs — indeed what the word dynamic means. Rejecting the process definition of God, Merton explains:

I cannot see where the idea of Godhead *as process* is more dynamic than that of Godhead *as pure act*. To one who has been exposed to scholastic ontology and has not recovered, it remains evident that the activity of becoming is considerably less alive and dynamic than the act of Being.²⁴

Merton rejected the idea of "'pure Being' as static quiescence." instead siding with the more traditional view of metaphysics regarding the Creator and creation.

Surely Blake's God is Creator who is present and immanent in his creation. not remote from it and solitary. But he is still the creator and not the creation process — the ground of being, not the process of becoming.²⁵

²⁰ CWA, 175. [Image edition]

²¹ LETM, 8-9.

²² Ibid., 9.

²³ Idem.

²⁴ Idem (original emphasis).

²⁵ Idem.

In elaborating on the concept of the Godhead, Merton addresses the notion of the Kingdom of God, which calls for a dynamic correlation with a forward thrust that is basic hope. "Traditional theology clearly distinguishes between God in himself and the work of God the Holy Spirit, but without separating and dividing them."²⁶ In fact, "the dynamism of eschatology is not a dynamism of the divine nature *ad intra* but a work of God in the world, 'in the Spirit' and 'in Christ'."²⁷ While the Kingdom of God grows continuously, the substance of the Godhead does not. Because the dynamism of the divine nature is the work of God in the world, in the Spirit and in Christ:

...the "forward-moving process" is the Kingdom and work of the Spirit, and it is not an attempt on the part of the Godhead to complete and perfect itself. It is God's self-manifestation and self-expression in man. The Kingdom of God is not "a dynamic epiphany of a Godhead in process of realizing itself," but rather an epiphany of God in process of *communicating and sharing himself*.²⁸

Merton further clarifies the meaning of the "forward-moving process" of the kingdom of God. In his critique of Albert Camus' The Plague, Merton compares Teilhard and Camus in their acceptance of nature and material creation. The difference in viewpoints starts with Camus' suspicion of totalitarians who look to the principles of evolution to justify an infallible progress to the new era. On the other hand, Camus preferred to have a human being confront the absurdity of the present order of existing reality rather than inviting us to envision the future.²⁹ Merton dubs this a superficial

²⁶ Idem.

²⁷ Idem.

²⁸ Ibid, 9-10 (emphasis original).

²⁹ The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton includes several articles on Albert Camus. While the full presentation of hope ranges beyond the purview of these collected essays, the notion of absurdity is at their very core. Camus and Merton both offer a view of reality out of which human hope might spring. However, Camus insists that this reality might be obscured by absurdity. Here, there is a paradox on order: to overcome absurdity, one must confront the absurdity. Therefore, Camus preaches the absurd as a way of life. (Thomas Merton, The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton, 197). For Merton, Camus' clear vision of the absurd is the beginning of a modest hope (Idem). Unlike Camus here, Barth and Merton both recognize that "the notion of grace can serve to corrode our sense of morality as a deliberate human project." John Webster, "The Christian Revolt: Some Reflections on 'The Christian Life,'" in Reckoning with Barth, ed. by N. Bigger (Oxford: Mowbray, 1988), 143-144.

eschatological hopefulness based on evolution. He blames Teilhard for choosing this form of optimism “which tends to look at existential evil and suffering through the small end of the telescope” and is unable to scruple and anguish with Camus over the murder of an innocent child.³⁰ Merton’s process view of reality – indeed, his understanding of hope – must be apprehended in the framework of a theology of change: the present reality is in a process of ongoing change toward perfection.³¹

3. Renewal and Hope

Merton’s conceptualization of hope is marked by a dynamism of a high quality. This dynamic dimension comes to the fore in two special areas of concern: Merton’s vision of monastic and ecclesiastical renewal.

a. Monastic Renewal

Taking his cue from the character of Father Zossima in Dostoevsky’s The Brothers Karamasov, Merton views the contemporary monk as “truly solitary, fully dedicated and forgetful of self...yet perfectly aware of his own weakness and limitation...totally submissive not merely to law but to truth.”³² To the diaspora monk, the world is not introduced to the victorious, authoritarian or despotic Christ; rather, Merton hopes the world will meet the living Christ, in these humble “‘ikons’ of flesh and blood, hidden in the world, solitary and humble men of prayer.”³³

³⁰ George Kilcourse, Ace of Freedom (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1993), 117.

³¹ God’s substance, according to Merton, does not change, since God is pure act. His view here can be compared to Jüngel’s exposition of Barth’s doctrine of the Trinity. According to Jüngel, the idea of “God is in becoming” should not be understood ontologically, nor originally as a Trinitarian category. God does not leave his present state behind as past in order to proceed toward a future which is unknown to him, but rather God is in a Trinitarian livingness individually, the beginning, succession and end, all at once in his own essence. Eberhard Jüngel, Karl Barth: A Theological Legacy, tr. by Garrett E. Paul (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), vii-viii.

³² SD, 216-217.

³³ SD, 217, as cited in Koch, An Unexpected American Apocalypse, 133.

The world view of a contemporary diaspora monk mimics those of early monks resolute on “pilgrimage ‘out of the world to the Father’ ... while remaining in the present life as a sign of the world to come.”³⁴ Their “true perspectives” on the Kingdom of God have taken their natural compassion *for* the world and transformed it into an understanding *of* the world:

Hence the concern of the monk can never be limited to the building up of an earthly and temporal structure, nor can he simply join in the labors and vicissitudes of the active apostolate.³⁵

For Merton, the monk’s horizons are those “of the desert and of exile.” But far from detaching the monk from the world, this should draw monks and humanity closer together.³⁶

The essay “Ecumenism and Renewal” (1968) acknowledges the legitimate grievances that Martin Luther held against the Church of his time. Today’s monks, after re-examining their vocation in the light of the Gospels and Paul’s theology, as Luther had done, find that they are calling into question the very concept of a vowed and cloistered life. Merton was aware of the solipsistic dangers of such self-examination, yet he believed it could bring back monasticism’s original eschatological orientation.³⁷

Of the factors that define monasticism’s relevance, Merton assigned its eschatological meaning primary importance:

The monastic orientation is eschatological: “out of this world to the Father.” The monastic community — like Faulkner’s Dilsey at the Negro church — is convoked not merely to listen to polite religious discourse but to hear the living word and to open up to it as a flower opens to the sun. The result will be, in one way or another, “vision” or “contemplation” (admittedly a bad word), prophetic and eschatological awareness: the awareness of Dilsey who wept at Rev.

³⁴ SD, 219.

³⁵ Ibid, 220.

³⁶ Idem.

³⁷ “Ecumenism and Renewal.” CWA. Image 195-211; Hard Cover 181-197.

Shegog's Easter sermon because it made her "see the beginning and the end."³⁸ For Merton, the eschatologically oriented monk experiences the kingdom of Promise as already fulfilled. "Monastic 'contemplation' is not merely reposeful consideration of eternal verities but a grasp of the whole content of revelation, albeit obscurely, in the deep experience of a fully lived faith."³⁹

Anxious to make monastic life more active, Merton saw this challenge as a sign of the "necessary dialectic between eschatology and incarnation."⁴⁰ Hence, the monastic life not only calls for contemplation but also for prophecy.⁴¹

For Merton, "the monastic life is centered on Christ as the alpha and omega, as the final revelation of God the Father, in whom one day the meaning of all the rest will be made finally plain — not by man's zeal or ingenuity but by the pure grace of Spirit."⁴²

Hence

The monk not only retains the eschatological privilege and duty of smashing the idols — worldly, ecclesiastical, secular and even monastic — but he also has the incarnational privilege and duty of having his feet on God's ground and his hands in the fruitful dirt.⁴³

The Silent Life (1957) examines the well-functioning monastery in relation to the new Jerusalem.⁴⁴ Material things are not alien to the vocation of the monk.⁴⁵ In fact it is good for monks to know what is going on in the intellectual and artistic worlds. This

³⁸ Ibid., 201.

³⁹ Ibid., 202.

⁴⁰ Idem.

⁴¹ "A Need For a New Education," CWA, 213. [Image edition].

⁴² "Ecumenism and Renewal," CWA, 202.

⁴³ Idem.

⁴⁴ SL, 20, 35-36.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 23.

enables them to offer enlightened comment from the vantage point of solitude to the benefit of the world.⁴⁶

SL in its epilogue “The Monk and the World” sees today’s world as “reaching the peak of the greatest crisis in history.”⁴⁷ Yet, latent in the crisis of the secular world is the new creation:

The world of our time is in confusion. ... Yet at the same time there remain possibilities for an unexpected and almost unbelievable solution, the creation of a new world and a new civilization the like of which has never been seen. We are face to face with Antichrist or the Millenium, no one knows which.⁴⁸

Though he knew well the dangers of our present age Merton held out for a basic optimism. The monk’s role is seen as contributing to the welfare of every faction of human society. His vocation is to be a sacrament of the mercy of God. As such, he is called to be “sympathetic to any social and cultural movement that favors the growth of man’s spirit.”⁴⁹

The Monastic Journey (1977) sketches the monk’s prophetic role:

... the monk’s vocation at all times is to live in, and for, and by Christ. ... in order to keep alive in the world that spiritual atmosphere without which all that is good and sane in human culture will die of asphyxiation.

In the night of our technological barbarism, monks must be as trees which exist silently in the dark and by vital presence purify the air.⁵⁰

Merton’s call to monastic renewal is bold, unrelenting, and radical. He rejects superficial tinkering, adjusting isolated facets or pursuing basic complacency in observance. He envisions full-scale transformation in light of the biblical message, the eschatological vision, and the socio-political interface that alone will guarantee the return

⁴⁶ Ibid., 87.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 173.

⁴⁸ Idem.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 176.

⁵⁰ MJ, 38.

of the monastic tradition to its original authenticity.

b. Ecclesiastical Renewal

For Merton, a full-scale hope is also indispensable for ecclesiastical renewal. The goal is not a return to Christendom.⁵¹ What is needed is a firm and faithful call to live in a world in which Christians constitute a minority and in which the church, once powerful enough to enforce its sovereign will on society, no longer possesses any immediately recognizable, special influence and power.⁵²

This bold, forward thrust, taking on the form of a creative fidelity, will give evidence that the church is a people of the future:

The Church in this New World is more than a decorative symbol of the past. It is the mother of the future. Its members must open their eyes to the future: they must recognize the signs that point to the future, signs through which God Himself speaks in the obscurity of history and in the present activity and life of the surrounding world. This is what the modern fathers have told us, calling us to "Catholic" action, asking for new orientation in our vocation for the priesthood in the New World. This orientation, however, depends on very old traditions which the modern world has forgotten and only recently has begun to remember: the priority of spirituality and the primacy of contemplation.⁵³

This is an uncompromising insight. For the impact of the Christian laity on the world to be significant it must be qualitative, not quantitative. "The apostle of the diaspora will have to have something more cogent to offer than an invitation to enter a ghetto of antiquated custom.... The only thing that can give meaning to such an

⁵¹ Merton takes a dim view of returning to the past, whatever its glory.

Fifteen-hundred years of European Christendom, in spite of certain definite achievements, have not been an unequivocal glory for Christendom. The time has come for judgment to be passed on this history. ... And that is why I think certain forms of Christian "optimism" are to be taken with reservations, in so far as they lack the genuine eschatological consciousness of the Christian vision, and concentrate upon the naïve hope of merely temporal achievement — churches on the moon! (HR, 66).

⁵² William H. Shannon, Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story, 254-255.

⁵³ HR, 42. A comment on the final sentence seems appropriate: renewal, contrary to common belief, does not signify total departure from tradition, but rather a new call to realize its unrealized dynamism.

apostolate is purity of eschatological hope.”⁵⁴ Such a hope is to be grounded in nothing less than the “eschatological victory of Christ.”⁵⁵ By placing their hope in this eschatological victory, Catholics open themselves to a “much more living, more varied and more creative Christian action in the world.”⁵⁶

Merton’s comments on The Castle by Kafka are apropos here.

The Castle is not a sick book, it is a healthy book about a sick situation, because it admits the sickness. ...

On the other hand it is imperative to overcome Castle sickness — involvement in Byzantine and futile hierarchical relationships — hoping in the inscrutable machine — here where I am. ... I have hope: hope of a new hope: not hope in myself or in the guitars. What is this hope? I don’t know. What are its real risks? What is the real struggle it demands of me?⁵⁷

While political action by Catholics need not, and probably should not, be centered around clerical “party lines,” or even associated with the propagation of a dogmatic message, this Christian action must be “concretely ordered to advancing the work of Redemption and deepening the penetration of grace into the realm of society and nature.”⁵⁸

“Schema XIII: An Open Letter to the American Hierarchy” was a clarion call to “conscience and consciousness,” as Merton diplomatically “lectured” the American Bishops on the “eschatological nature of the Church’s message to the world.”⁵⁹ The message had to do with horizons expanding beyond any particular time or culture. For the Church to be committed to, and to proclaim the Gospel, calls for a vision of reality

⁵⁴ SD, 188.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 189.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 190.

⁵⁷ LeL., 249.

⁵⁸ SD, 191.

⁵⁹ Koch, 136-137, see also WF, 88.

beyond the promises of the technological world. The Church, like us, is bound to make Christ-pleasing decisions, not decisions appealing to society, which is crucial when realizing political or social decisions can affect the entire planet.⁶⁰ Merton wrote:

He [the Christian] is called to obey the gospel of love, for all men, and not simply to devote himself to the interests of a nation, a party, a class, or a culture. The message of the church to the modern world therefore remains, as it has always been, an eschatological message.⁶¹

Merton felt the Second Vatican Council had tapped into something important. He believed the Church's eschatological message needed to be singular and powerful in the face of the potential good and ultimate evil, as exemplified by nuclear war. Merton challenged the Council's views on their war policy, stating the Church would be fulfilling its eschatological role if it followed a three-fold path: 1) to champion the cause of the poor vis-à-vis the face of the "unprincipled machination of militarists and power politicians;" 2) to not quash "the hopes of the defenseless and thrust them further into despair;" and 3) "to present the strongest and most unequivocal appeal for the renunciation of force" favoring instead peaceful and rational diplomacy.⁶²

Merton felt the Second Vatican Council would do better to preach instead "the New Commandment of Love." He felt this would be in keeping with Christ's own proclamation: "The time is accomplished and the kingdom of heaven is at hand: repent and believe the gospel" (Mk 1:15). Reminding the Bishops of Christ's message of salvation, Merton invited them to dutifully protest against "principles of thought which imply an enslavement of Christian conscience to powers in the world that are completely hostile to Christ and to his love."⁶³ The Council's primary responsibility, Merton concluded, is "to bear witness clearly and without any confusion to the Church's belief in

⁶⁰ WE, 88.

⁶¹ Idem.

⁶² Ibid., 90-91

⁶³ Ibid., 93.

the power of love to save and transform not only individuals but society.”⁶⁴

Merton’s vision of the Church, interestingly enough, is sketched in terms of hope.

True community: hope in man. “All-Man.” One in Christ with the dread that some may be lost, that individuals will fall out of the saved community, for whom there is hope because the Holy Spirit is powerful (enough) to work for all through all. The Christian way is “to hope for myself and for all others.... (Note hoping in all men is not by any means “hope in the human spirit,” yet as for that spirit too “we must cherish it a little.”)⁶⁵

Within this context of a Church in renewal, Merton spells out his own sense of calling:

My own peculiar task in my Church and in my world has been that of the solitary explorer who, instead of jumping on all the latest bandwagons at once, is bound to search the existential depths of faith in its silences, its ambiguities, and in those certainties which lie deeper than the bottom of anxiety. In those depths there are no easy answers, no pat solutions to anything. It is a kind of submarine life in which faith sometimes mysteriously takes on the aspect of doubt when, in fact, one has to doubt and reject conventional and superstitious surrogates that have taken the place of faith.⁶⁶

B. Hope as a Philosophical Actuality

The reflections on hope in the Merton writings have philosophical underpinnings.

A firm argument can be made for an epistemology of hope.

1. As an Epistemological Factor

In Merton, it can be cogently argued, one finds a basic epistemology of hope.

Such a perspective would address hope as subject and object of spiritual cognition. Two basic questions occur. First, how can one attain pure hope? Secondly, how does hope function in knowing the truth.

(A) Merton’s exposition of hope (as *deep mystery*) ranges across at least three distinct explorations of the subject. In LeL he laments that he has caused thousands of

⁶⁴ Ibid., 92.

⁶⁵ DWL, 29.

⁶⁶ FV, 213.

people to have the illusory expectations he has of himself: an expectation of deep new birth, hope, a solution.⁶⁷ To this he adds an insight into the temptation to illusion that is not far from the experience of hope: "Solitary life and struggle with illusion: not with objectified exterior devils but with the devils which are illusions about self."⁶⁸

In NM and NMI, he attempts to explain what hope is not. " 'A hope that is seen', says Paul, 'is no hope'. No hope. Therefore despair. To see your hope is to abandon hope."⁶⁹ To explain this oxymoron, Merton offers two perspectives. First, hope means to look for something from God. Second, pure hope is in God. Sometimes, we begin with the first kind of hope and grow into the second.⁷⁰ Above all, hope does not consist of visible rewards, internal feeling, or palpable objects.⁷¹

In his essay on Thomas Merton in "The Valley of Despair," Anthony T. Padovano explains:

There is a tendency in modern life to equate hope with the measure of control we have over our lives. We believe God is with us when things go according to plan. Hope, however, requires a belief in possibilities which are not easily available or within reach. Hope remains even in the valley of darkness.⁷²

Merton's "Sentences on Hope" addresses the task of analyzing desire and hope to clarify their interrelationship.⁷³ Desire can be either simple (i. e.. common) or unique, the latter

⁶⁷ LeI, 360.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 361.

⁶⁹ NM, 5.

⁷⁰ NMI, 17.

⁷¹ TS, 38.

⁷² Anthony T. Padovano, Thomas Merton: Becoming Who We Are (Cincinnati, OH: St. Anthony Messenger, 1995), 22.

⁷³ Donald Capps sees hope as an expression of desire: hope is not at play until desire has been able to "name" its object so as to say: this is what I long and yearn for. Thus, hope is the clarification of desire, enabling us to know where our desire is leading us and entailing the capacity to identify the object of our desire. Thus, hope is a persistent desire. What distinguishes hope as desire from both wishing and craving, is that its intensity is expressed in its persistence, as it continues to strive until its object is realized or proven to be unrealizable. Donald Capps, Agents of Hope: A Pastoral Psychology (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 59.

achieving complete fulfillment in the act of yearning to be loved by God. These two kinds of desire correspond to two distinct types of hope.⁷⁴

There was for Merton no attainment of hope in the abstract. Because hope belongs to, it can only be attained, in a setting of concrete commitment and reality.⁷⁵ “From this kind of love [as actually experienced] necessarily springs hope.”⁷⁶

Hope is planted in the barren soil of nothingness. It is only achieved when we desperately empty ourselves of our identity, our self-confidence, our strength – our existence. As gift, hope comes to us from God’s stillness, God’s silence, which is a vital part of our consciousness.

To be banished from the world of men by the silence of God means, in the end, not that one finds a new and mysterious universe to live in, but that the old, ordinary universe, with all its shabby poverty, while remaining perfectly ordinary, perfectly real, perfectly poor, becomes transfigured from within by a silence which is the supreme infinitely rich and generous God.⁷⁷

Merton situates the genesis of hope in the new creation, which sees “the eternal in the temporal, the timeless in time.”⁷⁸ This point of departure is called the *point vierge*.⁷⁹ Merton explains: “This little point of nothingness and of absolute poverty is the pure glory of God in us.”⁸⁰ God’s mercy cannot be fathomed by human method, since it is so closely intertwined with hope. “*Chesed* (mercy) ... is the power that binds us to God

⁷⁴ NML, 17-18.

⁷⁵ NM, 4-5.

⁷⁶ ITW, 183.

⁷⁷ Thomas Merton, Silence in Heaven (New York: Studio Publications, 1956), 21-22, cited in Suzanne Zuercher, Merton: An Enneagram Profile (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria, 1996), 140.

⁷⁸ Zuercher, 140.

⁷⁹ Merton borrowed “*le point vierge*” concept from Louis Massignon whom he had been reading from 1960 through most of 1964. Literally, virgin point. Merton’s metaphor for the point inside us that connects most closely with God. Christine Bochen, Thomas Merton Essential Writings (Maryknoll, New York, Orbis, 2000), 60.

⁸⁰ CGB, 158.

because he has promised us mercy and will never fail in his promise. For He cannot fail.”⁸¹ In God’s devotion to us, Merton finds the source of our hope.⁸² Our duty is “to wait in silent expectancy for the coming of God...to wait in peace and emptiness and oblivion of all things.” Merton closes his essay concerning *point vierge* with “*Bonum est praestolari cum silentio salutare Dei*” (It is good to wait in silence for the salvation of God).⁸³

Merton’s incongruous idea of hope is best viewed through the prism of his realized eschatology,⁸⁴ which explains what it means to live in hope. For example, the monk is the one who is about to attain full realization and know the secret of liberation and can somehow or other communicate this to others.⁸⁵ Elsewhere he writes about the “grasp of God in the present, as the One who has revealed Himself in the past and holds in His mystery, the promise of His mercy for the future.”⁸⁶

Regarding the emphasis on the present reality, Walter Capps’s comparative analysis is to the point:

Moltmann finds the substance of integration in the normative process, and refers the fundamental contrast to distinctions in time tenses. In his view, the contrast will eventually be overcome, but the time or moment of integration is not now.⁸⁷

On the other hand,

Merton makes integration dependent upon the higher, larger, truer, and surer mystical vision, in contrast to which all lesser alternatives are relegated to the

⁸¹ Thomas Merton, “The Good Samaritan,” in A Thomas Merton Reader, 351.

⁸² Zuercher, 140-142. See also Chapter 3, section 2.

⁸³ NSC, 46.

⁸⁴ VC, 31-32.

⁸⁵ AJTM, 333.

⁸⁶ SS, 354.

⁸⁷ Walter Capps, Hope Against Hope, 163.

world of deception, distortion, and even illusion.⁸⁸

In Capps's view the "fundamental problem, for Merton, is the distinction between visible and invisible, apparent and real, conflicted and centred."⁸⁹ Despite his strong emphasis on present realization, Merton does not neglect a future dimension of fulfillment. He not only sees all things as they are in themselves, but also sees them as they are in Christ, full of promise. A strong paradoxical element runs through Merton's hope.

(B) Secondly, for Merton the epistemology of hope functions in the actual knowing of the truth. TS insists on the total commitment of self to reality. In this process, hope becomes a way to reality, and serves as a criterion for authenticity. For Merton, the desert is the place where people attempt to run from unreality to reality. "The desert is the home of despair. And despair, now, is everywhere."⁹⁰ Despair is a bottomless abyss: to live facing despair one must not consent to it.

To trample it down under hope in the cross. To wage war against despair unceasingly. That war is our wilderness. If we wage it courageously, we will find Christ at our side. If we cannot face it we will never find Christ.⁹¹

Hope as an expression of truth helps us to find Christ, the source of truth. Hence, hope offers the sum and substance of all theology to individual souls. By hope all the truths that are presented to the whole world in an abstract and impersonal way become for us a matter of personal and intimate conviction. In short,

Hope is the gateway to contemplation, because contemplation is an experience of divine things and we can not experience what we do not in some way possess. By hope we lay hands on the substance of what we believe and by hope we possess

⁸⁸ Idem.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 164.

⁹⁰ TS, 20.

⁹¹ Ibid., 21.

the substance of the promise of God's love.⁹²

While not developed to its fullest potential, Merton's presentation of hope is informed by a basic epistemology.

C. Hope as a Psychological Phenomenon

In Merton we find an explicit development of the psychology of hope and its psychological concomitants.

Hope, in Merton, is first off "a confidence which He creates in our souls as secret evidence that he has taken possession of us."⁹³ This confidence is a genuine gift from God. Thoughts in Solitude equates hope with confidence and the ability to take a risk.⁹⁴ NSC offers a reminder: "to hope is to risk frustration. Therefore, make up your mind to risk frustration."⁹⁵ The downside of hope is confidence in the face of inertia and cowardice. Both of these attitudes instill fear of the future because they undermine trust in God. Laziness, being at variance with discretion, avoids risk; discretion on the other hand urges one to take the risk that God demands.

Merton labels this reluctance and lack of courage the death of hope.⁹⁶ Merton interprets Jesus' saying that the kingdom of heaven is to be won by violence (cf. Matt 11:12), to mean that it can be bought at the price of certain risks. In a changing world, one can lose touch with the present, but it is imperative "to recognize the possibilities and challenges offered by the present moment, and to embrace them with courage, faith and hope."⁹⁷

⁹² NMI, 23.

⁹³ Ibid., 15.

⁹⁴ TS, 33-35.

⁹⁵ NSC, 104.

⁹⁶ TS, 34.

⁹⁷ CGB, 208.

Merton in several places emphasizes hope as one's own free act. In NMI, for instance, he observes: "hope is the wedding of two freedoms, human and divine, in the acceptance of a love that is at once a promise and the beginning of fulfillment."⁹⁸

The struggle with dread and despair was a consistent factor in Merton's life. In her psychological profile of Merton, Suzanne Zuercher illustrates how Merton's dread develops into despair. Her contention was that since Merton was cut off from his feelings, he was unable to experience immediate, genuine, impulsive living. Dread stems from maladjusted living, according to Merton, from being detached from our personal experience, from imitating a life not ours.⁹⁹ Merton further found a sense of helplessness to escape this false living, since the more one attempted to live simply and truthfully, the more one tried to be redeemed, the more one sank deeper into "roles, self-preoccupation. postures."¹⁰⁰

Anne Carr develops a similar psychological profile of Merton's sense of dread, despair and remorse, but from a theologian's perspective, based on his Contemplative Prayer. She says he employs a theological definition of guilt that goes beyond "mere neurotic anxiety."

[Merton's] theology ... has experiential implications: one has a sense of failure, a personal awareness of one's own infidelity in not facing truth, and in not "giving back... a fair return for all that has been given..."¹⁰¹

Linked to his sense of guilt, but deeper, is dread, based on our temporal estrangement from God.

⁹⁸ NMI, 22.

⁹⁹ CP, 102-104. Cited in Zuercher, 89.

¹⁰⁰ "Despair is the absolute extreme of self-love. ... In every man there is hidden some root of despair because in every man there is pride that vegetates and springs weeds and rank flowers of self-pity as soon as our own resources fail us. ... Despair is the ultimate development of a pride so great and so stiff-necked that it selects the absolute misery of damnation rather than accept happiness from the hands of God...." NSC, 180.

¹⁰¹ Anne E. Carr, A Search for Wisdom & Spirit, 116.

This experience of dread at this radical depth is different, Merton notes, from remorse. For remorse is for something specific that one has done or failed to do. But dread is the “worst emptiness of the faithful Christian” who has really tried conscientiously what is required in the task of life, but has realized even more deeply a radical wrongness.¹⁰²

In these depths of despair, Carr notes that Merton still finds the seeds of hope: “This deep dread and night must then be seen for what it is: not as punishment, but as purification and as grace.” Zuercher agrees, noting that Merton realizes without despair, there is no hope. Merton says that in order to live facing despair, to become courageous, authentic beings, we must be grounded in the hope that Christ brings to us by his presence.¹⁰³

We are open to God and to [God’s] mercy in the inscrutable future and our trust is entirely in [God’s] grace, which will support our liberty in the emptiness where we will confront unforeseen decisions. Only when we have descended in dread to the center of our own nothingness, by [God’s] grace...and guidance, can we be led by [God]...to find [God] in losing ourselves.¹⁰⁴

1. Relating to Self

In Time Invades the Cathedral, Walter Capps takes note of a shortcoming in the “theology of hope” associated with “Jürgen Moltmann and Johann Metz: namely, that it has failed, by and large, to come to grips with the question of the self. This failure can be traced to their opposition to “ the way in which preoccupation with matters of ‘personal salvation’ tends to conceal or mitigate the Christians’ proper interest in caring for the world.”¹⁰⁵ However, Capps further notes that “in an age of transition questions about the self emerge in an almost overwhelming way.”¹⁰⁶ Acknowledging Walter Capps’

¹⁰² Ibid. 117.

¹⁰³ TS, 21 as cited in Zuercher, 90.

¹⁰⁴ CP, 101 as cited in Carr, 118.

¹⁰⁵ Walter H. Capps, Time Invades the Cathedral, 134.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 137.

discovery of this lack of concern about the role of the self in the theology of hope, Donald Capps underscores the role of the self in the experience of hoping.¹⁰⁷ A special contribution to the theology of hope by Merton is his attention to the role of the self.

Every theologian of hope, by intrinsic necessity, is a theologian of change. This includes Thomas Merton. While Moltmann specifically constructed a political theology, Merton played the part of a social critic, though a monk. A fundamental difference marks their approach to reality. Moltmann "looks for visible signs that oppression, in concrete social and political terms, is being overcome," since human alienation cannot be eliminated except "through the transforming power of specific historical acts and events."¹⁰⁸ Merton, on the other hand, evinces a constant preoccupation with self-transcendence.¹⁰⁹

In a Bangkok address Merton noted that both Buddhism and Christian monasticism start from within oneself.

Both Christianity and Buddhism agree that the root of man's problems is that his consciousness is all fouled up and he doesn't apprehend reality as it fully and really is; that the moment he looks at something, he begins to interpret it in ways that are prejudiced and predetermined to fit a certain wrong picture of the world.
¹¹⁰

While this egoistic view of the world is certainly flawed, the beginning of the road to salvation starts by peeling away the layers of the self, not the layers of the world's problems. "It is not a matter of discovering remedies and of resolving problems." Capps writes. "Rather it is necessary that men and women come to a radically different understanding of themselves."¹¹¹ Clearly, Moltmann and Merton differ on this point: even

¹⁰⁷ Donald Capps, Agents of Hope: A Pastoral Psychology (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 6.

¹⁰⁸ Walter Capps, Hope against Hope, 160-161.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 160.

¹¹⁰ AJTM, 332.

¹¹¹ Walter Capps, Hope Against Hope, 125.

though both are concerned about the transformation of external and internal structures, Merton clearly would err on the side of inner consciousness.

In "Peace: Christian Duties and Responsibilities," Merton constructed his argument within an apocalyptic setting with a view to mapping out the course of future events. He proposed a subjective examination of conscience by each reader. He writes that we live in an apocalyptic time.

In their nakedness, they reveal to us our own selves as men whose lot it is to live in the time of a possibly ultimate decision. In a word, the end of the world is quite really and literally up to us and to our immediate descendants, if any. And this, I might venture to suggest, is more "apocalyptic" than anything our fathers discovered in the Revelations of St. John.¹¹²

In "Christian Action in World Crisis" Merton adopted the apocalyptic image of the seven-headed beast to symbolize a symbol of a sinister force emerging from collective humanity. There are many-crowned and many-headed monsters rising on all sides out of the deep and we do not understand them. We panic at their sight even though they may not come to life and can be mere illusions.¹¹³ Merton concludes: "The enemy is in all of us. The enemy is war itself and the root of war is hatred, fear, selfishness, lust."¹¹⁴

2. Contributing to Transcultural Consciousness

Merton's transcultural consciousness is fully developed in his provocative essay "Final Integration: Toward a 'Monastic Therapy'."¹¹⁵ This is in effect a monastic and theological commentary on A. Reza Arasteh's Final Integration in the Adult Personality, a work which draws upon and critiques the psychoanalytic literature on identity formation especially in the light of Buddhism, Taoism, and Persian Sufism. "Final

¹¹² NA, 13.

¹¹³ Ibid., 219.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 220.

¹¹⁵ CWA, 219–231.

Integration” is Arasteh’s term, not for the limited cure that results from adaptation to society and may take the form of a “useful” role in society, but for a far more radical and complete cure: “the final and complete maturing of the human psyche on a transcultural level.”¹¹⁶ In Merton’s view, final integration is a state of transcultural maturity far beyond mere social adjustment.

The man who is “fully born” has an entirely “inner experience of life.” He apprehends his life fully and from an inner ground that is at once more universal than the empirical ego and yet entirely his own. He is in a certain sense “cosmic” and “universal man.” He has attained a deeper, fuller identity than that of his limited ego-self which is only a fragment of his being.¹¹⁷

William M. Thompson explains why Merton’s transcultural consciousness is unique and can contribute to global consciousness. First, in keeping with his own view of the monk and solitary as one who took a risk “to explore, to risk, to abandon himself sagaciously to untried possibilities.”¹¹⁸ Merton saw himself as providing a model for a new global awareness.¹¹⁹

If I can unite in myself the thought and the devotion of Eastern and Western Christendoms, the Greek and Latin Fathers, the Russians with the Spanish mystics, I can prepare in myself the reunion of divided Christians. From that secret and unspoken unity in myself can eventually come a visible and manifest unity of all Christians. If we want to bring together what is divided, we can not do so by imposing one division upon the other or absorbing one division into the other. But if we do this, the union is not Christian. It is political and doomed to further conflict. We must contain all divided worlds in ourselves and transcend them in Christ.¹²⁰

Secondly, in elaborating his transcultural consciousness, Merton draws upon Karl

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 222.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 225.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 258.

¹¹⁹ William Thompson, “Merton’s Contribution to a Transcultural Consciousness,” in Thomas Merton: Pilgrim in Process, ed. by Donald Grayston and Michael W. Higgins (Toronto: Griffin House, 1983), 149.

¹²⁰ CGB, 21. Paper back edition.

Rahner's thesis of the diaspora situation of contemporary Christianity. This view holds that Christianity is concurrently selling out its western forms and moving towards a pattern of transculturalization. The collective consciousness Merton was attempting to fashion was not just another form of pseudo-Christian imperialism.¹²¹

Thirdly, even while creating this new vision, Merton was true to Christian orthodoxy.¹²² In this regard, William Thompson claims that we in the Christian West can draw several insights from this vision, since Merton's idea grew out of his own genuine Western experience, not an idea imported from the East.¹²³

To characterize Merton's new vision, Thompson draws upon Eric Weil's incisive understanding of the nature of breakthrough in history. According to Eric Weil, a breakthrough will only occur when it is realized that the old way has led to a dead end.¹²⁴ For Weil a genuine breakthrough continues the authentic values of the past rather than repealing them, because it builds on a present consensus with the past. Furthermore, "Breakthroughs are never total ruptures with the past; accommodation is not a sin but a characteristic of breakthrough that changes the outlook of humanity or great parts of it."¹²⁵

Thompson argues that if Merton's transcultural consciousness stems from his uniquely *Christian* experience, then this ground breaking principle is not only relevant, but a real possibility to all Christians.¹²⁶

Thompson also analyzes Merton's presentation of final integration. Merton's

¹²¹ William Thompson, "Merton's Contribution," *op. cit.* 149-150.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 150.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 151.

¹²⁴ Eric Weil, "What Is a Breakthrough in History?" *Daedalus* 104 (1975) 26-30. Quotation from William Thompson, "Merton's Contribution To a Transcultural Consciousness," 151.

¹²⁵ William Thompson, "Merton's Contribution to a Transcultural Consciousness," 151.

¹²⁶ *Idem.*, author's emphasis.

transcultural maturity is not just a “syncretistic mindset,” on the order of the one possessing universal knowledge.¹²⁷ Merton has conceived of a person with such self-confidence, such calm, such detachment, that the value of each person and culture is recognized and sustained.¹²⁸ In Merton’s own words:

He is in a certain sense identified with everybody ... “He has embraced all of life ... He has experienced qualities of every type of life” ... With this view of life, he is able to bring perspective, liberty, and spontaneity into the lives of others.¹²⁹

Accordingly the

task of the solitary person and the hermit is to realize within himself, in a very special way, a universal consciousness and to contribute this, to feed this back insofar as he can, into the communal consciousness which is necessarily more involved in localized consciousness, and in such a way that there is a dialectical development toward a more universal consciousness.¹³⁰

In this connection, Robert Inchausti’s comment is very much on the mark:

“Thomas Merton was not a spokesman for any particular group, cause, or movement, but a critic of any and all manifestations of bad faith: the harbinger of a still yet to be realized personalist counterculture.”¹³¹

D. Hope as a Socio-Political Dynamic

At the end of his life, eschatological themes had moved ever closer to the core of Merton’s thought. Far from being a dour prophet warning that the end is near, however, Merton continued to hold to his faith and hope in the Risen Christ. Gordon Zahn remarks that Merton “never seems to have lost his persistent hope and patient assurance that whatever promise there was that a world of peace and justice might someday be achieved

¹²⁷ Ibid., 153.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 153-154.

¹²⁹ CWA, 225-226.

¹³⁰ Preview to the Asian Journey, 69-70.

¹³¹ Robert Inchausti, Thomas Merton’s American Prophecy, 4-5.

lay in the perfection and ultimate fulfillment of the Christian message.”¹³² Merton does in fact observe:

In a time of drastic change one can be too preoccupied with what is ending or too obsessed with what seems to be beginning. In either case one loses touch with the present and its obscure but dynamic possibilities. What really matters is openness, readiness, attention, courage to face risk. You do not need to know precisely what is happening, or exactly where it is all going. What you need is to recognize the possibilities and challenges offered by the present moment, and to embrace them with courage, faith and hope.¹³³

Merton delineated three emphases for Christian social action: the human, distinct from his utility in the means of production; the personal value, the unknowable, spiritual aspect of one’s nature that results in positive action; and an “emphasis on wisdom and love—a sapiential view of society is less activist, more contemplative; it enables men and institutions to see life in its wholeness, with stability and purpose.”¹³⁴ Merton, Gordon Zahn rightly perceived, was always sensitive and committed to the eschatological implications of specific social issues.¹³⁵

On the strength of the foregoing observations, this section will examine Merton’s interpretation of Christian hope for social analysis. Hope and eschatological awareness assume a major role in all areas of his socio-political and cultural analysis. The topics that call for specific examination here are: war, racism, violence, social transformation, monastic renewal and ecclesiastical renewal.

1. Against War

From very early, Merton was committed to pacifism. At Columbia, he took the Oxford pledge never to participate in any war. After converting to Catholicism in 1938,

¹³²Gorden Zahn, “Merton on Peace,” in Thomas Merton: Pilgrim in Progress; edited by Donald Grayston and Michael W. Higgins. Toronto: Griffin House, 146.

¹³³ CGB, 208. Paper back edition.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 83.

¹³⁵ Gordon Zahn, “Merton on Peace,” in Thomas Merton: Pilgrim in Progress, 138.

he became aware of St. Augustine's idea of a "just-war" theory. He criticized that theory, however, saying Augustine was "the Father of all modern Christian thought on war." He rejected this, reverting to the eschatological doctrine of the New Testament and the early Fathers, which questioned any Christian's involvement in any war.¹³⁶ In fact, according to David W. Givney, while Merton never formulated a tightly constructed, fully developed treatise, his writings offer a unified outlook -- more exactly, a way of nonviolence -- based upon his critique of war and search for peace.¹³⁷ According to Patrick F. O'Connell:

One of the most significant but perhaps least noticed and appreciated aspects of Merton's spirituality, particularly as it relates to peacemaking, is his perception that the Kingdom of God has, in a very real sense, already been made present in Christ ... Merton's nonviolence is intimately bound up with what may be called his realized eschatology.¹³⁸

Merton's thoughts on war and peace have their foundation in the hope of the Messiah in both the Hebrew Scriptures as well as in the New Testament. Merton extrapolates that the Old Testament prophets anticipated the coming of the Messiah as the "Prince of Peace" (Is 9: 6). The messianic kingdom was to be a kingdom of peace (Hos 2: 18-20) where all are to live in peace with one another (Is 54:13).¹³⁹ Christians, according to Merton, accept Christ as a Prince of Peace whose coming was foretold in the Old Testament.¹⁴⁰ In addition, because "Christ died out of love for all men, in order to live in all men, all were henceforth 'one in Christ' (Gal 3:28) and Christ Himself was their peace. his Spirit kept them united in supernatural love (Eph 4:3)." The early followers of the risen Savior therefore believed "the Christian ... has the obligation to treat every other

¹³⁶ SD, 134-151, especially 145.

¹³⁷ David W. Givney. The Social Thought of Thomas Merton : The Way of Nonviolence and Peace for the Future (Chicago: Franciscan Herald, 1983), 45.

¹³⁸ Patrick F. O'Connell. "Merton and Peacemaking." Living Prayer 21 (6, 1988), 38.

¹³⁹ SD, 125-126.

¹⁴⁰ Idem.

man as Christ Himself, respecting his neighbor's life as if it were the life of Christ, his rights as if they were the rights of Christ."¹⁴¹

This imperative, Merton noted, applied even if that neighbor proved to be repugnant and evil. Rather than condemning one's neighbor, the disciple of Christ has an "obligation to be patient, and to seek his enemy's highest spiritual interests."¹⁴² For Merton early Christian love of one's enemies was more than a moral responsibility, it was "an expression of eschatological faith in the realization of the messianic promises and hence a witness to an entirely new dimension in man's life."¹⁴³ Thus, according to Merton, Christian peace "was an eschatological gift of the risen Christ (John 20: 19)"¹⁴⁴ and

could not be achieved by any ethical or political program. It was given with the supreme gift of the Holy Spirit, making men spiritual and uniting them to the "mystical" Body of Christ. Christian peace is in fact a fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5: 22) and a sign of the Divine Presence in the world.¹⁴⁵

Merton does not doubt that the attitude of the early Christians toward war and peace was essentially eschatological.¹⁴⁶ We are not fighting to obtain a kingdom. because it is already present among us. Merton proclaims that "the Messianic kingdom has come and bears witness to the presence of the *Kyrios Pantocrator* in mystery, even in the mystery of the conflicts and turmoil of the world."¹⁴⁷

Merton found evidence of the early Christians' non-violence in the Book of the Apocalypse. For him this New Testament book explicitly presents the eschatological

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 127.

¹⁴² Idem.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 127.

¹⁴⁴ Idem.

¹⁴⁵ Idem.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 129.

¹⁴⁷ Idem.

view of peace in “mysterious and symbolic language the critical struggle of the nascent Church with the powers of the world...”¹⁴⁸ The imagery in Revelation characterizes this battle as “definitive and marks the last age of the world ... the final preparation for the manifestation of Christ as Lord of the Universe (the *Parousia*) (Apoc 11: 15–18).”¹⁴⁹ Merton draws out the Kingdom and resurrection implications. “The Kingdom is already present in the world... But the Kingdom is still not fully manifested and remains outwardly powerless. It is a Kingdom of saints and martyrs.”¹⁵⁰

Merton boldly attempts to reinterpret the meaning of Armageddon, originally portrayed as a total and ruthless power struggle in which all world rulers are engaged; and yet Merton sees this in the light of an inner and spiritual dimension which these rulers are incapable of seeing and understanding. The saints are “in the world” and see the inner meaning of these struggles.

They trust in God to work out their destiny and rescue them from their final destruction, the accidents of which are not subject to their control. Hence they pay no attention to the details of the power struggle as such and do not try to influence it or to engage in it, one way or another, even for their own benefit and survival. For they realize that their survival has nothing to do with the exercise of force or ingenuity.¹⁵¹

In the final analysis, Merton sees eschatological hope animating the book of Apocalypse. A recurring theme of Revelation is that

the typical power-structured empire of Babylon (Rome) cannot but be “drunk with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus” (Apoc 17 : 6) and that therefore the saints must “go out from her” and break off all relations with her and her sinful concerns (18: 4 ff.) for “in one hour” is her judgment decided and the smoke of the disaster “shall go up forever and ever” (19 : 3)¹⁵²

¹⁴⁸ Idem.

¹⁴⁹ Idem.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 129-130.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 131.

¹⁵² Ibid., 131 (emphasis added).

2. Against Racism

Hope continued to be a firm dynamic in Merton's various essays on racism, especially his main works on the subject: Seeds of Destruction and Faith and Violence. In SD Merton wrote several "letters to a white liberal." These letters contend that the white liberal was largely responsible for the racial conflict in the United States. They affirm that most white liberals were basically ignorant of the racial situation and became involved in the civil rights movement not so much to help the African-American attain full human rights, but to maintain their own image as a liberal. Merton further held that white liberals distorted the meaning of the movement by implying that African-Americans actually have a place in white society, when most neither wanted nor accepted African-Americans in their own neighbourhood. Merton believed the presence of white liberals at the 1963 civil rights march on Washington hurt African-Americans because it fabricated hope. when, at that moment, there was no place for them in white society.¹⁵³ Merton believed that if there were any hope for a truly positive outcome of the movement, the leadership needed first to be African American and second to be nonviolent. His analysis points to a major obstacle in reconciliation between the races. "What the white South knows, and the white liberal fails to understand," is that true integration would be revolutionary, demanding a huge sacrifice on the part of both whites and African Americans.¹⁵⁴

Merton insisted that "we must dare to pay the dolorous price of change *to grow into a new society*. Nothing else will suffice."¹⁵⁵ The burden of integration, he said, was placed squarely on the shoulders of all Americans, but white Christians in particular.

What the Negro now seeks and expects...from the White Christian is not sermons

¹⁵³ Ibid., 34.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 8.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 9 (original emphasis).

on patience, but a creative and enlightened understanding of his effort to meet the demands of God, in this, his *kairos*. What he expects of us is some indication that we are capable of seeing a little of the vision he has seen, and of sharing his risks and his courage.¹⁵⁶

Merton viewed this time in the country's history as a very real opportunity for the races to close a gap, with God as the bridge between them. He called this time the "providential hour," or *kairos*—God's time. Therefore, the African-American offered the white person a "message of salvation," an opportunity to enter into a "*providential reciprocity willed for us by God.*"¹⁵⁷

According to Givney, a major reason Merton viewed the racial conflict as *kairos* was that "it afforded American society a chance for self-examination and self-evaluation."¹⁵⁸ As with his stance on war, Merton believed that a permanent solution to the race problem in the West—a culture enslaved by materialism—was possible only if there was a widespread change. "a real *metanoia*, within people's hearts."¹⁵⁹

Merton's second book on black/white relations was Faith and Violence (1968), coming in the wake of the 1967 race riots in the United States. The book said the shift from the nonviolent to the violent "Black Power" movement occurred because integration was a solid, irrefutable theory which was completely irrelevant to the majority of Americans, both African-American and white. Thus nonviolence both "as a tactic and as a mystique has been largely rejected as irrelevant by the American Negro."¹⁶⁰ Many African-Americans began to trade the nonviolent practice of Martin Luther King for the simpler and more effective and meaningful message of Malcolm X and the Black Power movement. Merton agreed in essence with the widely-criticized statement by H. Rap

¹⁵⁶ Ibid. 65-66.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid. 64 (original emphasis).

¹⁵⁸ David W. Givney, The Social Thought of Thomas Merton, 89.

¹⁵⁹ Idem.

¹⁶⁰ FV, 121.

Brown: "Violence is as American as cherry pie,"¹⁶¹ indicting America as a culture dripping with violence.

Merton summarized the goals of the African-American Power movement thus: 1) to forge a new African-American identity; 2) to remove the shackles of the white liberals' self-serving goals of integration; and 3) to state clearly that the African-Americans wanted to gain freedom on their own terms.¹⁶²

The real point of the African-American Power movement was to gain political power by their own efforts; to exert real influence in the community in which they lived; and to be allowed a level playing field economically. Merton quotes Floyd McKissick, who said, "[Black Power is]...a drive to mobilize the black communities of this country in a monumental effort to remove the basic causes of alienation, frustration, despair, low self-esteem and hopelessness."

The media, however, tended to downplay this moderate wing of the African-American Power movement in favor of the more flamboyant images provided by the more radical wing. The Black Power Movement, Merton proposed, was seen as part of "a ... world movement of refusal and rejection of the value system we call Western culture. It is therefore at least implicitly critical of Christianity as white man's religion."¹⁶³ Because of their commitment to Christ, Christians are obliged to be peacemakers wherever they find themselves. "But merely to demand support and obedience to an established disorder which is essentially violent...will not qualify as 'peace-making,'" Merton wrote.¹⁶⁴

Merton thought the only real hope was to extract the evil root of violence—"hatred, poison, cruelty and greed which are part of the system itself." The white

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 123.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 124.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 128.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 129.

Christian's burden, then, was to identify the cause of injustice, the effect of which is violence.¹⁶⁵

3. Against Violence

The essay "Toward a Theology of Resistance" maintained that contemporary theology ought to meet the felt needs of the culture, and, in a violent culture—one "nourished on a steady diet of brutal mythology"¹⁶⁶—theology ought to focus on the issue of violence. This mythology "simply legalizes the use of force by big criminals against little criminals—whose small-scale criminality is largely caused by the large-scale injustice under which they live—only perpetuates the disorder."¹⁶⁷

Merton censures this mythology of force, which has as its chronicler the mass media. Bringing a daily dose of violence to the nation's doorstep—"If it bleeds, it leads"—the media necessarily could not raise non-violence as a viable solution to social problems, because it contradicts the bedrock upon which the culture is based.¹⁶⁸ Merton charges that much of the most potent kind of violence today is not crimes of passion, but the dispassionate white-collar crime, "*the systematically organized bureaucratic and technological destruction of man.*"¹⁶⁹ The real problem, then, is not the individual murderer, but the corporate murderers, those who profit from the big business of death and genocide. According to Merton, this modern version of violence seems to be "more innocent and effective..." because it makes invisible the face of murder, and replaces it with a statistic on paper.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁵ Idem.

¹⁶⁶ FV, 3.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 4.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 35.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 6 (emphasis original).

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 6 - 7.

Modern technological mass murder...is abstract, corporate, businesslike, cool, free of guilt-feelings and therefore a thousand times more deadly and effective than the eruption of violence out of individual hate.¹⁷¹

In pursuing his own solution to all issues involving violence, Merton proposed non-violence not as a way of *avoiding* conflict but as a particular technique and positive force for *dealing* with conflict.

Inferentially, the aim of Christian nonviolence is the “healing and reconciliation of man with himself, man the person and man the human family.”¹⁷² Hence, as a Christian monk Merton was concerned to repair the disunity which exists in the world and help heal the wounds of violence and division. There was only one way of accomplishing this task, according to James Baker, who summarizes the Merton agenda in terms that the only way to restore unity to American and world affairs was through nonviolent protest against injustice and war.¹⁷³

Nor did Merton overlook an opportunity to state the importance of hope for the nonviolent resister. He argues that there are sound possibilities in everyone and that love and grace have the power to release those possibilities at the most unexpected moments. There are two basic sources of Merton’s optimism about these possibilities: the first is God’s grace and love, and the second is the innate goodness of humankind.

Therefore, Merton says:

if he has hopes that God will grant peace to the world, it is because he also trusts that... there is in man a potentiality for peace and order which can be realized, provided the right conditions are there. The Christian will do his part in creating these conditions by preferring love and trust to hate and suspiciousness.¹⁷⁴

Merton’s sense of innate goodness of humankind was shared by Pope John XXIII and

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 7.

¹⁷² Ibid., 15.

¹⁷³ James Baker, Thomas Merton : Social Critic, 115.

¹⁷⁴ NA., 215.

Gandhi:

...Gandhi cannot however be understood unless we remember his basic optimism about human nature. He believed that in the hidden depths of our being...we are more truly nonviolent than violent. He believed that love is more natural to us than hatred. That "truth is the law of our being."¹⁷⁵

However, Merton cautioned that "this 'hope in man' must not be naïve. But experience itself has shown ... how much an attitude of simplicity and openness can do to break down barriers of suspicion that had divided men for centuries."¹⁷⁶

Merton believed the motivation for Christian nonviolence is our sure hope of eternal life found in the Gospel. Therefore, he often stated that Christian non-violence was nothing,

...if not first of all a formal profession of faith in the Gospel message that the kingdom has been established and that the Lord of truth is indeed risen and reigning over his kingdom, defending the deepest values of those who dwell in it.¹⁷⁷

As this analysis has shown, "we live in a time of eschatological struggle, facing a fierce combat which marshals all the forces of evil and darkness against the still invisible truth, yet this combat is already decided by the victory of Christ over death and over sin."¹⁷⁸ Furthermore, Merton believes that God is at work in history, not just in the past on the cross, but now in our struggles. Merton concurs with Julian of Norwich, who said, "All manner of thing shall be well."¹⁷⁹

E. Summary

This chapter has explored a synthesis of Merton's understanding of hope. First, hope was examined as a theological reality. Merton's explicit theological foundation for

¹⁷⁵ CGB, 85. Paper back edition.

¹⁷⁶ Idem.

¹⁷⁷ FV, 19.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid, 18.

¹⁷⁹ CGB, 211. Paper back edition.

hope is the triune God. His writings invariably identify God as the source of hope. He clearly differentiates between genuine Christian hope based on God and false hope based on naïve optimism and human calculation.

Secondly, hope was presented as a philosophical actuality. At its most basic level, hope was examined as a metaphysical premise. Hope was further explored as an epistemological factor in so far as it functions as the underlying criterion for and validation for truth. Hope was further considered as a psychological phenomenon. For Merton, hope serves as a psychological imperative for experiencing the authentic life. Finally Merton's use of social analysis was explored. Hope and eschatological awareness play a central role in all areas of his socio-political and cultural analysis.

CHAPTER V: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This final chapter provides an opportunity to offer a summary and conclusion. This will be done (1) by revisiting the methodology of the dissertation; (2) by articulating several evaluative perspectives on Merton's theology of hope; (3) by identifying several defining viewpoints on hope from his autobiography; and (4) by offering an illustrative Merton reflection and prayer on hope.

(1) The purpose of this dissertation has been to explore Thomas Merton's contribution to the theology of hope. An introduction to the theology of hope examined its major academic exponents: Pannenberg, Moltmann and Metz.

Exploring the theology of hope in the writings (published to date) of Thomas Merton, a threefold methodology was used. A diachronic study of all the Merton works followed a taxonomy of three stages.

1. 1915-1954: Signs of an Implicit Hope
2. 1955-1959: Emergence of an Explicit Theology of Hope
3. 1960-1968: Apogee of Merton's Gestalt of Hope

An analytical exploration addressed his sources from the correlatives of hope, trust, confidence and eschatology. A systematic approach to the topic dictated an investigation into the theological reality, philosophical actuality, psychological phenomenon, and socio-political dynamic of hope.

(2) Several concluding evaluative perspectives are in order. Even though he did not create an intentional philosophy or theology of hope, Merton's reflections on hope are compelling, consistent, broad-ranging, and incisive. His construal of hope addresses concerns of spirituality, sociopolitical critique, monastic and ecclesiastical renewal and a dialogical existentialism.

The fundamental premise of Merton's theology of hope was his approach to the topic as spiritual experience. This premise was grounded in the conviction that the horizon for discovering God is defined neither by the present time nor the immediate

space.¹ He saw hope as an unremitting, life-committing search for “the greater God” — the awareness of the transcendent One who cannot be defined by the present and by experience. The same premise is brought to bear on the search for the true self, since Christian hope is related to the future, and cannot make sense apart from the present condition. Hope is therefore dialectical. This means, for Merton, that hope is rooted in the present, provides the key to the future and proceeds on the perceived nearness of God in the here and now.² The proximity of the hidden God and of his Spirit in the present underscores the relationship between contemplation and hope. Contemplation, actualized in an awareness of God’s power now and presence here, energizes Christian hope in this world. For Merton, then, contemplation is a foretaste of the divine victory of life over death.

Nor is hope for Merton a passive waiting. It is the risk-filled positive trust which calls for a more authentic embodiment of God in the future.³ In Contemplative Prayer hope strives for a playful conquest of fear and dread, in filial openness to a heavenly Father whose invitation to walk confidently forward comes in the form of a call which speaks to “the inner ear.” even when no voice or word is heard.

As for Merton’s sociopolitical critique, hope urges the conviction that God’s fulfillment of purpose cannot be experienced by our partial, fragmented glimpses of reality. Christian confidence is more than a static sense of euphoria, an indefectible assurance that precludes anguish or sense of tragedy. Even more. Christian confidence is a great expectation of ultimate victory that transcends tragedy. Hope thus is an inner enlightenment achieved in prayerfulness, impelling us to look for the authentic present in the world, the truth in obscurity, the one in multiplicities, the all-powerful in the midst of weakness, the absolute in the midst of uncertainties. This hope is also resolute

¹ RU, 5.

² CGB, 184.

³ NSC, 104.

commitment to pursue and possess the authentic, the real, the enduring, amid our faltering efforts to find assurance about life's ultimate meaning.⁴ This hope is never more truly hope than when we are put to the test by a seeming hopelessness. In this search Merton takes his cue from Paul moving from faith to faith (Rom 1:17), hoping against hope (Rom 4:18).

As for Christian hope within the monastic life, Merton explains that the monk experiences the kingdom of promise as already fulfilled.

Monastic "contemplation" is not merely reposeful consideration of eternal verities but a grasp of the whole content of revelation, albeit obscurely, in the deep experience of a fully lived faith.⁵

Thus, monastic contemplation, as the experience of eschatological promise, already gives Christian hope a dimension of realization. This not only recognizes that God is the beyond in our midst, but also the more in our fullest realization, the end beyond our best achievement.

Drawn by the awareness of future possibilities in the present moment, hope is an adventure of the total, concrete person engaged in search of its source and fullest fulfillment in God. God's eschatologically victorious grace is already at work in our midst. In the parousia, the mystery hidden from the learned and the proud but revealed to God's little ones, will be made manifest for all to see and experience. Therefore, one who is rooted in hope finds no rest until this eschatological expectation is realized.

In his speculations about the future Merton drew persistently upon Christian eschatology. His criticism of liberal utopianism and false optimism in the 60s was an urgent call for social change not based upon economic or materialistic exigencies, or solely upon humanistic concerns. His challenge to Christians to contemplate and pursue social change was based on Christian principles of action and the eschatological thrust of

⁴ FV, 26.

⁵ CWA, 188.

hope. In his incisive words, eschatology “is not the last gasp of exhausted possibilities but the first taste of all that is beyond conceiving as actual.”⁶

On many occasions, moved by a vision of the just society as he conceived it, he drafted descriptions of hope from the perspective and in process of personal and cosmic fulfillment.⁷ One cannot conceive a perfect society, he insisted, except in connection with the parousia, the coming of Christ and the establishment of God’s reign. Hence, anything he himself might propose in his writings would be provisional. Such an eschatological hope moves the Christian to transcend earthly political boundaries and strive for transcultural integration.

In the final analysis, Merton’s social thought drew upon the best elements of his contemplative spirituality and combined them with the social dimension of life in the world. To achieve this blend, Merton clung to a dynamic and broad-ranging world-view. He opposed any concept of a static mode of a sacred and hierarchical cosmos, in which all things are decided beforehand or locked in a fixed condition. He rejected a rigid dualism in human life or of world-view, and encouraged a penetrating acceptance, on the one hand, of change, diversity, and development, and on the other, of freedom, choice and fallibility. Assenting to such a world-view makes it easier to appreciate Merton’s view of social change. To that end, Merton believed that Christians today must help direct and shape the force of change in the modern world. The Christian cannot afford to let the directional force of society depend upon a partial, transitory, or self-serving ideology. The greatest threat to accomplishing this task he labeled “moral passivity...the most terrible danger of our time.” In this process, Merton positions himself in the role of a prophet, “one whose whole life is a living witness of the providential action of God in the world.”⁸

⁶ RU, 75.

⁷ Monk and Poet, 121.

⁸ SJ, 11. Merton’s definition of prophecy is “not to predict, but to seize upon reality in its moment of highest expectation and tension toward the new” (LETM, 373). The threefold dimensions of

Unlike the hope construal of Pannenberg, Moltmann and Metz, Merton's theology of hope is not organically developed, nor does it build upon an understructure of logical thought, nor conform to an explicit method. Accordingly hope never emerges as a doctrinal bloc in his theological work. It is not formally predictable, applied or incorporated into a formal system of thought. It is neither the process nor the product of formal academic elaboration. It is not dependent upon or related to any set group of philosophical thinkers, or indeed upon any single philosophical school. Merton's theology of hope cannot therefore be described as a coherent philosophy or an explicit theological gestalt. It never became for him a formal academic inquiry. In Merton hope never positions itself as the primary subject, the overarching object, or the overriding methodology.

It emerges from an intuitive range of insights. It embodies a coherent wisdom that comes from a gifted mind, noteworthy for its poetic intuitions, determined its logical capacities. Merton's excursions into the theology of hope move along vistas of eschatology, kairos, kingdom of God, trust and confidence and their antitheses: dread, fear and despair. While he elaborates these several themes, he does not call upon a predictable substratum of hope, nor does he play the role of professional theologian or exegete of hope.

Merton's contribution to the theology of hope may not be consciously substantive, yet it is significant. It may not be fully or evenly developed, it is recognizable. He utilizes the broad lexicon of hope and, in addition to the traditional issues, he addresses the major contemporary concerns. His passionate commitment to hope finds expression mainly in his essays, correspondence and eschatological poems, but his other writings do not neglect this prevailing interest. The full range of his explorations on hope qualify as a significant contribution to the theology of hope in the last third quarter of the twentieth

"expectation," "tension," and "toward the new" clearly indicate Merton's view of prophesy in function of hope.

century. In any assessment of the theology of that period a notable body of his work must be acknowledged as engaging seriously and substantively the issues that the academic theologies of hope have addressed and will continue to address.

What made Merton's theology of hope unique was its various strands: its biographical/ autobiographical features, its monastic perspectives, its mystical dimensions, its literary correlations, its eschatological dynamics, its prophetic dialogue with the world.

Embedded as it is in the autobiographical or biographical, Merton's theology of hope reflected his own search for God and his prophetic stance towards the ills of the world as he knew them. Merton found in hope an assuring, enthusiastic anticipation of realities on the cusp of realization. His Catholicism, concretized by his own monastic, eremitic and contemplative life-style, provided a psychological stance, but also at a deeper level a prayerful liturgical orientation toward God and the world. One who lacks a kindred spirit of prayer will find it hard to fully grasp Merton's gestalt of hope. Because he was called to a life of contemplation, Merton's prayer was not just a round of formulas or a routine of liturgical observances. Being present to God through an in-depth process of contemplation also meant wrestling with God's seeming absence. Merton's fascination for John of the Cross suggests that he knew the many densities of the Dark Night, how in these most trying of contemplative moments, despair becomes almost as real as the hope that sustains the prayer.

Merton also understood what the existentialists, like Camus, spoke of when they contemplated and attempted to articulate the absurd. Thus, an appreciation of Merton's theology of hope, for all its pronounced supramundane dimension, does not defy an honest effort.

Most of all, Merton fully believed that the life of the Risen Lord is holding the whole of creation intact, and yet the whole of creation is still groaning for final fulfillment, as Paul indicated in Rom. 8:22. Being present to God not only meant for

Merton being present to himself but to the world. Thus, his hope called him to dialogue with the world. His hope gave him the voice of a prophet: it urged him to shed all the illusions we tend to wrap ourselves in, even those that his own community and his own church were inclined to embrace.

Therefore, Merton's theology of hope combines the most personal with the theological, bridging the gap that academic theology has suffered between the scholarly and the pastoral, the academic and the contemplative. Though one can presume that the professional theologians know in their marrow what it means to wrestle with despair, except for Moltmann one cannot witness them doing that in their very cerebral, very academic theologies of hope.⁹

Merton also demonstrates that the personal is never divorced from socio-political engagement. He therefore also demonstrates that any theology of hope worth its name addresses the agony and defeat of the world. But because of his strong eschatological thrust which he shares with the other theologians of hope, Merton's engagement is also tempered by historical disengagement. He stands with Moltmann and Metz as an articulate prophet for his century and after. But what accounts further for Merton's original contribution to the intentional theology of hope is that his socio-political critique is not only sustained by an acute biblically-based social analysis, but also by a fervent life of contemplation. He, more than any other theologian of hope, has wagered on the power of prayer — contemplative, monastic, eremitic, and liturgical — to call forth here and now the eschatological reality of the resurrection. One misses the significance of Merton's theologizing on hope if this is not recognized as being grounded on a commitment to and experience of prayer.

All the theologians of hope take their stand for change on the historical process. But as his poetry demonstrates, Merton also evokes out a marked aesthetic quality about hope. Hope is not only possessed in the act of eager anticipation, but also in its capacity

⁹ Jürgen Moltmann, The Experience of God, London: SCM, 1980.

to enchant, to elate, to animate. Hope becomes an enlivening experience when it gladdens the heart, quickens the mind, and liberates the spirit from the grimness of despair. Merton's theology of hope actually situates the task of theology within a larger horizon beyond the cerebral where the person not only seeks to know the true and to act upon the good but also to be lured and held captive by the beautiful. As a poet, Merton's lines articulate — sometimes laboriously — his struggles with despair, his own and the world's at large that does not know God's gift of hope. He proclaims passionately that hope is not only true and good, but also beautiful.

While professional purists insist in denying Merton the recognition of a *bona fide* theologian, it can be argued that he has in fact demonstrated how theologizing might be done in the first place, and how theology, as originally conceived, can never be divorced from one's personal and ecclesial life of prayer, of contemplation, of moral-pastoral response to the world. Merton exemplifies what might be designated a theology of whole-hearted integration.

While Merton had of course read some of Karl Rahner's and Teilhard de Chardin's writings, the present writer has not uncovered any evidence to demonstrate that he had ever read any of the writings of the theologians of hope, viz., Pannenberg, Moltmann, or Metz. Two factors may be cited to explain this. As already stated, Merton never aspired to be an academic theologian: the trends in the guild of theologians was never a primary concern. Furthermore, most of the works on the new movement of hope theology began to appear in United States only shortly before Merton's death.

The work of an intuitive theologian is hardly ever dependent on formal research, nor does it typically reflect the scholarly issues and methods that are the stock in trade of the professional theologians. Despite this, there is evidence that Jürgen Moltmann's interest in "meditative knowing" brought him into contact with Merton's Contemplation in A World of Action (1975). The link is clearly the "desire to know in order to

participate.”¹⁰ Moltmann further explored Merton and other Christian mystics in his discussion of the Augustinian concept of “the soul’s ways of meditation on the path to God”¹¹ and the relationship between contemplation and action.¹²

Even if Merton himself neither formally nor consciously entered the realm of the theology of hope, at least one exponent saw in him a kindred spirit. Though not a member of the guild, Merton possessed the qualifications and made his contribution from that perspective.

It should further be noted that Moltmann formally recognizes in Ernesto Cardenal’s powerful *Cantico* an inaugural contribution to a new cosmic spirituality. This new approach prompts Moltmann to remark: “We should rediscover God’s hidden immanence in nature, and revere the divine presence in everything created.”¹³ The readers of this dissertation will recall that Cardenal was a novice under Merton at Gethsemane and continued to be mentored by Merton on his return to South America where he found his poetic voice. The creative theological acuity shared by all three does not testify to Merton’s exposure to, or awareness of, the formal literature of theology of hope. But it does point to an innate giftedness for the art of theology, especially in a new field such as the theology of hope.

In the final analysis, there is a clear and cogent connection between the three premier academic hope theologians’ idea of prolepsis and Thomas Merton’s concept of and commitment to realized eschatology. This point has been made at various points in this thesis. Had Merton studied the hope theologians on their notion of prolepsis, his realized eschatology would have been more sharply delineated. But Merton, the poet and

¹⁰ Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God*, San Francisco: Harper & Rowe, 1985, 32.

¹¹ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation*, 92, 324.

¹² *Ibid.*, 334, 335. Here Moltmann includes Merton’s two major works on Zen to present this idea: *Zen and Birds of Appetite* (1968) and *Mystics and Zen Masters* (1967).

¹³ Jürgen Moltmann, *God for a Secular Society*, 63. See also 22, 105-106, 266, n. 18, 270, n. 23.

essayist, was not interested in carrying out a theological agenda as much as he was committed to proclaiming the kingdom of God as present, here and now. Like the Old Testament prophets, Merton sees and proclaims this vision of the future—grounded in its present reality. Significantly, his description of contemplation highlights seeing the present reality of the future.

Contemplation cannot construct a new world by itself. Contemplation does not feed the hungry; it does not clothe the naked... and it does not return the sinner to peace, truth, and union with God. But without contemplation, we cannot see what we do in the apostolate. Without contemplation, we cannot understand the significance of the world in which we must act.¹⁴

(3) The autobiographical and biographical perspective is never remote from Merton's point of view. A key example will suffice here.

The SSM traces Merton's life-story from birth on "the last day of January 1915" to the taking of "my solemn vow, last spring, on the Feast of St. Joseph [March 19], in the thirty-third year of my age [1948]." The journey had begun in a world wavering between the throes of violence and an invitation to hope, a

world [that] was the picture of Hell, full of men like myself, loving God and yet hating Him; born to love Him, living instead in fear and *hopeless* self-contradictory hungers.¹⁵

The journey reaches a defining spiritual moment but not without the convergence of anguish and assurance that are the formula for hope.

It seemed to me that You were almost asking me to give up all my *aspirations* for solitude and for a contemplative life...

By the time I made my vows, I decided that I was no longer sure what a contemplative was....

The months have gone by, and You have not lessened any of these *desires*. but You have given me peace...

...I no longer *desire* to see anything that implies a distance between You

¹⁴ Lawrence S. Cunningham, Thomas Merton & the Monastic Vision. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1999) 209.

¹⁵ SSM, 3 (emphasis added).

and me...

That is the only reason why I *desire* solitude...

...Now my sorrow is over, and my joy is about to begin: the joy that rejoices in the deepest sorrow. For I am beginning to understand You have taught me, and have consoled me, and I have begun *again to hope* and learn.¹⁶

The journey had been torturous and tense, filled with anxious days and fretful hours, brimming with faith yet laced with fear, and above all impelled by the touch of mystery that is hope.

(4) In conclusion, the following prayer fittingly summarizes Merton's vision of hope:

My Lord, I have no *hope* but in Your Cross. You, by Your humility, and sufferings and death, have delivered me from all vain *hope*. You have killed the vanity of the present life in Yourself, and have given me all that is eternal in rising from the dead.

... Why should I cherish in my heart a *hope* that devours me — the *hope* for perfect happiness in this life — when such *hope*, doomed to frustration, is nothing but *despair*?

My *hope* is in what the eye has never seen. Therefore, let me not *trust* in visible rewards. My *hope* is in what the heart of man cannot feel. Therefore let me

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 420-422 (emphasis added). Bolstering this significant reflection is a Merton self-description as a hopeful person:

One must choose between people like (Emmanuel) Mounier and people like (Renato) Mori and (Louis) Massinger; between the progressives and optimists, à la (Pierre) Teilhard de Chardin, and the eschatologists. You can't be both. You can't be in every way fashionable. And presently the eschatological view is the least fashionable. But it is more my view and my choice (*DWL*, 4).

To this must be added a statement from his "very dark days":

I still have *hopes* and sometimes strong ones. One must have courage to hope — dare to rouse *hopes* that might be dashed. Yet — not rouse them to such a pitch that they have to become delusions. *Hope* more in God than in a particular fulfillment if that appears to be willed by him (*SS* 352, emphasis added).

And likewise the reflection at end of *CGB* on a poem by George Oppen:

There is the *hope*, there is the world that remakes itself at God's command without consulting us. So the poet, here, does not ask about lies or worry about them. He sees only the world remaking itself in the live seed, and Max can *confidently* take the baby to the window to see the false, glittering buildings, about which some speech will probably come later. (pp. 319-320; emphasis added.)

not trust in the feelings of my heart. My *hope* is in what the hand of man has never touched. Do not let me *trust* what I can grasp between my fingers. Death will loosen my grasp and my vain *hope* will be gone.

Let my *trust* be in Your mercy, not in myself. Let my *hope* be in Your love, not in health, or strength, or ability or human resources.

If I *trust* You, everything else will become, for me, strength, health, and support. Everything will bring me to heaven. If I do not *trust* You, everything will be my destruction.¹⁷

¹⁷ TS, 38-39 (emphasis added). (A comparable prayer is found in SS, 61-62.)

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