

**THOMAS MERTON AS A 'WISE THEOLOGIAN':
AN ENGAGEMENT WITH HANS URS VON BALTHASAR
AND DAVID F. FORD**

By

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ABSTRACT

Helen Louise Tedcastle

‘Thomas Merton as a Wise Theologian.’ An Engagement with Hans Urs von Balthasar and David F. Ford

This thesis examines the question: in what way can Thomas Merton be understood as a wise theologian, through an engagement with Hans Urs von Balthasar and David F. Ford. In chapter one, it is argued that he is a theologian in the patristic sense of uniting knowledge and faith, spirituality and theology. I argue, against Christopher Pramuk’s thesis, that Merton is aligned with Balthasar and eastern orthodox scholars, rather than Karl Rahner. This is grounded on Merton’s strong critique of enlightenment thinking. In chapter two, I argue that Merton’s understanding of man as a ‘microcosm’ and nature as ‘theophany’ resonates strongly with Balthasar but that Merton extends this way of seeing beyond the church. In chapter three, it is suggested that this epistemology emerges in Merton’s poetry and writing. Chapter four concerns Ford’s criteria for a wise polyphonic self and Ford’s own exemplar, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. I argue that Merton can also be regarded as an exemplar of Ford’s model. Chapter five is concerned with Ford’s wisdom-seeking theology, which is contrasted with Balthasar. In conclusion, it is argued that Merton can be regarded as a ‘wise theologian’ in integrating theology with spirituality and practical living.

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THOMAS MERTON AS A ‘WISE THEOLOGIAN’: AN ENGAGEMENT WITH HANS URS VON BALTHASAR AND DAVID F. FORD

Thomas Merton is not generally regarded as a theologian in the academic sense. He was primarily a monk who was a born writer and prolific author. Merton’s quest for radical inner depth and inner searching led him to engage in multiple dialogues with social and political concerns during the last decade of his life. He can be regarded as an ‘exemplar extraordinaire’ of the religious search; someone who managed to combine in his life and writings the twin concerns of contemplation and action. Merton’s contribution to theology and spirituality could be summed up as helping to redefine for Christians what it means to be a Christian in today’s world – a ‘wise theologian’ of the lived experience.

In order to understand who Thomas Merton is and what his influences were, it is necessary to outline a brief biography and select key influences on his thinking. The examples shed light on his way of seeing the spiritual life and his willingness to engage in literary and social criticism in his mature years.

Merton’s biography explodes the popular myth of the monk as someone who is ‘other worldly’ and rather unaware of life as it is experienced by their contemporaries ‘in the world.’¹ He has been described as an ‘extraordinarily complex and complicated man, multifaceted, diverse and variable’² and he described his own life as ‘paradoxical.’³ Indeed,

¹ The image or idealized version of a monk is renounced by Merton in his later work. He notes for example, ‘The contemplative life is unfortunately too often thought of in terms purely of ‘enclosure’ and monks are conceived
²² M. Scott Peck, ‘Introduction’ in Thomas P. McDonnell, ed., *A Thomas Merton Reader* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 1.

with so many publications still in print and new collections being printed,⁴ Merton's influence and impact extends more widely now than it did while he was alive.⁵ Yet it was the central paradox of his monastic vocation which called him again and again to retrieve, examine and interrogate what it means to live as a Christian and as a monk in the monastery and in the world, living out a serious monastic discipline combined with a willingness to learn from all sources.⁶ His writing developed beyond a rigidly sectarian model of the Church, which the young Merton exhibited in the years following his conversion, to respect learning and truth in other persons and traditions. This mirrored the changes in the orientation of the Roman Catholic Church towards the modern world in the 1960s but was foreshadowed in the monastic and patristic sources of Christian wisdom he retrieved and mapped out as a way of living in the world.⁷

Biography

³ Ibid., 16.

⁴ Patricia A. Burton, author of the official Merton bibliography, comments that Merton's written legacy contains over 80 works in over two dozen languages and in a wide variety of genres: journals, poetry, letters, collected meditation, essays. Many of Merton's calligraphies and photographs have also been published. There are over 70 editions of his best-selling autobiography published in sixteen languages as well as a growing number of selections chosen and edited by others. Patricia A. Burton, *More than Silence: A Bibliography of Thomas Merton* (Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, 2008), xiii.

⁵ Paul M. Pearson, PhD Thesis: *The Geography of a Soul: Thomas Merton's Ongoing Spiritual Autobiographical Quest within the Context of the Literary Genre of Autobiography* (London: University of London, 1996), 7. Paul M. Pearson comments on the contribution of Thomas Merton, 'The quantity if not the quality of his work make him the most eloquent monastic writer to date and his effect on monasticism and on spirituality as a whole are impossible to quantify.' (7). It is telling on the continuing impact of Merton that academic studies of the monk number over 300 theses and dissertations. Patricia A. Burton, *More than Silence: A Bibliography of Thomas Merton* (Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, 2008), xi.

⁶ Abbot Timothy Kelly, 'Preface,' in Lawrence S. Cunningham, *Thomas Merton and the Monastic Vision* (Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 1999), ix.

⁷ Ibid., 208.

Detail about his early life is documented in Merton's best-selling autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*,⁸ written whilst still a young monk, encouraged to write by his Abbot, Dom Frederic Dunne. There are also a number of biographies of Merton which expand upon his own account of his life, aspects of which were sometimes glossed over to placate the Trappist censors of the era, although there is evidence that Merton self-censored and wrote in coded terms about his escapades as a student in Cambridge.⁹

In summary, Thomas Merton was born in Prades, France on January 31st 1915, the first-born son of a moderately successful New Zealand-born artist, Owen Merton and an American-born artist mother, Ruth Jenkins. His childhood can best be described as itinerant, leaving France as an infant to live for six years in the United States to escape the ravages of the First World War. After his mother died of cancer when he was six, he followed his father to Bermuda for a year and then in 1925, for three years in France, where he spent an unhappy time at a Lycee in Montauban. He was rescued as he saw it from this school by his father and

⁸ Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (London: SPCK, 1990).

⁹ Merton's biographer Michael Mott suggests that the censorship of the Trappist order as a way of explaining omissions in the account of his life is an oversimplification. Firstly, as a monk, Merton accepted the terms and conditions set by the order for him to write his autobiography. Secondly, in an earlier draft of the manuscript, he considers how to Merton it would seem prudent not to rake up past transgressions in one of the pages on Cambridge: 'There would certainly be no point whatever in embarrassing other people with the revelation of so much cheap sentimentality mixed up with even cheaper sin. And besides, I have been told not to go into all that anyway. So that makes everything much simpler.' Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984; reprint, San Diego, CA: Harvest, 1993), 77. In his later journals, Mott notes that entries were often 'coded' – to be read one way by Merton and another way by others. Perhaps this restraint is redolent of the young Merton's desire not to boast of sins and conquests but to focus on his liberation from sin by fleeing to the monastery. This, Mott comments, is also frequently the case with references to Cambridge in the autobiography and poems. However, an unpublished autobiographical novel, *The Labyrinth*, written in 1939, contained a lost chapter called 'The Party in the Middle of the Night.' Merton's literary agent Naomi Burton Stone recalls these 'lost' pages describing a drunken party in Cambridge in which one of the students agrees to take part in a mock crucifixion. In the drunken chaos, this mock crucifixion of a student came close to being a real one. Was Merton the student who was so nearly crucified? Although there is no direct evidence, Merton's poems and novels related to Cambridge often contain references to crucifixion. Furthermore, Merton's certificate of naturalisation in the USA in 1951 refers to a distinguishing 'scar' on the palm of his right hand. Ibid., 78f. However, Jim Forest notes that Merton's readers in 1948 had to take his word for it that he was guilty of 'unspecified mortal sins' such as fornication or pride, 'more powerful than any explosive.' Jim Forest, *Living with Wisdom, A Life of Thomas Merton*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2008), 33.

in 1928 moved to England to live with his paternal aunt, Maud Grierson Pearce. He enrolled at Ripley Court School in Surrey before entering Oakham public school in 1929. He describes this time as a relatively happy and secure one and where he excelled academically.

However, by the age of sixteen he was an orphan, his father having died of a brain tumour in a London hospital. At the age of eighteen in the autumn of 1933, Merton entered Cambridge on a scholarship to read modern languages. Merton's first year was by his own account a rowdy and boisterous one of drinking, carousing and womanising, the culmination of which was the fathering of an illegitimate child.¹⁰ Subsequently he received a letter from his Guardian, Tom Izod Bennett, advising him to remain with his grandparents in New York that summer and not to return to Cambridge in the autumn. Instead, he enrolled as a sophomore at Columbia University in the autumn of 1934. He continued carousing and drinking at Columbia but at the same time there came a growing academic prowess, burgeoning friendships which were to last the rest of his life and an intellectual interest in Catholicism, which drew him eventually into the Church in 1938.

With a growing sense that he was called to religious life, he abandoned his fledgling research for a doctorate in English Literature and in 1940 he took a job teaching English at St. Bonaventure University in upstate New York. There he applied to but was rejected from the Franciscan Order on the grounds of 'unsuitability' after the Order were informed of his misdemeanours in Cambridge. However, after making an Easter retreat in April 1941 at the Cistercian Abbey of Gethsemani, Kentucky, he applied and was accepted as a postulant. He entered the monastery to live a strictly disciplined and scholarly life on December 10th 1941. There he remained a professed monk for the next twenty seven years, becoming Master of

¹⁰ Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, 84.

Novices, a senior role involving the monastic formation of young men, from 1955 until 1965, when he ‘retired’ to live a hermit life in the grounds of the monastery. He suffered an untimely death by accidental electrocution in Bangkok on December 10th 1968.

Merton’s influences

The roots of Merton’s outlook both spiritually and in literature, can be discerned from his autobiography and other sources confirm this.¹¹ He was the son of artists and he credits his father with having given him a sense of how to look at things.¹² Throughout his life Merton would often be led in new directions by his reading explorations and engagements with a host of interlocutors. Often he would be overtaken by enthusiasms, some of which would be short-lived, while others he would return to again and again, such as Blake, Hopkins, Gandhi and Joyce.¹³

¹¹ William H. Shannon’s balanced and sensitive account of Merton’s life highlights the key influences of Van Doren, Maritain, Gilson and Walsh as well as his meeting with an Indian student Bramchari, who advised him to read Augustine’s *Confessions* and the *Imitation of Christ*, as a way of understanding his Christian heritage. His opinion was that having some grounding in one’s own tradition is essential before embarking on studies of other religions. See William H. Shannon, *Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story* (London: SCM Press, 1993), 84-96.

¹² Merton paints his father in very positive terms as having a ‘vision of the world that was sane, full of balance, full of veneration for structure, for the relations of masses and for all the circumstances that impress an individual identity on each created thing,’ Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 3. Again Merton points to a direct seeing of reality as something which displays the virtues of integrity and wisdom he values and words such as ‘sane’ and ‘full of balance’ would often recur in Merton’s writing when he particularly enthused about a work of art or writing. His mother is portrayed rather less positively (although credited by her son for being an artist) as a, ‘rather slight, thin, sober little person with a serious and somewhat anxious and very sensitive face.’ Ibid., 5. The influence of his parents and their early deaths has been the subject of much scholarly interest, particularly the effect of his mother’s early death on Merton’s attitude to women, in contrast to Merton’s highly positive view of his father, despite the itinerant life he led. For more than one extended period, Owen Merton would leave the young Merton alone in boarding schools or with friends in France and relatives in England, while he went on painting expeditions. In Bermuda, and with the young Merton accompanying him, Owen Merton formed a ‘ménage a trois’ with writer Evelyn Scott and her husband. Thomas became very resentful of Evelyn Scott and led to the Mertons leaving the island. See Robert E. Daggy, ‘Thomas Merton and the Search for Owen Merton’ in Patrick F. O’Connell, ed., *The Vision of Thomas Merton* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2003), 23-41.

¹³ Paul M. Pearson, ‘Sentinels upon the World’s Frontiers: Thomas Merton and Celtic Monasticism’ *The Merton Journal* 21, no.1 (2014): 12.

Merton does present us with pivotal influences in the formation of his thought as well as his conversion to Catholicism in his autobiography: his English professor at Columbia, Mark van Doren; his Philosophy professor, Daniel Walsh; Etienne Gilson and Jacques Maritain.¹⁴ The poetry of William Blake and Gerard Manley Hopkins also feature strongly as influences in the autobiography. They were to remain with him for the rest of his life and will be referred to as influential at key moments in this thesis.

Mark van Doren's teaching made a deep impression on Merton as a student at Columbia and he remained a life-long mentor. According to Merton, van Doren resisted ideological and theoretical approaches to the study of literature, preferring a direct study of the text as literature rather than as history or sociology and encouraging his students through questions designed to elicit independent thought. For Merton, van Doren's appeal lay in his scholastic temperament,¹⁵ 'in the sense that his clear mind looked directly for the quiddities of things and sought being and substance under the cover of accident and appearances.'¹⁶

In addition to poets, Merton describes how he bought the neo-Thomist work, *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*¹⁷ by Etienne Gilson, and how reading it influenced a major shift in his thinking about the Catholic faith and its understanding of God. Merton admitted that before reading Gilson's book, 'I had never had an adequate understanding of what Christians meant by God.'¹⁸

¹⁴ Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 140, 219.

¹⁵ An example of their shared outlook is evident in a preface by van Doren, written for a selected volume of Merton's poetry, 'I believe him (Merton) to be right, that poetry at its best is contemplation – of things and what they signify. Not what they can be made to signify but what they actually do signify, even when nobody knows it. The better the poet the more we are convinced that he has knowledge of this kind and has it humbly.' Mark van Doren, 'Introduction' in Thomas Merton, *Selected Poems of Thomas Merton*, enlarged ed. (New York: New Directions, 1967), xii-xiii.

¹⁶ Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 140.

¹⁷ Ibid., 171.

¹⁸ Ibid., 174.

... And the one big concept I got out of its pages was something that was to revolutionise my whole life. It is all contained in one of those dry, outlandish technical compounds that the scholastic philosophers were so prone to use: the word *aseitas*... This notion made such an impression on me that I made a pencil note at the top of the page: “Aseity of God – God is being per se.”¹⁹

Again, Merton’s autobiography documents his student reading of Thomas Aquinas, guided by a philosophy course led by Daniel Walsh, a lecturer who became another mentor and whose approach influenced Merton to see Catholic philosophy as a unity, rather than a division between the branches of the schools.²⁰ Walsh saw in Merton an outlook which put him among the intellectual descendants of St. Augustine, in the same heritage as Anselm, Bernard, Bonaventure and Duns Scotus – an attitude which is spiritual, mystical, voluntaristic rather than intellectual and speculative, although he learned from Walsh and Maritain, that the schools can complement each other.²¹ This insight was telling and assisted in Merton’s eventual turn to experience and away from scholasticism in writing. Indeed, his only sortie into scholastic theology, *The Ascent to Truth*,²² was deemed by Merton himself to be one of his worst books, exhibiting a dry and laboured style in marked contrast to his later works.²³

¹⁹ Ibid., 172.

²⁰ Ibid. Merton describes the intellectual influence of Walsh: ‘For he like Gilson, had the most rare and admirable virtue of being able to rise above petty differences of schools and systems and seeing Catholic philosophy in its wholeness, in its variegated unity and in its true Catholicity. ... He avoided the evil of narrowing and restricting Catholic theology and philosophy to a single school, to a single attitude, a single system,’ (220).

²¹ Shannon, *Silent Lamp*, 95. George Kilcourse makes a similar point in locating the influence of the neo-Thomism of Gilson and Walsh in Merton’s thinking, as well as the Franciscan, Duns Scotus, whose epistemology aimed to seek knowledge and therefore truth, through dialogue and who saw in personhood, rather than rational nature, the image and likeness of God. ‘This habit of dialogue and reconciling diverse understandings would work into the marrow of Merton’s own catholicity.’ See George Kilcourse, *Ace of Freedoms, Thomas Merton’s Christ* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame press, 1993) 31. While it is the case that Merton read Duns Scotus enthusiastically as borne out in, Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (San Diego, CA: Harvest, 1981), he fades in prominence from Merton’s writing after this book.

²² Thomas Merton, *The Ascent to Truth* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1951; reprint ed., Tunbridge Wells: Burns and Oates, 1991). Shannon explains that *The Ascent to Truth* bore all the hallmarks of Merton’s formation in seventeenth century scholasticism, the formal philosophy of the Catholic Church only finally discarded at Vatican II. It is a form of deductive reasoning which sets up a thesis, the latter of which is accepted as true. It then falls to the theologian to defend the thesis as true by reason, using scripture and the fathers as proofs, while refuting the errors of ‘adversaries.’ Shannon, himself a Catholic priest formed in the pre-Vatican II theology,

Another key influence on Merton's developing religious outlook was Jacques Maritain, a Thomist philosopher who was concerned to integrate the schools of Aquinas and Augustine into his own thinking. Maritain had a deep and long-lasting influence on Merton from student days until his death in 1968.²⁴ Particularly influential is his philosophy of beauty and art and in his Master's thesis Merton used Maritain's philosophy as a lens through which to view William Blake. The influences of Walsh, as in Gilson and later Maritain, conveyed to Merton that catholicity was found in its wholeness, so that apparently differing theologies could be studied side by side, avoiding a singular interpretation or narrow systemisation.²⁵

The autobiography also points us towards firm literary and poetic influences, foremost among them being the poet William Blake, a presence in Merton's life from boyhood.²⁶ As a religious non-conformist, Blake represented for Merton a quality of mind that neither saw the world through rose-tinted glasses nor saw creation with eyes dead to the presence of God.²⁷

detects the 'thesis mentality' at the heart of Merton's book. It was uncondusive to Merton's way of thinking and at cross purposes with the monastic and mystical theology he was studying alongside it. Shannon, *Silent Lamp*, 131. This shift in Merton's thinking away from writing scholastic theology and towards experience is evident in the prologue to *The Sign of Jonas*, 'I found in writing *The Ascent to Truth* that technical language, though it is universal and certain and accepted by theologians, does not reach the average man and does not convey what is most personal and most vital in religious experience. Since my focus is not on dogmas as such but only on their repercussions in the life of a soul in which they begin to find a concrete realisation, I may be pardoned for using my own words to talk about my own soul,' Merton, *Sign of Jonas*, 8-9.

²³ Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (London: Collins Flame, 1985), 341.

²⁴ Maritain's works were read by Merton at Columbia University, Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, 199.

Art and Scholasticism was a key Maritain text drawn on heavily in his Master's thesis on *Nature and Art in William Blake*. See Thomas Merton, *Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. Brother Patrick Hart (New York: New Directions, 1984), 391. Maritain's influence permeates Merton's work throughout his life. They corresponded between 1949 and 1967 and the letters reflect many topics of mutual concern. The two men were introduced by Daniel Walsh at Columbia while Merton was still a student and Maritain visited Merton at Gethsemani in 1966.

²⁵ Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 220.

²⁶ Michael Mott documents how the seeds of his love for Blake's poetry were sown in France by Merton's father, Owen, who talked frequently to the boy of his own love for the English poet.

²⁷ Forest, *Living with Wisdom*, 52.

Known as ‘something of a rebel’ himself,²⁸ Merton saw in Blake a holy and mystical form of rebellion as something to be identified with.²⁹

A further key poetic influence is Gerard Manley Hopkins, whom he had read since boyhood at Oakham and whom he chose as the subject of his doctoral thesis. It was while reading a biography of Hopkins, a well-known convert that Merton resolved to become a Catholic.³⁰ Hopkins’ attunement to nature as revealing inscapes, the pattern in nature of the glory of God, resonated in the poetry and journals of Merton as an attuned noticer of nature and place in the rhythm of life in the monastery, as will be shown later in this thesis.

Research questions and thesis overview

This thesis makes the claim Merton can be regarded as a ‘theologian of wisdom’ by bringing him into engagement with two theologians who offer two different ways of theologising: Hans Urs von Balthasar and David F. Ford. Both have engaged with the theme of wisdom and the sapiential in theology, Balthasar through his magisterial aesthetics and work on Maximus the Confessor and Ford through a sustained engagement with the themes of polyphony and wisdom as a hermeneutic which relates to the whole of life.

²⁸ In a reference given by his headmaster at Oakham written for Merton in March 1942, just after the latter entered the monastery, he notes that Merton was regarded as ‘a legendary figure’ by the boys of his generation and as ‘something of a rebel.’ See Shannon, *Silent Lamp*, 2.

²⁹ ‘On Blake’s rebellious nature Merton writes sympathetically, ‘It was the rebellion of the lover of the living God, the rebellion of one whose desire of God was so intense and irresistible that it condemned with all its might, all the hypocrisy and petty sensuality and skepticism and materialism which cold and trivial minds set up as impassable barriers.’ Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 87. Michael W. Higgins even suggests that Merton so absorbed the thought of Blake that he *is* the William Blake of our time in the sense that he was engaged in the same intellectual and spiritual tasks as a social critic, poet, visual artist, an outsider and consummate rebel. Michael W. Higgins, *Heretic Blood: The Spiritual Geography of Thomas Merton* (Toronto: Stoddart Pub., 1998), 4.

³⁰ Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 211-216.

Therefore, the following key research questions are considered:

- 1) In what way can Merton be understood as a ‘wise theologian’?
- 2) What resonances can be discerned between Merton’s thought and that of Balthasar and in relation to David Ford?
- 3) Does Merton turn to the motif of wisdom/*Sophia* to ground his theology or is it part of an ongoing synthesis and intensification of different influences in his monastic life?
- 4) In what ways might Merton link with David Ford’s criteria for a polyphonic self and is Merton’s method of writing suggestive of a Christian wisdom-seeking as practised and performed in ordinary life?

To address these questions, the chapters are divided in the following way. In chapter one, I consider whether Merton can be understood as a ‘wise theologian.’ Initially, there is a short section outlining the term ‘wisdom’ followed by a discussion of the grounds for claiming Merton’s ‘authority’ as a theologian and which theologians he is akin to. Next, I discuss and evaluate in depth the recent work by Christopher Pramuk, an American Merton scholar and theologian, on the theme of *Sophia*³¹ and critique his criteria for *Sophia* as a hermeneutic. I argue that Pramuk’s work is incisive in the tracing of a sapiential consciousness or ‘sophianic key’ permeating Merton’s works and that he is right in his attempt to regard Merton as a theologian, steering a course between totalising and subjective discourses. Pramuk’s ‘method of catholicity’ as a way of mediating within a mosaic of traditional symbols, performed in poems and texts to meet contemporary agendas, is critiqued

³¹ I am employing the term *Sophia* with a capital emphasis to reflect the way Pramuk uses the term in his book. However, the *italics* are my emphasis.

as a victory of lyric style over substance. At this point however, the third research question is considered: is Merton's turn to wisdom or *Sophia* a breakthrough to a new theology or is the motif part of an ongoing synthesis and intensification of different influences in his monastic life, which led to an outward look beyond the monastery? Further still, I suggest – against Pramuk and the general trend of American Merton scholarship – that Merton displays a stronger correspondence with Balthasar's epistemology than with Karl Rahner's. I propose that Merton's sapiential humanism does not lead inevitably to a Rahnerian 'turn to the subject' but suggests a growing personal synthesis of spiritual with practical knowledge, closer to Balthasar and the Russian theologians. This is an important move regarding Merton's reception in the church and academy.³² For although I agree with Pramuk that Merton is popular with 'ordinary seekers' in the pews and outside the church, he has too often been misunderstood and misrepresented, which hinders his full reception and prevents him from being seen as a 'wise theologian.'³³

³² Robert Inchausti summarises the ambiguity of the Catholic Church towards Thomas Merton which, while acknowledging his faith and genius, in some quarters, flinches at his interest in political issues and avant-garde literature. The omission of Merton's name from the official United States Catholic Catechism for adults, 2006, showed that he was viewed as 'controversial,' and even as a 'lapsed monk' rather than someone who represented the Catholic faith: 'So the questions remain: was Merton a traditionalist or a heretic; a beatnik, a Buddhist or a saint?', Robert Inchausti, *Thinking Through Thomas Merton: Contemplation for Contemporary Times*, (Albany, NY: University of New York Press, 2014), 6. In my view, the omission of Merton from the catechism is a misreading of Merton's intentions in writing on social issues, engagements with the contemporary thought of his day and shows a lack of understanding his way of seeing, which is deeply catholic and mindful of tradition. In the recent speech of Pope Francis to the United States Congress on 24th September 2015, Thomas Merton was highlighted as one of four exemplary Americans along with Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther-King and Dorothy Day. The Pope's choice of Merton as an exemplary man of prayer, openness and dialogue, could be regarded as a response to those who deleted Merton's name from the catechism: See Rosie Marie Berger, 'What Pope Francis Can Teach the US Catholic Church about Thomas Merton,' [article online]; available from <https://sojo.net/articles/what-pope-francis-can-teach-us-catholic-church-about-thomas-merton>; Internet; accessed 27th September 2015; Deborah Halter, 'Whose orthodoxy is it?', [article online]; available from http://natcath.org/NCR_Online/archives2/2005a/031105/031105a.php; Internet; accessed 27th September 2015; Pope Francis, 'Visit to the Joint Session of the US Congress: Address of the Holy Father, United States Capitol, Washington, D.C., 24th September 2015,' [article online]; available from https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/september/documents/papa-francesco_20150924_usa-us-congress.html; Internet; accessed 9th October 2015.

³³ Fr. Francis Marsden, a regular feature writer for the conservative- leaning *Catholic Times*, appears to have misread or interpreted somewhat selectively and wrongly in my view, Merton's life story and approach in his

In chapter two, there is consideration of the question: if Merton is to be regarded as a ‘wise theologian,’ which theologian’s work most resonates with his way of seeing? In chapter one, it will be argued that the reception of Merton by some in the church is ‘controversial.’ Likewise, the name of Balthasar is associated by some with controversy over whether he offers only a world-denying theological conservatism,³⁴ while others associate him with theological innovation.³⁵ In chapter two, I set out to argue that both Merton and

last decade to other religions, insinuating of Merton, ‘a dangerous syncretism’ and of claiming to have experienced ‘a visitation from Gautama Buddha’ whilst in Sri Lanka, or ‘someone who would, had he lived, become a Buddhist.’ See Fr. Francis Marsden, ‘The Jury is still out on Mystic Thomas Merton,’ *Catholic Times*, Sunday, December 7th 2008, 7.

³⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Von Balthasar Reader*, ed. Medard Kehl, SJ and Werner Loser SJ, (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1982), 4f. Kehl suggests that Balthasar is seen as a conservative by some because of his concern over ‘trends’ in the church after Vatican II, which he thought neglected the tradition, elevating themes in modern historical-critical scholarship and religious pluralism above a distinctive and holistic faith rooted in prayer, contemplation and the great tradition of the church. Thomas G. Dalzell makes a similar point but also suggests labelling Balthasar as a conservative is a reductionist move, which, ‘...becomes clear once one has broken through the surface of his work.’ Thomas G. Dalzell, *The Dramatic Encounter of Divine and Human Freedom in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2000), 15. Joseph Ratzinger, later Pope Benedict XVI, gave the homily at Balthasar’s funeral, and praised the life and work of the Swiss theologian, ‘...the Church itself in its official responsibility, tells us that he is an exact master of the faith, a guide towards the sources of living water...’ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, ‘Ein Mann der Kirche für die Welt’, in K. Lehmann and W. Kasper, eds., *Hans Urs von Balthasar: Gestalt und Werk*, (Cologne, 1989): 353-354, quoted in Aidan Nichols, *The Word Has Been Abroad: A Guide Through Balthasar’s Aesthetics*, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998), xx. Nichols comments that after the death of Balthasar’s long-time collaborator, Adrienne von Speyr in 1967, Balthasar’s intellectual stature was recognised by the Holy See. (xix).

³⁵ Alyssa Lyra Pitstick questions whether Balthasar remains within orthodoxy in relation to his treatment of Christ’s descent into hell. In Balthasar’s *Mysterium Paschale*, the Son is wholly passive and wholly dead to be wholly in solidarity with the dead. He is identified with sin and experiences the full horror and wrath of it, as total abandonment by the Father or God-forsakenness. Pitstick claims this interpretation is ‘heretical’ as traditional teaching describes the descent to the dead as a triumphant restoration. See Alyssa Lyra Pitstick, *Light in Darkness: Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Catholic Doctrine of Christ’s Descent into Hell* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 342-346. Agreeing with Pitstick, Gavin D’Costa argues that Balthasar’s scheme appears to allow a Christological and a trinitarian rupture within the divine life due to Christ’s complete God-forsakenness. See Gavin D’Costa, *Christianity and the World Religions: Disputed Questions* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 208-209. Ben Quash suggests Balthasar’s view of hell is too epic as he appears to try to control events within it. At the moment of the Son’s abandonment, Balthasar is at his most mythological, thus missing the truly dramatic impact of events. See Ben Quash, *Theology and the Drama of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 195. Conversely, Edward Oakes argues that Balthasar’s interpretation is both a radical and orthodox doctrine of the *descensus*. See Edward Oakes, ‘The Internal Logic of Holy Saturday in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar’, *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 9, 2 (2007): 184-99. Balthasar’s influences are also questioned as unorthodox; particularly his closeness to Adrienne von Speyr, a mystic, whose work Balthasar insisted was inseparable from his own. See Karen Kilby, *Balthasar a (very) Critical Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MN: Eerdmans, 2012) 26-31. Ben Quash questions Balthasar’s theological indebtedness to Hegel, despite Balthasar’s persistent criticism of him. The suggestion is that Hegel might have unduly shaped Balthasar’s thought in a number of ways. See Ben Quash, *Theology and the Drama of History*, 53-83. Fergus Kerr sees the influence of Heidegger in shaping Balthasar’s metaphysics, ‘Balthasar and

Balthasar share many similarities, suggesting the labels ascribed to them are somewhat limited. Instead, it is argued that Balthasar shared a catholic disposition to fullness and openness which integrates in itself the whole of human reality similar to Merton's expansive consciousness. He was one of many interlocutors with whom Merton exchanged letters but his ground-breaking works on St Maximus and other Greek Fathers, as well as his aesthetics - which was directed towards recovering the 'lost unity' between spirituality and theology and the restoration of beauty to the grammar of faithful expression³⁶ - shed light on themes retrieved by Merton in his own epistemology. He will be drawn into engagement more closely, as someone with whom Merton not only corresponded³⁷ but whom he read regularly.³⁸ Along with Merton, Balthasar's theology and retrievals of tradition can act as a bridge between western and eastern Christian ways of seeing and provides a fruitful ground

Metaphysics' in Edward T. Oakes SJ and David Moss, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 224-239.

³⁶ Merton refers many times to Balthasar approvingly in his personal journals and on June 24, 1966, makes this comment on how he sees Balthasar's project as similar to his own: '...thought about the letter from von Balthasar yesterday - His complaint of being theologically isolated from people in fashion ((Karl) Rahner, (Hans) Kung etc.) - Realised to what extent my own theology goes along with that of Balthasar and I should read him more deeply. (I now have his *Herrlichkeit*/(*Glory of the Lord*) in French, so I can handle it).' Merton had been reading *Glory of the Lord* in the original German but as he was not fluent, he found it a struggle. In realising how similar his project was to Balthasar, I understand Merton to mean that Balthasar's concern to restore beauty to the grammar of faith is a similar theological concern as well as their similar engagement with intellectuals, particularly in the literary and artistic fields. See *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom, The Journals of Thomas Merton*, vol.6 1966-67, ed. Christine M. Bochen, (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1998), 343.

³⁷ The letters written by Merton to Balthasar fall between July 3rd 1964 and September 12th 1966 are documented in: Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction*, ed., Brother Patrick Hart OCSO (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1990), 219-312. Balthasar also arranged for a German translation of some of Merton's poetry and wrote the introduction to the volume of his poetry published in German. Merton's letter of September 12th 1966, thanks Balthasar for his help with the project, (312).

³⁸ The personal journals are a source of evidence of Merton's wide reading of Balthasar but it is unfortunate that not all references to Balthasar's books read by Merton are picked up in the index of Volume Five. In this volume, Merton documents reading the *Glory of the Lord*, (140-149); *Word and Revelation*, (155); and *Verbum Caro* (*The Word made Flesh*), (160): Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: The Journals of Thomas Merton*, vol. 5 1963-1965, ed., Robert E. Daggy, (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1998). In Volume Three, Balthasar's book on Gregory of Nyssa, *Presence and Thought*, is being read by Merton, (84), Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's Life, The Journals of Thomas Merton*, vol.3 1952-1960, ed., Lawrence S. Cunningham, (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1997). In Volume Six, Balthasar's *Glory of the Lord* is being re-read by Merton in French, (see footnote 34).

for dialogue between eastern and western Christians.³⁹ As such, they are both representative of a form of wise contemplative catholicity. In addition, the problems and deficiencies of Balthasar's theology will be discussed as not sufficiently 'wise enough.' I suggest Merton's wise way of theologising is more in line with an understanding of wisdom integrated into the whole of life and open to the other, in ways which Balthasar, at times, is too tentative with his own presuppositions to pursue. The theological parallels between Balthasar as part of the *ressourcement* movement and Merton have been touched on in passing by various scholars in Merton Studies, showing a growing awareness of the links between the two but so far no systematic study has been undertaken.⁴⁰

In Chapter three, the research focus is directed to consider in what further ways Merton is a wise theologian. I shall discuss briefly how Merton's theological understanding of the integrity of art and the person is influenced by the thought of Jacques Maritain. It is argued that Merton develops the motif of the 'guilty bystander' as he considers his role as a monk in the world. I shall show that it was a natural step for Merton to develop an outward

³⁹ (See footnote 221). For an account of the Balthasar and Bulgakov engagement, see Katy Leamy, *The Holy Trinity: Balthasar and His Sources*, (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2015), 1-118. Leamy highlights for example, the engagement between Balthasar and Bulgakov in the area of kenotic trinitarian theology and doctrine of the descent to hell of the God-forsaken Son. Balthasar and Bulgakov's trinitarian theology bear similarities, particularly the paradox that suffering and glory are interchangeable when describing the act of self-abandoning love that is the divine ousia. Similarities are found in their view of suffering in the inner-trinitarian relations. See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale*, trans. Aidan Nichols (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000). On the doctrine of judgement and universal hope of salvation, (*apokatastasis* – the Orthodox teaching), despite the 'No' to God of the human being, see Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Dare We hope, "That All Men be Saved"?* trans. David Kipp and Lothar Krauth (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 13-45. See also, Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-drama: Theological Dramatic Theory: The Final Act*, Vol 5, trans: Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998). Balthasar's study of the work of Soloviev is found in Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics, Vol. III: Studies in Theological Style: Lay Styles*, trans. Andrew Louth, John Saward, Martin Simon and Rowan Williams (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986), 279-352.

⁴⁰ As well as the correspondence between Merton and Balthasar documented in *School of Charity*, there are other recent examples of references to Balthasar's links to Merton and *ressourcement*: Ron Dart, 'Thomas Merton and Nouvelle Theologie,' *The Merton Journal* 19, no.1 (2012): 26-35; Robert Inchausti, *Thinking Through Thomas Merton*, 1-8; and their interest in beauty in nature and contemplation, Paul M. Pearson, 'Sentinels upon the world's Frontiers- Thomas Merton and Celtic Monasticism,' *The Merton Journal* 21, no.1 (2014): 13.

look to the world in the 1950s and 1960s, as he no longer saw any contradiction between this and his monastic vocation.

In chapter four, Merton's writing is brought into discussion with the theologian David F. Ford to consider whether he can be understood as a 'wise theologian' from the perspective of Ford's contemporary theology. Ford is a thinker who moves and mediates between various postmodern voices, while remaining grounded in a Christian biblical narrative and worship-focussed framework. The discussion considers similarities between Ford's understanding of wisdom embodied in the healthy Christian self, which Ford calls a way of living polyphonically, and Thomas Merton. I shall set out Ford's main argument for polyphony and discuss his choice of exemplar, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He regards Bonhoeffer as encapsulating the essential dynamics of Christian life through worship and the transformation of self, as, 'the most illuminating interpretations of Christian identity are found in particular lives marked by joy and sacrificial responsibility.'⁴¹ After an evaluation of the strengths and limits of the model I suggest that Merton fits Ford's criteria for a polyphonic exemplar of wisdom.

In chapter five, there is a brief discussion and evaluation of Ford's theology of wisdom and his re-configuration of Balthasar's theo-drama. Ford and Balthasar are brought into engagement on the question of drama and how this theme is performed in the church and world in daily living. It will be shown how the two theologians regard the motif differently, as well as how there are some resonances.

In chapter six, a summary and conclusion of the thesis is set out. Overall I argue that Merton's life and writing cannot be seen as separate from the monastic, patristic and contemplative tradition of which he was part. He synthesised this tradition with his poetic

⁴¹ David F. Ford, *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 2.

and artistic sensibilities in order to critique what he saw as the problems in the modern world of the sixties. In Merton scholarship the tendency is to place Merton in the trajectory of Karl Rahner. I argue however that Merton more closely shares a patristic way of seeing with scholars such as Balthasar and the Russian Sophiologists in critiquing enlightenment thinking, particularly Descartes and Kant, bypassing the ego self. Due to a retrieval of this way of seeing, Merton no longer sees any contradiction between his monastic life and engagement with the world. It enables him to develop an outward look.

In engagement with Ford, I argue that Merton fits his criteria for a polyphonic self as an embodiment of practical themes of wisdom but he cannot be seen as separate from the patristic/mystical tradition. Ford focuses on mediations between biblical and liturgical thought and postmodern thought. I suggest the contemplative/mystical tradition could be developed within Ford's repertoire of themes and images.

CHAPTER ONE

UNDERSTANDING THOMAS MERTON AS ‘WISE THEOLOGIAN.’

1:1. What is wisdom? Merton’s way of wisdom

In what way can Thomas Merton be understood as a ‘wise theologian’? To answer this question, this thesis suggests the theme of wisdom helped Merton to present and communicate living tradition in his engagement with the world. Underpinning this claim is the description of Thomas Merton as a theologian of ‘wisdom’ - someone who exemplified the biblical theme of wisdom or *sapientia* in his writing and outlook.⁴²

Wisdom, as a theological intuition, is woven right through Merton’s work but intensified particularly in the mature writings, as Szabo comments perceptively, ‘one observes his repeated engagement with the same vexed questions.’⁴³ In this period, he defines wisdom as the highest form of cognition or ‘way of knowing’ without which man is consumed by abstractions and analytical reasoning.⁴⁴ Wisdom combines an intensely lived personal experience of faith and formation and traditional discipline, ‘For wisdom cannot be learned from a book. It is acquired only in a living formation; and it is tested by the master himself in

⁴² David F. Ford, *Christian Wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 183. Ford comments on the scriptural background to spiritual maturity in I Corinthians: 2-3 and 12-14, noting that a wisdom outlook is linked to a specific form of maturity. The ‘pneumatic’ person is formed through living ‘in the spirit’ and has ‘the mind of Christ.’ Although Merton is familiar with the figure of Wisdom in Proverbs, he draws on a wide range of wisdom tradition: the fruit of the Holy Spirit in Isaiah 11, the Pauline contrast between human and divine wisdom as well as the Logos Christology of John’s gospel. Growth in wisdom becomes more and more a process of growth to be more like Christ.

⁴³ Thomas Merton, *In the Dark before Dawn: New Selected Poems of Thomas Merton*, ed. Lynn R. Szabo (New York: New Directions, 2005), xxviii.

⁴⁴ Thomas Merton, “‘Baptism in the Forest:’ Wisdom and Initiation in William Faulkner,” *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. Brother Patrick Hart (New York: New Directions, 1981), 99. See also Merton’s essay, ‘Gandhi and the One-eyed Giant’ where he describes wisdom as a way of knowing, ‘... which transcends and unites, ... which dwells in body and soul together and which more by means of myth, of rite, of contemplation than by scientific experiment, opens the door to a life in which the individual is not lost in the cosmos and in society but is found in them.’ See Thomas Merton, *Gandhi on Non-Violence: A Selection from the Writings of Mahatma Gandhi* (New York: New Directions, 1965), 1.

certain critical situations.⁴⁵ Wisdom is also derived from the fathers, St. Bernard⁴⁶ and scripture: *sapientia* as the highest form of wisdom,⁴⁷ restoring humanity to existential communion with God, the pristine state of pre-fallen nature or original unity.⁴⁸ Merton justifies his engagement with authors outside Catholic circles like William Faulkner by his conviction that creative writing and imaginative criticism is, ‘a privileged area for wisdom in the modern world. At times one feels they do so even more than current philosophy and theology.’⁴⁹ Seeds of wisdom⁵⁰ are cultivated by gaining knowledge or wisdom as something lived, practised and integrated into the whole of life.⁵¹

The development of Merton’s interest in wisdom can be seen by comparing the spiritual book, *Seeds of Contemplation*,⁵² with Merton’s later revised version.⁵³ In the original version there is no description of wisdom but an earnest hope that the author has not written a single word to perplex an orthodox theologian.⁵⁴ In the chapter on *Faith*, Merton writes that

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ St. Bernard’s treatise *On Loving God* treats the subject of wisdom and the search for it as rooted fundamentally in human experience. This is scanned to discern patterns to reveal the cosmic wisdom which forms and sustains the universe. As such *sapientia* is religious experience itself and awareness of what he calls the underlying universal law of love. See Bernard of Clairvaux, *On Loving God*, Comm., Emero Stiegman, Cistercian Fathers Series, no.13b, (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1995), 56f.

⁴⁷ Thomas Merton, *The New Man* (London: Burns and Oates, 1962; reprint, London: Burns and Oates, 2003), 75-76.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 35-48.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid. Merton suggests *sapiential wisdom* is not inborn. He uses the term ‘seeds’ deliberately to describe the potential in each person to grow spiritually. ‘Seeds’ are latent in each person and have therefore to be cultivated and developed through discipline and practice.

⁵¹ George Kilcourse, *Ace of Freedoms*, 36. According to Kilcourse, ‘Sapientia,’ is sensing or ‘tasting’ the knowledge of God. The term ‘Sapiential’ has its root in Latin, ‘Sapere.’ To know God is to seek him by experience of tasting His infinite goodness. Merton unpacks this central experience in Christian life, indeed potentially experienced by all human beings, by virtue of their creation in God’s image. Kilcourse summarises as follows: ‘Here is Merton the quintessential monk, renewing contemplative spirituality with water from Cistercian wells.’ (134).

⁵² Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation* (London: Hollis and Carter, 1949).

⁵³ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (Boston, MA: Shambhala, 2003).

⁵⁴ Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation*, 14.

faith is first of all an intellectual assent which perfects the mind and through which one submits to the authority of God. The mind of the monk is steeped in post-war scholasticism.

By 1961, Merton had rewritten the chapter and renamed it, *Faith and Wisdom*. Merton develops the theme of faith to involve a simple act of assent but not submission. Faith is not one moment in the spiritual life or simple conformity but a step to something else – deeper communion - whose intensity reaches out to affect everything. The true spiritual life transcends a dissipated life and a life of apollonian clarity, ‘It is a life of wisdom, a life of *sophianic* love.’⁵⁵ For Merton, faith opens up to wisdom as life in Christ, where truth is integrated and bears fruit in spiritual life.

Further analysis of wisdom, *sapientia* and the place of *Sophia* in Merton’s theology will be made later in this chapter and in chapter two.

1:2. Is Thomas Merton a theologian?

Merton never became a member of a theological academy but preferred to range widely in poetry, essays, journals and books, including a number of books and articles on monastic life and concerns.⁵⁶ In this section and to make the claim that Merton is a ‘wise theologian,’ it is important to ask in what ways he could be regarded as a theologian and what is his source of authority.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 144.

⁵⁶ Examples of books by Merton on purely monastic orders and the history of monasticism: Thomas Merton, *The Silent Life*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1957); Thomas Merton, *The Waters of Siloe* (San Diego, CA: Harvest, 1979).

There is much discussion between scholars about where to locate Merton and the well-spring of his authority.⁵⁷ It is argued by Christopher Pramuk that Merton has been underrated by theologians of the academy because he is not a systematic theologian but an explorer of the terrain of religious experience.⁵⁸ He believes that this preconception is in need of serious revision and argues that Merton is a ‘sapiential theologian,’ one whose primary concern is not with doctrinal precision.⁵⁹ I concur with Pramuk at this point and suggest that the two chosen theologians for engagement with Merton in this thesis shed light on the claim. Merton’s vision of life as an integral unity, derived from patristic and aesthetic sources, and writing unsystematically, is resonant with Hans Urs von Balthasar; and the way Merton narrates his life as a means of re-imagining Christian selfhood, avoiding systematics, is consonant with David F. Ford’s project.⁶⁰

Although not a formally recognised academic, Merton did write monastic works and hold senior teaching posts in the monastery.⁶¹ His lecture notes on Evagrius Pontus point to the theologian as one who sees no essential contradiction between theology and spirituality, and a personal experience of prayer, ‘If you are a theologian you will truly pray and if you

⁵⁷ Merton’s official biographer, Michael Mott, comments that Merton combined so many things –monk, poet, writer, activist, contemplative, reformer of monastic life, artist: ‘...that it is disconcerting for those who know him best in one aspect, to find him treated exclusively from another point of view.’ Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, xix.

⁵⁸ Pramuk, *Sophia*, 24.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 20f.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 21. At this point I disagree with Pramuk in locating Merton as a sapiential theologian in the orbit of Karl Rahner, as will be discussed further in the thesis.

⁶¹ The key to understanding the centrality of Merton’s thought as theological is to be reminded of the life Merton actually lived. Between the years 1951-1955, Merton’s role in his Monastery was a Master of Scholastics i.e.: monks training for priesthood. From 1955-1965, (three years before his death), he took on the high status role as Master of Novices. These roles involved teaching and helping to form young men ‘from the world’ into their new lives as monks. The lecture notes from this period offer a valuable insight into Merton’s own deep love for and commitment to the monastic tradition of which he was part. For example, Thomas Merton, *Cassian and the Fathers: Initiation into the Christian Monastic Tradition*, ed. Patrick O’ Connell, Monastic Wisdom Series, no.1, (Kalamazoo, MN: Cistercian Pub., 2005).

pray truly, you are a theologian.’⁶² This understanding of theology resonates with the thought of Balthasar, who highlights the continuity between the concrete lives of saints and the life of prayer with the dogmatics of knowledge.⁶³

The intellectual activity of becoming fully immersed in the tradition as a collective memory, *memoria*, of the Church is important for Merton.⁶⁴ This tradition was something understood only when really lived and formed the whole person, as Merton’s lecture notes emphasise, ‘This tradition forms and affects the whole man: intellect-memory-will-emotions-body-skills (arts)-all must be under the sway of the Holy Spirit. Important human dimension given to tradition- its incarnate character. Note especially the memory.’⁶⁵ As a contemplative his thought also stems from his retrieval of the monastic tradition of the Cistercians⁶⁶ and draws on the apophatic and kataphatic language of mystical experience, as a ‘coincidence of opposites.’⁶⁷ Indeed, Merton’s retrievals of lost or forgotten sources of tradition situate him in

⁶² He adds, ‘For Evagrius: ‘Theologian equals Mystic.’ In other words, a mystical theologian is someone who does not distinguish between spirituality and knowledge. Ibid., 96.

⁶³ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Explorations in Theology 1: The Word made Flesh* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1964), 206.

⁶⁴ Raymond Bailey comments, ‘... Merton’s thought and methodology were rooted in traditional mystical theology and framed in the matrix of the symbols and structures of Catholicism. Merton presented little in the way of original thought. His great contribution was the particularity of his person and the synthesising and contemporising of ancient and universal truths.’ See Raymond Bailey, *Thomas Merton on Mysticism* (New York: Image Books, 1976), 16.

⁶⁵ Thomas Merton, *An Introduction to Christian Mysticism: Initiation in the Monastic Tradition*, ed. Patrick F. O’Connell, Monastic Wisdom Series, No. 13, (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 2008), 35-36.

⁶⁶ Thomas Merton, ‘Conference Notes by Thomas Merton: The Cistercian Fathers and their Monastic Theology,’ Part One: St. Bernard, *De Diligendo Deo* ed. Chrysogonus Wadell, OCSO, in *Liturgy, Cistercians of the Strict Observance*, Vol. 27, No.1, (1993), 15-53, quoted in Bernard of Clairvaux, *On Loving God*, Anal. Comm. Emero Steigman, 45-66. *On Loving God* is the single most important source of understanding Bernard’s thought, according to Merton (Ibid.). In his analytic commentary on St. Bernard, Steigman draws on Merton’s conference notes as a source of authority in analysing Bernard’s treatise. According to Steigman, Bernard was essentially an ‘artistic writer’ whose theology cannot be separated out from affective experience. Instead, it could be described as an, ‘emotional involvement with God.’ (48). This description of Bernard is suggestive of Thomas Merton’s approach to writing, also as the fruit of artistic shaping, and with theology as inseparable from affective experience and a life of prayer.

⁶⁷ Christopher Nugent, ‘Merton, the Coincidence of Opposites and the Archaeology of Catholicity,’ *Cistercian Studies* 26 (1991): 263. Nugent describes Merton’s ‘way of seeing’ as a re-articulation of the ‘coincidence of opposites.’ Christian spirituality and self-understanding is patterned after Christology, which church father and exponent of *coincidentia oppositorum*, Nicholas of Cusa calls ‘the least imperfect definition of God.’ Nugent

alignment with *ressourcement*,⁶⁸ in the sense of his on-going preoccupation with ‘returning to the sources’ of the catholic theological vision of the first ten centuries of the Church before the advent of scholasticism.⁶⁹ He is engaged in theological work in excavating and synthesising sources to share with a wider audience, and rooted in the ancient Christian tradition and articulating it for the contemporary age.⁷⁰

Some commentators suggest however, that Merton is not a recognised ‘original thinker’ in theology or literature but a creative synthesiser. This might explain why he has been regarded not as a theologian but as a spiritual writer, poet and autobiographer.⁷¹ More often focus in the academy has been on the psychological and popular spirituality of Merton’s books, with neglect of the theological discourse which holds them together.⁷² This impression is reinforced by the large number of books published each year by the ‘Merton industry’ often of varying quality.⁷³ Furthermore, Merton eschewed systematics, suggesting that his spiritual reflections did not offer a pre-prescribed programme. He would leave the construction of

suggests that Cusa’s *coincidence of opposites* is not dealt with explicitly by Merton but is a key running through his works.

⁶⁸ *Ressourcement* or *Nouvelle Théologie* is the name commonly used to refer to a school of thought in Catholic theology that arose in the mid-20th century, most notably among certain circles of French and German theologians such as Henri de Lubac and Jean Danielou and Hans Urs von Balthasar.

⁶⁹ Thomas Merton, *Cassian and the Fathers: Initiation into the Christian Monastic Tradition*, ed. Patrick O’Connell, Monastic Wisdom Series, no.1, (Kalamazoo, MN: Cistercian Pub., 2005), 5-7.

⁷⁰ A related point to this is made by Daniel P. Horan in his paper on Merton as a ‘praxis-based vernacular theologian,’ in the style of St Francis of Assisi. See Daniel P. Horan, ‘Thomas Merton’s Vernacular Franciscan Theology’ *The Merton Journal* vol. 16, no.2 (2009): 23-26.

⁷¹ Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, xxii. Mott highlights the continuity between Merton’s first novel, *My Argument with the Gestapo*, penned in 1939 but only published in 1969, written in the Joycean idiom of macaronic language and his mature, final poem, *The Geography of Lograire*, (published posthumously in 1969). Indeed, Merton’s ‘anti-poetry’ of the 1960s had continuities with the young Merton’s love of James Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake*. Although Merton is known through his continuing autobiographical books and journals, Mott suggests he is also an ‘anti-autobiographer’ i.e. someone concerned to challenge the form and poke fun at conventions. Merton’s late poems and published novel signal Merton’s push through illusory barriers to find truth.

⁷² Pramuk, *Sophia*, 24.

⁷³ Ibid.

systems to others as he renounced any attempt to offer universal principles to govern his audience's lives.⁷⁴

Therefore, we must ask how Merton's writing reveals the kind of theologian he is, if he is to be regarded as one. The first suggestion is Merton's intense concern for the 'problem' of the self,⁷⁵ so that his theology becomes not so much an intellectual and speculative exercise, as a realisation and an intellectual struggle, circling and informing the other.⁷⁶ In this regard, the style of theology of David F. Ford gives an imaginative re-visioning of Christian selfhood and identity in the contemporary world.⁷⁷ Merton represents an exemplar of 'embodied wisdom' or 'the dynamics of the self in transformation through involvement with God,' as we shall explain further on in the thesis.

Secondly, Merton became more aware that the vision of the world he offered through his writing was not simply about self-discovery but 'an implicit dialogue with other minds,'

⁷⁴ Thomas Merton, *No Man is an Island* (Tunbridge Wells: Burns and Oates, 1955), ix.

⁷⁵ Anne E. Carr, *A Search for Wisdom and Spirit: Thomas Merton's Theology of the Self* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 3.

⁷⁶ Merton suggests that he is circling around a centre in his writing, 'My ideas are always changing, always moving around one centre, and I'm always seeing that centre from somewhere else. Hence I will always be accused of inconsistency. But I will no longer be there to hear the accusation.' See Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life*, 67. Like Merton, Balthasar was fond of using the description of circling around the centre in his theologising. For example, 'Since the all-embracing context cannot fall under any general concept, theodrama cannot be defined: it can only be approached from various angles.' See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theodrama: Theological Dramatic Theory Volume 2: The Dramatis Personae: Man in God*, Trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 62. In both cases it seems to be a rejection of system. Kilby suggests it is Balthasar's way of mapping pluralism (see Kilby, *Balthasar, a (very) critical introduction*, 86), while with Merton it could be the changing contexts of the monastery and society in the sixties and responses to his correspondents. The image of lines radiating from the centre is used also in the writing of Maximus the Confessor, a source for both men. Maximus uses the image to describe how the contemplative centred on God can see all things from their inner source, the *Logos* of them all, in undivided knowing. See Maximus the Confessor, *Chapters on Knowledge*, II, 4 in *Maximus Confessor: Selected Writings*, trans. George C. Berthold, Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1985): 148, quoted in Mark A. McIntosh: *Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 58.

⁷⁷ Luther Zeigler, 'The Many Faces of the Worshipping Self: David Ford's Anglican Vision of Christian Transformation,' *Anglican Theological Review* 89, no.2 (2005): 267.

and ‘a dialogue in which questions are raised.’⁷⁸ This would involve a series of interlocutors - most of whom he never met but knew from his wide and varied reading - brought into encounter through letters or essays and books. Merton’s writing engaged readers as ‘interrogative confidants’,⁷⁹ inviting them to look in the direction he was looking,⁸⁰ from incidents in ordinary living to wider social issues without seeming to be self-absorbed or pretentious.⁸¹ In this sense his theology and writing are of a piece. He wrote his life and his writing was his way of searching for wisdom.⁸² This theological style bridges the gap between the lived-religious life and contemporary concerns – it represents a type of theology which ranges widely between genres,⁸³ because at its heart is the interrogative, personal and spiritual search. The ability to articulate his lived search and experience in an accessible style gives Merton the further authority to speak out in the 1960s against war and racism as well as on

⁷⁸ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Tunbridge Wells: Burns and Oates, 1995), 7.

⁷⁹ George Kilcourse, *Ace of Freedoms*, 2. Merton’s determination to share his experience with others means his audience is inclusive of people of a wide demography not limited to a clerical or academic readership, as evidenced by the thousands of people he corresponded with, who clearly looked to him as a source of spiritual authority.

⁸⁰ Rowan Williams, *A Silent Action: Engagements with Thomas Merton* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2011), 19.

⁸¹ Ibid. This personal and seemingly low key style arose out of a fierce concentration developed in a monastery where he had little personal free time due to his monastic duties, until he lived full time in his hermitage from 1965. He found a way to write quickly in the blocks of time he was given. In his best works such as *Conjectures*, small pieces of writing noted in journals and notebooks would be honed into a spare, direct and aphoristic style. However, Merton’s popularity as a writer did not safeguard him from writing some poor books of hagiography with ‘turgid prose.’ For example, Thomas Merton, *What are These Wounds?: The Life of a Cistercian Mystic Saint Lutgarde of Aywieres*, (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Co., 1950). Merton rated this book as one of his worst.

⁸² Gary Hall, ‘The Fiction of Merton,’ *The Merton Journal* 16, no. 1 (2009): 10-16.

⁸³ David F. Ford, *The Future of Christian Theology* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 1-42. David F. Ford provides a typology of the kind of theology we are discussing, which integrates practice with understanding under the heading of wisdom: Four elements of wise creativity: 1. Wise and creative retrieval such as *ressourcement*; 2. Wise and creative engagement with the world; 3. Wise and creative thinking; 4. Wise and creative expression – writing in a ‘feast of genres.’ (21). Ford also provides a dramatic framework between lyric and epic types of theology. Ford’s method moves and mediates between typologies without being caught fast by any one. He describes his method as ‘systematically unsystematic’ but he gives primacy to the narrative/dramatic, that which allows the biblical drama to be the primary source for identifying who God is and what God’s purposes are. (40). His method is based on the typologies of theology set out by Hans Frei in Hans Frei, *Types of Christian Theology*, ed. George Hunsinger and William C. Placher (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

spiritual matters.⁸⁴ This is a style that Ford describes as ‘wisdom-seeking’ – a theology of desire which unites understanding with practice and is concerned to engage with, and indeed shape the whole of life.⁸⁵

In conclusion, the argument of the thesis is that Thomas Merton is a ‘wise theologian’ that is, an exemplar of embodied wisdom, by integrating the *memoria* of the church with his contemplative life and in personal wisdom-seeking through his writing.⁸⁶ The following sections consider further the kind of wise theologian he is, by assessing the contribution of Merton scholar Christopher Pramuk, who bases his claims on Merton’s poem *Hagia Sophia*.⁸⁷

1:3. Pramuk’s source - the poem *Hagia Sophia*

Hagia Sophia, a prose poem penned by Merton in 1962, has led to intense discussion of the place of wisdom in Merton’s developing consciousness and theological trajectory in his mature years.⁸⁸ The poem originated with a dream,⁸⁹ a subsequent imaginary letter in

⁸⁴ For example the Cold War letters on matters of war and peace, were circulated on mimeographed papers and smuggled out of the monastery to avoid the censors of the order.

⁸⁵ For a fuller treatment of the theology of the dynamics of transformation of the self, See David F. Ford, *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 1-17. Ford explains that a ‘journey of intensification,’ a phrase borrowed from contemporary American theologian David Tracy, is a journey through Christian self-understanding, ‘...the aim of which is to do theology in places where Christian selfhood has been most profoundly shaped. (9).

⁸⁶ Selections of Merton’s letters are published in four major edited volumes of letters and other minor volumes of published letters between Merton and an individual correspondent. William H. Shannon comments there are approximately 3, 500 letters to over a thousand correspondents of varied backgrounds and countries at the Thomas Merton Center in Bellarmine University, Louisville, Kentucky, and more letters continue to be discovered. See Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (London: Collins, 1985),vi.

⁸⁷ Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1980), 343.

⁸⁸ Wisdom and the terms *Sophia/sophianic/sapientia* pepper other works by Merton including, *The New Man*, *New Seeds*, and, Thomas Merton, *The Behaviour of Titans* (New York: New Directions, 1961).

⁸⁹ In the dream of February 28th 1958, Merton imagines he sees a young girl Jewish, Anne, whom he named ‘Proverb.’ In the letter, he expresses his gratitude for her innocent love and virginal solitude, given as gift and for which he is entirely grateful. He rationalises in a journal entry that ‘Proverb’ is an experience of the presence of the divine described in biblical wisdom, ‘I loved wisdom and sought to make her my wife.’ Merton, *The Search for Solitude*, 176.

Merton's journal entries, and from a discussion with his artist-friend Victor Hammer about a triptych the latter had crafted.⁹⁰ Weeks later, Merton writes a journal entry⁹¹ describing an experience of overwhelming solidarity and love with the people around him as he stood on the corner of Fourth and Walnut streets in Louisville. The later re-worked journal passage in *Conjectures* represents Merton's new awareness of the contemplative's love and compassion for others, in an artistic description of the crowds in their ordinary humanity, bearing a hidden beauty.⁹²

The poem is divided into four parts based on the canonical hours of prayer. 'Lauds' describes waking up from illusions and realising the 'hidden wholeness' of creation, the presence of wisdom experienced in the depths of the self, nature as a divine gift. This description coincides with Merton's experience in his Louisville vision.⁹³ To respond to the invitation to awake or to live, is to recognise wisdom and respond to its presence in the world.⁹⁴

In 'Tierce', light imagery is employed with echoes of Hopkin's inscapes, 'We do not see the Blinding One in black emptiness. He speaks to us gently in ten thousand things, in which his light is one fullness and one Wisdom,' who shines not on them but, 'from within them.'⁹⁵ The in-dwelling of wisdom is also described in *Conjectures* as 'absolute poverty' and

⁹⁰ In a letter to Victor Hammer, Merton describes Wisdom in a series of ideas and metaphors as the feminine dimension of God, not another person but God's *ousia* (being or darkness which is infinite light), the 'pivot' of all being and creativity, the mercy of God, the Virgin Mary who gives the Word human nature and sends him forth on his mission of redemption, the feminine child playing before God, playing before him at all times, playing in the world, (Proverbs 8). Thomas Merton, 'Letter to Victor Hammer, May 14th 1959', *Thomas Merton: Witness to Freedom: letters in Times of Crisis* ed: William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Giroux and Straus, 1995), 4.

⁹¹ Merton, *A Search for Solitude*, 182.

⁹² Merton, *Conjectures*, 158.

⁹³ Kilcourse, *Ace of Freedoms*, 90.

⁹⁴ Thomas Merton Encyclopedia, 192

⁹⁵ Merton, *Collected Poems*, 366.

the 'pure glory of God in us.'⁹⁶ Imagery and phrasing oscillates between the apophatic and kataphatic, saying and unsaying, 'O blessed, silent one, who speaks everywhere! / We do not hear the soft voice, the gentle voice, the merciful, the feminine.'⁹⁷ Such language implies fluidity and openness, the coincidence of opposites, as God is not constrained as an object of knowledge.⁹⁸ The interplay of gender metaphors suggests two aspects of a single dynamic at work, like Wisdom at the foundation of the world.⁹⁹ The feminine theme is integrated into the poem, borrowing mystical language from Julian of Norwich, 'Jesus our Mother,' with autobiographical echoes of times in his life when he had not treated women well, 'He will have awakened not to conquest and dark pleasure but to the impeccable pure simplicity...one Wisdom, one Child, one Meaning, one Sister.'¹⁰⁰

In the final section, 'Compline', the traditional Marian prayer, 'Salve Regina,' is recalled as Mary is exalted for her humility, mercy and purity, linking her to the creativity of *Sophia* as an image of God's fullness. As redeemed humanity, she is the perfect expression of wisdom in mercy, crowning Christ and sending him into the world.¹⁰¹ Christ is not set apart from the world but within it, poor, hidden and homeless,¹⁰² and as close to us as our own selves.¹⁰³

⁹⁶ Ibid., 370 and Merton, *Conjectures*, 158. In *Conjectures*, Merton borrows a phrase from Louis Massignon to describe the centre of being as '*le point vierge*', a point of 'nothingness untouched by sin and illusion, under the image of a spark or pure diamond blazing with the invisible light of heaven. '... and if we could see it we would see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely.' (Ibid.).

⁹⁷ Ibid., 365. This sentence appears in the second section of the poem, 'Early Morning: The Hour of Prime.'

⁹⁸ Susan McCaslin, 'Merton and Hagia Sophia (Holy Wisdom)': Merton and the Eastern Fathers' in Bernadette Dieker and Jonathan Montaldo eds., *Merton and Hesychasm: The Prayer of the Heart* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2003), 243.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 248.

¹⁰⁰ Merton, *Collected Poems*, 366.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 370.

¹⁰² Ibid., 371.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 368.

The poem can be read as a synthesis of reading and experiences in the spiritual development of Merton, from that of a young monk, spurning the world and waking from his dream of a 'special vocation to be different' from the world.¹⁰⁴ Merton connects his dream of 'Proverb' and experience in Louisville¹⁰⁵ with the contemplative and mystical symbolism he had previously reserved for his spiritual books.¹⁰⁶ In the original journal passage, Merton notes with joy that he is a member of the human race and he sees humanity of the women shining through, recognising the times past when he had not regarded women this way.¹⁰⁷ Through his monastic vows, he celebrates the 'secret beauty of their girls' hearts as they walked in the sunlight,'¹⁰⁸ as images of God,¹⁰⁹ 'In this each one is Wisdom and *Sophia* and our Lady – (my delights are to be with the children of men!).'¹¹⁰ What is celebrated is the perception of sacred joy, in the ordinary, the unity of that which is fragmented,¹¹¹ and the flowering of natural contemplation in Merton's experience, 'the feminine child playing before God.'¹¹²

¹⁰⁴ According to O' Connell in *Thomas Merton Encyclopedia*, 191, the synthesis of the poem is an amalgam of themes drawing from the figure of Wisdom in Proverbs 8, on reflections from Russian theologians, Bulgakov, Soloviev and Berdyaev, read by Merton in 1957, Julian of Norwich and Merton's own dream of Proverb. There are also traceable themes of wisdom noted from St. Bernard and from Balthasar's book on *Gregory of Nyssa* in the original journal entries for this period, as they formed part of his reading. See Merton, *Entering the Silence*, 70 (84).

¹⁰⁵ Merton, *Conjectures*, 156.

¹⁰⁶ Kilcourse, *Ace of Freedoms*, 91.

¹⁰⁷ Merton, *A Search for Solitude*, 182. He acknowledges the humanity of the women on the street and no longer regarding them as objects of conquest, as he admits he did in his pre-monastic years, 'It is not a question of proving to myself that I either like or dislike the women one sees on the street... I am keenly conscious, not of their beauty... but of their humanity, their woman-ness. (Ibid).

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ross Labrie suggests the poem *Hagia Sophia* gives lyrical expression to Merton's own highly personal recognition of the feminine as a way for restoring wholeness to the image of God, even though some of the female traits he identifies such as 'yielding', 'mercy' and 'tenderness' may be considered rather gender-stereotypical. See Ross Labrie *Thomas Merton and the Inclusive Imagination*, 229.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Kilcourse, *Ace of Freedoms*, 91. Kilcourse regards 1958 the breakthrough year for Merton in terms of his developing incarnational Christology.

¹¹² Merton, *Witness to Freedom*, 4.

In summary, Merton's experiences of 1958 only intensify his desire for solitude and contemplation on behalf of the strangers, as they are his own self.¹¹³ They act as a catalyst for Merton's discovery of a new, wider matrix for writing about the contemplative inner self's compassion¹¹⁴ and point towards a deeper integration of autobiography, contemplative life and the identity of the inner self.

In the following section, we will give an account of theologian Christopher Pramuk's claim that Merton's breakthrough to *Sophia* in the poem, *Hagia Sophia*, marks the birth of a new hermeneutic of engagement with the world.

1:4. Is *Sophia* a 'unifying key'? (Pramuk)

Sixteen years after the first major work of theology on Merton, *Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton's Christ*,¹¹⁵ Christopher Pramuk has produced a stunning theological work on Merton's theology, *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton*.¹¹⁶ He begins with the thesis that *Sophia* – the unseen Christ - is the central theme of Merton's mature Christology, a theme which propelled the development of his theological imagination at a time of social and political and religious upheaval.

It is a theme which Pramuk states is a modern case of 'dogmatic searching' or discernment in response to the signs of the times.¹¹⁷ At the heart of the book lies his exegesis of the poem *Hagia Sophia*, which he describes as the most lyrical and daring meditation on the Wisdom figure of *Sophia*.

¹¹³ Ibid, 158.

¹¹⁴ Kilcourse, *Ace of Freedoms*, 91.

¹¹⁵ Kilcourse, *Ace of Freedoms*. This was the first exclusively theological treatment of Merton's work.

¹¹⁶ Pramuk, *Sophia*. The book evolved out of Pramuk's doctoral dissertation. Pramuk received his PhD from Notre Dame University, Indiana in 2007.

¹¹⁷ Pramuk, *Sophia*, xxviii.

The primacy of the poem *Hagia Sophia* therefore, is as a free and creative working out of what Pramuk sees as Merton's mature Christology and his poetic sacramental imagination in an apocalyptic key. Pramuk narrates the experiences that Merton had on his way to penning *Hagia Sophia*¹¹⁸ and notes that the birth of *Sophia* in Merton's imagination was not fleshless but radically incarnational, allowing him to see all areas of life as a unity.¹¹⁹ Pramuk sees the figure of Proverb in Merton's dream and realised in the Louisville experience, as the working out of God's anthropology.'¹²⁰ The phrase suggests a radical intimacy between God and human freedom and¹²¹ suggests a call to prophetic action in the here and now.¹²² Merton scholar Daniel P. Horan is in agreement with Pramuk, identifying this as resonating well with the theological anthropology of Karl Rahner and those who follow his thinking– a point also made by Kilcourse in *Ace of Freedoms*.¹²³

However, as Pramuk acknowledges, Merton is known as an apophatic thinker¹²⁴ and as a mystical theologian, a poet of the presence of God.¹²⁵ Is Merton for instance, using the medium of the poem to challenge complacent images of God that most Christians (and Christian theologians will bring to the text),¹²⁶ as Pramuk claims? This claim appears at odds with the traditional Marian devotion penned by Merton in *Hagia Sophia*:¹²⁷ 'God enters into

¹¹⁸ Pramuk, *Sophia*, 11-17.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 19.

¹²⁰ Pramuk, *Sophia*, 80.

¹²¹ Pramuk, *Sophia*, 80. The phrase 'God's anthropology' is coined by Edward Kaplan, an American Merton scholar, who states, 'Instead of remaining the object of human consciousness, God becomes experienced as the Subject of which the person is the object. The Bible is God's anthropology, not human theology.' Pramuk agrees strongly with this view and endorses it and describes it as an 'extraordinary statement which captures something essential.' (80)

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ George Kilcourse, *Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton's Christ*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), 4.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 291.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 293.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 211.

¹²⁷ Merton, *Collected Poems*, 370.

creation. Through her wise answer, through her obedient understanding, through the sweet yielding consent of Sophia....¹²⁸

Pramuk acknowledges that his poetic interpretation is a thought experiment and is not about labelling or enlisting God in a particular political context,¹²⁹ but the privileging of the category *Sophia* over traditional Christological categories could carry that risk. Again, what is not entirely clear is any political intent in Merton's employment of gender pronouns in the prose poem.¹³⁰ There are however autobiographical links to this naming, as well as links to traditional mystical language, as we saw in the last section. Furthermore, Merton himself is not sure what to make of his poem: 'It is pretty, but my theology is strange in it. It needs revision and formulation.'¹³¹ Even if we acknowledge that the poem now no longer belongs to Merton exclusively, we should still 'let Merton, be Merton'¹³² and avoid reading for agendas beyond the scope of the poem.

Sophia as a form in Pramuk's reading, de-centres traditional terminology and is deliberately and consciously 'fluid,'¹³³ even slippery, which allows, '...something to breakthrough, an inner music to be heard, indeed to be enjoyed in the wide-ranging symphony that comprises his life.'¹³⁴ This kind of theologising would therefore, be ever-responsive to the here and now, and involve a living and creative component, a form of generous wisdom-seeking. As Pramuk is mindful of the problem of intelligibility of Christian faith as

¹²⁸ Ibid. For example, in Pramuk's exegesis of the *Hagia Sophia*, drawing on the work of Susan McCaslin, Mary's crowning of Christ is suggested as 'an act of feminine power,' (206), subverting traditional notions, as it is Mary empowering Christ and sending him out. This image however is misleading in my view, as Mary is empowered precisely because of her own readiness or fiat to allow God to work in her. This traditional understanding is brought out by Merton in his poem and it is not clear what is 'complacent' about it.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 209.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Merton, *Turning Towards the World*, 230.

¹³² Pramuk, *Sophia*, 27.

¹³³ Ibid., xxx. Pramuk uses the word 'fluid' to describe his reading of Merton's poem not just Christo-centrally but theo-centrally or with a universalist metaphysic at play.

¹³⁴ Ibid., xxii.

communicated today,¹³⁵ what concerns him is not just what the tradition says (its faith content) but how it is said (its form).¹³⁶

Pramuk presents a tantalising range of ideas resulting from the poem; however, is not this very fluidity in danger of obscuring the poem's origin as a response to Merton's own experiences and range of encounters? As we saw in the previous section, the poem is bound up with autobiography - a point Pramuk acknowledges - as well as the contemplative's prayerful response of joy linked to his monastic practice and monk's compassion for the world.¹³⁷ Pramuk however, places emphasis on Merton as a seeker of wisdom whose style offers a new way of doing Christology via the translation of *Sophia* as a theological form to the West. In the next section, we will explore the theme of *Sophia* as a 'method of catholicity.'

1:4:1. Is the theme of *Sophia* a 'method of catholicity'? (Pramuk)

The inner harmonising key of Merton's thought is also described by Pramuk as Merton's 'method of catholicity.'¹³⁸ The way is catholic in its sources, detects key points of tradition, and imaginatively enables fresh readings of the signs of the times. Merton is a stylist of a particular way of doing theology - a theologian of 'the everyday' or of 'every text.'¹³⁹

¹³⁵ Daniel P. Horan, 'Book Review Symposium: Christopher Pramuk: *Sophia – The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton*,' *The Merton Annual* 23 (2010): 264. Horan criticises the readability of the Pramuk's book, as written in a complex academic style, with text that is a challenge to read at times. It is therefore difficult to see how the book can be accessible in its present form to a wider, general audience. Also, Merton scholar Bonnie B. Thurston critiques the book's style and theological structure, 'It is written in a dense style and its theological framing did not 'always illuminate Merton's thought,' Bonnie B. Thurston, 'Book Review: Christopher Pramuk, *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton*,' *The Merton Journal* 17, no.1 (2010): 48.

¹³⁶ Pramuk, *Sophia*, 24.

¹³⁷ See Merton, *Conjectures*, 158.

¹³⁸ Pramuk, *Sophia*, 7.

¹³⁹ Daniel P. Horan, 'Book Review Symposium: Christopher Pramuk: *Sophia – The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton*,' *The Merton Annual* 23 (2010): 262. Central to all the thinkers Pramuk employs is the sense that human experience is necessary for theology. (Ibid.).

Pramuk claims that Merton's memory of *Sophia* is not only the fruit of much study but also an attempt to restore the sophiological tradition to the West, 'The intentionality and depth of realisation in *Hagia Sophia* are undeniable - yet there is no artifice, no hidden agenda anywhere in its lines.'¹⁴⁰ He develops a sophiological framework for his claim that the narrative, performative and poetic imagination was the key medium through which Merton incorporated the theme of Wisdom/*Sophia* into his Christology.¹⁴¹

The style involves recovering and retrieving fragmentary forms in the Christian tradition which are forgotten or repressed and must be correlated with the present. For Pramuk, this means opening theology to a plurality of forms and pinpointing in Merton his remembrance of *Sophia* from the Russian Sophiologists, Evdokimov and Bulgakov.¹⁴² From this mapping *Sophia* emerges as a theological form, and as the systematic structure of Merton's mature Christology.¹⁴³ *Sophia* is the fruit, argues Pramuk, of Merton's study of the Fathers, Zen, the Russians, lectio divina amongst other things but that the poem in which the memory of *Sophia* is invoked, '...can become a privileged meeting-place for the encounter with God, the one God of all peoples.'¹⁴⁴ Thus, he is excavating what he considers to be a pivotal wisdom hermeneutic which, when properly understood, could become a 'way' of mediating between different groups, whether interreligious, feminist or secular. Merton

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 208. Despite the apparent centrality of *Sophia* in Merton's theology, Pramuk admits that Merton never tried to develop a formal sophiology as such along the lines of the Russian Sophiologists. – It is more of a key running in, 'his most enduring works.'

¹⁴¹ Daniel P. Horan, Book Review Symposium, *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton*, Christopher Pramuk, *The Merton Annual* 23 (2010):262.

¹⁴² Ibid., 23 (26). To help him chart a course for Merton, Pramuk employs David Tracy's suggestion of searching for the right form and content for doing theology and on Tracy's work on the category of imagination.

¹⁴³ According to Daniel P. Horan, 'This assertion again highlights Pramuk's efforts to de-centre the popular status quo reading of Merton as unhelpful for modern theological enquiry.' Daniel P. Horan OFM, Edward K. Kaplan, Lynn R Szabo, 'Review Symposium, Christopher Pramuk: *Sophia-The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton*,' *The Merton Annual* 23 (2010): 261.

¹⁴⁴ Pramuk, *Sophia*, 209.

presents the type of faith which steers a course between ‘totalitarian rationality and self-present subjectivity.’¹⁴⁵

The poem *Hagia Sophia* is best grasped, Pramuk suggests, in its ‘performance’ so that when read, the text becomes, ‘the occasion for a merging of the way of knowledge and the way of love’¹⁴⁶ and the moment of responsive-remembrance as her name ‘...awakens in us a sense of mercy, communion and presence, *Sophia*.’¹⁴⁷ According to Pramuk, ‘Thomas Merton had embraced the sophiological world-view as fully his own and had begun to translate it with intellectual and poetic vitality to the West,’¹⁴⁸ so much so that the biblical name of wisdom or *Sophia*,

... is not mere wordplay for Merton but bears the analogical capacity to awaken in the responsive human community an authentic memory of God, a palpable hope for human imagination and a real Presence in whom we, “live and move and have our being.”¹⁴⁹

In summary, Pramuk’s ‘method of catholicity’ is a way of negotiating and mediating between a host of ideas and symbols from tradition, lyrically expressed in the term *Sophia* and performed in the poem *Hagia Sophia* in a way which meets the needs of contemporary agendas. In the next section, I intend to evaluate Pramuk’s thesis and suggest where problems might lie in this approach to Merton as a theologian of wisdom and as a contemporary presentation of his theology.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 29.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 196.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 207. Pramuk lists all the possible resonances that can be ascribed to the image of *Sophia* – an image; it is evocative and superabundant in the sheer number of motifs at play: ‘Who then is *Hagia Sophia*? She is the Spirit of Christ but more than Christ. She is the Love joining Father, Son and Holy Spirit that longs for incarnation from the very beginning. She is Jesus our Mother and Mary, the *Theotokos*. She is the pivot (*le pointe vierge*) of nature, *Natura naturans*, and all creation in God from the beginning. Perhaps most of all, Merton’s *Sophia* is our “true self”, when we, (like Mary seat of Wisdom) allow Christ to be birthed in us... The remembrance of *Sophia* opens onto a mystical-political spirituality of engagement with the world.’

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 162.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 169.

1:5. Evaluation

Although Pramuk charts successfully a series of themes in Merton's work related to wisdom, it remains unclear first of all, whether he has indeed shown that Merton's reading of the Russian Sophiologists was decisive in his turn to the world in the late 1950s; or that the prose poem *Hagia Sophia* could herald a new way of conceiving theology imaginatively, '...its invitation into a mosaic experience of God, beyond traditional doctrinal presentations.'¹⁵⁰

Firstly, Pramuk relies on Paul Valliere's interpretation of Bulgakov's *Sophia*¹⁵¹ to justify the sophiological tradition as a new way of conceiving postmodern theology, despite the cautious reception of *Sophia* as a trinitarian concept - bordering on condemnation - in eastern orthodox circles.¹⁵² Furthermore, he only deals with Merton's reading of Russian theology, especially Bulgakov, although Merton ranged more widely into eastern orthodox thought through writers Olivier Clement, Alexander Schmemmann and Athanasian sources. Indeed at times, as Scruggs comments, 'it seems as though Pramuk has left Merton behind to concentrate on the Russians.'¹⁵³

Moreover, Pramuk admits that Merton was influenced by a wide range of mentors and his own capacious reading while *Sophia* was one metaphor among many incorporated into his poetry and meditation on the general theme of wisdom.¹⁵⁴ Pramuk charts moments in Merton's books when he mentions *Sophia* but there is a lack of decisive primary sources to

¹⁵⁰ Pramuk, *Sophia*, 285.

¹⁵¹ Paul Valliere, *Modern Russian Theology: Bukharev, Soloviev and Bulgakov - Orthodox Theology in a New Key* (Edinburgh: T.&T.Clark, 2000).

¹⁵² Ibid., 287.

¹⁵³ Ryan Scruggs, 'Illuminating Wisdom,' *The Merton Seasonal* 35, no.1 (2010):36.

¹⁵⁴ Bonnie B. Thurston, 'Book Review: Christopher Pramuk, *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton*,' *The Merton Journal* 17, no.1 (2010): 48. Merton scholar Bonnie Thurston identifies several shortcomings and omissions in the book: 'There is no evidence of readily available primary material from the various Merton archives on subjects the book treats...secondary material on Merton is thin and uneven,' Ibid, although Pramuk conducts interesting comparisons between John Henry Newman and Merton and Abraham Joshua Heschel.

shore the claim up.¹⁵⁵ Therefore, it seems *Sophia* could be interpreted as simply a ‘sustained metaphor’ for the humanity of God; one which Merton incorporated into his repertoire of poetic metaphors.

Secondly, although Pramuk is incisive in the tracing of *sapiential* or *sophianic* consciousness permeating Merton’s works, he claims this is a method that helps Merton to critique theologically, contemporary writings, poetry and social issues. It is my contention however - through dialogue with Balthasar and Maximus - that Merton’s theology arises from his particular understanding of the world as saturated in Christ, reading the patterns and themes in modern literary and poetic narratives with sapiential and Christological lenses. Merton’s sapiential consciousness is a way of seeing, responding to and living the contemplative life while sharing its fruits with others. This way includes radical self-questioning and searching and using a sustained metaphor or theme for, ‘the central wisdom that comes in tune with the divine and cosmic music and is saved by love, yes, even eros.’¹⁵⁶ This approach re-enforces the claim that Merton is indeed a theologian of wisdom - one who retrieves eastern and western sources and a unified way of seeing.

Thirdly, this reading of Merton’s epistemology would align him more closely with Balthasar and the eastern orthodox theologians than with Rahner; and through his absorption of their work, it suggests that Merton is a link or bridge-builder between western and eastern theologies rooted in the fathers, and which long to reclaim a vision of the cosmos as a unity shot through with the presence of God, in a scientific and increasingly technological age.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁵ Christopher Pramuk, *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton*, ‘Book Review Symposium,’ *The Merton Annual*, 23 (2010): 262.

¹⁵⁶ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Tunbridge Wells: Burns and Oates, 1995), 11.

¹⁵⁷ Mary B. Cunningham and Elizabeth Theokritoff, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Eastern Orthodox Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 68.

However, Pramuk opts to interpret Merton within a Rahnerian framework of ‘mediated immediacy’, mediated by the inner freedom of the person in their deepest self (supernatural existential) and shaped in a social matrix. This move will be evaluated more closely alongside Balthasar and Bulgakov in a following section of the thesis.

Fourthly, although Pramuk’s attempt is praise-worthy for trying to construct an ‘interdisciplinary bridge’ between theology and other fields, as well as contribute to contemporary Christology, one wonders whether this feat has been fully realised. He is consciously aware that he might be in danger of over-stating his case at various moments in the book, acknowledging that Merton’s Christology conforms to the traditional pattern of identifying wisdom with the second person of the Trinity¹⁵⁸ and that Merton’s *Hagia Sophia* is more a poetic free-play and meditation rather than an example of a kind of systematic theology of presence.¹⁵⁹

Although Pramuk’s critique assists us in identifying theological and literary influences on Merton, particularly in tracing the development of his sapiential consciousness, he has not considered sufficiently his poetics and genealogy of philosophical and literary influences. He risks reading more into Merton’s meditation than is there,¹⁶⁰ by overlaying his own method and assumptions onto Merton’s poetry, so becoming,

...a theologian reaching for the means by which to uncover the poem’s language - its centricity in Logos, the Word made flesh – in the black marks on white pages that

¹⁵⁸ Pramuk, *Sophia*, 211.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Dr. Lynn Szabo, a Merton scholar who reads Thomas Merton from a literary/poetic perspective, makes this criticism. Szabo also takes issue with the lack of reference in Pramuk to the influence on Merton’s poetics of the Romantic poets like Blake and Wordsworth, as well as the American Transcendentalist poets – in the conception of Wisdom in the poem, *Hagia Sophia*: ‘These surely were the literary forebears for Merton’s embrace of *Sophia*, the Eros of God in creation, “the general dance.” The intersections with Merton’s poetic imagination cannot be overstated for the arousal of his mystical poetics.’ Lynn R. Szabo, ‘Book Review Symposium: Christopher Pramuk: *Sophia – The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton*,’ *The Merton Annual* 23 (2010): 273.

script the poetic genre, uniquely in its rupture of the lines of syntax, parataxis and ultimately intellection.¹⁶¹

Moreover, Pramuk seems to be utilising language as ‘symbol at play’ to be approached by the human imagination and he does not do justice to the idea that Merton’s poetry is a response to manifestations of ‘wisdom’ with its words, silences and absences:

... Language is not confined to its powers as an instrument of communication or as a site of communion. Its ground is the incarnate/Logos/Word made flesh, in and of itself. As in the ‘general dance’ like Sophia, language is one of the essences of God himself – *analogia entis* – in which created being including human language is in analogical relation to divine being.¹⁶²

In Merton’s poetry, the incarnation is ‘embodied in experience’ and cannot be restricted to one type of mediation:

Hagia Sophia is literary mysticism in its purest poetic form not excluding but also not limited to any form of enquiry, case study, disciplinary initiatives etc.; Trinitarian, sophianic and cosmic in its proportions, primarily because it has been conceived in the language of poetry which is the word/Word of Genesis, of the Incarnation and of the resurrection of Christ himself without mediation or proposition – of God.¹⁶³

In other words, Pramuk is in grave danger of prioritising word-play and performance and at times sounding a form of musical theology which is hard to pin down, rather misreading the purpose of Merton’s mystically charged analogues in *Hagia Sophia*. However, Pramuk is clear that for him, all language is mediated and sacramental language is no different, commenting, ‘... if a poem falls in the forest, does anybody hear?’¹⁶⁴ In his view, he is questioning how one can build an unmediated sacramentality without presupposing the mediations of Word, Incarnation, ‘...all of which shape and give positive (loving) content to

¹⁶¹ Ibid. 272.

¹⁶² Ibid. 274 Szabo describes the prose poem as the magnum opus of *analogia entis* and *theoria* manifested in Merton’s understanding of Christ and to accept Pramuk’s version of *Hagia Sophia* as a new way to do theology would be ‘privileging an aesthetic different from any other of Merton’s writings.’ (274).

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

our communal confidence in the sacramental (analogical) power of language.’¹⁶⁵ He wonders whether a poem can be ‘sacramental’ where it evokes in its performance a positively demonic framework of meaning.¹⁶⁶

Is Pramuk making a valid point in trying to present theology in a contemporary key, to locate presence or ‘something breaking through’ via the all-inclusive Sophia-Christology he identifies in Merton? The problem is that the all-encompassing inclusivity leads to a host of different symbols and metaphors coming into play as the book proceeds. Merton is presented as a ‘virtuoso performer’ of religious language and symbols, appropriating the Russian sophiological tradition into his prose poem – as if it were the manifesto for a new way of ‘doing’ Christology. One begins to wonder what constitutes exclusion from the embrace of *Sophia*.

Further suspicion is aroused in Chapter three when Pramuk describes how Merton utilises religious symbols in superabundance such as ‘Logos,’ ‘Christ,’ ‘Spirit’ and ‘Sophia’ not as he assures, ‘word-magic’ or ‘aesthetic fantasies’ but as ‘sacraments, vessels of memory, presence and hope.’¹⁶⁷ This gives the impression that the author is treating words like ‘Logos,’ which has a high Trinitarian lineage, tangentially at best in describing it as ‘sacrament’ or ‘vessel of memory.’¹⁶⁸ In fact he also describes the theological symbol as a ‘privileged vessel of memory’, a ‘locus of participatory hope,’¹⁶⁹ formed in the faith community and lived out in daily life, yet he is at pains to remind the reader that Merton is not a word-magician practising literary or aesthetic magic. But if Merton is not a word-magician,

¹⁶⁵ Ibid. 280.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 80-81.

¹⁶⁸ Pramuk presses the point again towards the end of his book when he implores the reader to ‘...remember that the sophiological perspective is alive to God’s presence in the world, never as ‘abstract essence’ or merely symbolically but concretely, sacramentally, more than literally.’ Pramuk, *Sophia*, 297.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 114f.

perhaps it is Pramuk who is. Of course Pramuk is searching for a new idiom in contemporary theology to communicate the *sensus fidei* but if terms like ‘Logos’ are vehicles for free-play and only have meaning in performance, where is the sense of sacramentality as presence? One wonders in fact whether he is putting the theological ‘cart before the horse’ in stressing that meaning arises from performance. Pramuk’s endeavour is to locate Merton amidst a world of historical consciousness and to a ‘secular postmodern audience,’ that is, ‘the common intellectual currency’ but one wonders whether it is audience reception and reaching for the means to sound ‘relevant’ that is Pramuk’s theological priority. Yet Merton described himself as - ‘marginal’ and ‘deliberately irrelevant’¹⁷⁰ – surely, it is also in his role as a counter-cultural critic that Merton remains enduring – rather than as a Christian representative of ‘relevance’ for the notice of a wider audience.¹⁷¹

In addition, it seems that Pramuk’s sophisticated theological musicality glides over the way Merton links contemplation and action in his monastic vocation and it drives a wedge between *ressourcement* scholars like Balthasar and Merton, in preferring to place Merton alongside Karl Rahner. In the following section, I will turn to consideration of Pramuk’s claim that Merton is situated in alignment with Rahner and the Russian theologians in his mediating of Christianity to the modern world.

¹⁷⁰ Merton, *Asian Journal*, 305. Merton states: ‘In speaking for monks, I am really speaking for a very strange kind of person, a marginal person, because the monk in the modern world is no longer an established person with an established place in society. He is a marginal person who withdraws deliberately to the margins of society with a view to deepen fundamental human experience.’ (Ibid.). Merton also notes, ‘On monks and hippies and poets irrelevant? No, we are deliberately irrelevant.’ (206). The monk takes up a deliberately marginal position in order to be a ‘witness to life.’ (Ibid.) So this would mean not conforming to dominant contemporary agendas but seeing life from the peripheries, and commenting on it.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

1:6. Is it Merton and Balthasar or Merton and Rahner?

In considering Thomas Merton as a ‘wise theologian’ it is worth pausing to assess if Merton can be located along a distinct theological trajectory. Christopher Pramuk argues that in his last decade, Merton’s opening to a form of imaginative catholicity¹⁷² aligns him with the theology of Karl Rahner. He questions whether Balthasar’s theology can ‘speak’ intelligible theology for contemporary times¹⁷³ within a wider pluralist society of competing narratives.

However, I contend, against Pramuk, that Merton is a wise theologian precisely because he avoids the kind of Kantian epistemology imported by Rahner into his theology. In his attempt to persuade the reader that Merton’s view of the world is in line with Rahner,¹⁷⁴ Pramuk does not acknowledge the unity and reciprocity between spirituality and theology in Balthasar’s thought.

Secondly, Pramuk’s criticism of Balthasar’s theology as not dramatic in the temporal realm suggests that he is apparently unaware of the concrete realism of Balthasar’s theology,¹⁷⁵ its creative way of breaking familiar theological categories which point to new

¹⁷² Pramuk, *Sophia*, 21.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 23.

¹⁷⁴ Pramuk suggests that the lesson he learned from pondering Merton was that he could not fit his Christology into pre-conceived categories. See Pramuk, *Sophia*, xxiii. Yet further on he asserts, ‘To identify Merton as a mystical or sapiential theologian is to place him in the orbit of another towering theologian of the twentieth century, Karl Rahner.’ Ibid., 21. In this way, he *is* identifying Merton with a particular way of doing theology, which is not above categorisation.

¹⁷⁵ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Moment of Christian Witness* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), 127-130. Balthasar savages the humanistic idea of ‘anonymous Christians’ as a way of living in the world with ‘well-meaning agnostics.’ He gives a dramatic reading of what he thinks the Christian today is called to witness to. Rather than Balthasar portraying a Christian as recoiling from action in the world, he shows that real action to the point of sacrifice is the decisive question, ‘What am I prepared to die for?’ For Balthasar, *the analogia entis - analogia libertatis* (82) which affirms created freedom is fully realised the more one gives up to and participates in uncreated freedom... His main objection to Rahner and Enlightenment philosophy or ‘the modern system’ is in its ‘hominised world’ or ‘turn to the subject,’ which he thinks collapses into idealism and materialism. Rowan Williams notes, ‘... perhaps Balthasar’s harsh clear-sightedness is an important disturbance of any easy ‘humanist’ convergences in our world.’ Rowan Williams, ‘Balthasar and Rahner,’ in John Riches, ed., *The Analogy of Beauty* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986), 33.

possibilities,¹⁷⁶ or of Balthasar's resonance with the theology of orthodox theologians like Bulgakov in themes (following Maximus the Confessor) like participation and eschatology, treated in their 'densely metaphorical idiom.'¹⁷⁷

Thirdly, his advocacy of Rahner's view, that only by turning to the subject can one engage with the modern world, underplays Rahner's employment of enlightenment categories to ground his theology which does not account for Merton's growing understanding of the role of his own monastic vocation as living and speaking in the 'present moment...'.¹⁷⁸

However, if as I suggest, Merton is more aligned with Balthasar¹⁷⁹ and Orthodox writers, Merton emerges as a distinctive theologian who bridges east and west with the shared critique of Kantian epistemology; who is able to synthesise both an attention to history and humanity with patristic and mystical sources in a realised eschatology; who is fully open to the divine presence in the world through the participation of beings in relationship with each other and with creation.

1:6:1. No Spirituality without Theology

To be fair to Pramuk, he does acknowledge the similarity of interests of Merton and Balthasar, their retrievals of eastern and patristic thought, especially the cosmic synthesis of

¹⁷⁶ Karen Kilby, *Balthasar: A (Very) Critical Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MN: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2012), 167.

¹⁷⁷ Rowan Williams, 'Eastern Orthodox Theology,' in David F. Ford ed., with Rachel Muers, 3rd ed., *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology since 1918* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2013), 578.

¹⁷⁸ Rahner's style, although relatively unsystematic, is not easy reading and is described as 'famously dense' by J.A. Di Noia. He suggests Rahner's essays are written in a convoluted prose although they exhibit a direct and inventive treatment of theological themes. J.A. Di Noia, 'Karl Rahner', in David F. Ford ed., 2nd ed., *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 132.

¹⁷⁹ Williams notes that among western theologians, it is Balthasar's theology which stands closest to the theology of eastern orthodoxy. Williams, 'Eastern Orthodox Theology,' 578. Balthasar devotes an entire chapter of the second volume of his *Theo-drama* to praise of Soloviev's theology. The latter first developed sophiology as an idea and it was taken up later by Bulgakov. Balthasar suggests that the problem with it is it suggests a kind of pan-unity which tends towards idealism. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord, Vol. III, Lay Styles* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988).

Maximus Confessor.¹⁸⁰ He notes that like Balthasar, Merton's aesthetic arose from the biblical and eastern patristic tradition (with its accent on realised eschatology) and a wide engagement with literary, ecumenical and non-traditional sources. However, unlike Balthasar, he suggests Merton and the Russians made it central to their work to correlate a sophianic vision with historical events in the modern world, to forge a Christian humanism.¹⁸¹ In other words, he implies Balthasar neglects the fully cosmic dimension of patristic thought which incorporates human action in history.

However, because of this limitation in Balthasar, Pramuk, like some other American Merton scholars,¹⁸² makes the theological leap towards locating Merton in the orbit of Karl Rahner. He offers reasons for this. Rahner is a theologian who believed the insights of theologians and mystics should 'inform the living body of faith,' not separating spirituality from theology.¹⁸³

Pramuk admits that Balthasar and other *ressourcement* scholars such as de Lubac, were, like Rahner, committed to a manner of doing theology arising out of a life of prayer, communal life and doxology,¹⁸⁴ not suggestive of the remote or 'dry bones' theology of the manuals which so constrained the pre-Vatican II Church.

¹⁸⁰ Pramuk, *Sophia*, 26. It is an acknowledgement rather than a detailed account.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Another theologian who has located Merton in the orbit of Rahner is George Kilcourse, *Ace of Freedoms*, 3-5. He suggests that Rahner's concern to make theology more accessible and relevant by emphasising Christ's humanity and that Merton's achievement was his discovery of the humanity of Christ as a paradigm for our religious self-understanding. He did this by 'taking risks' with Christian tradition, particularly the Greek Fathers, and mirrored the kind of Christological renewal in the Church that Rahner was spearheading. However, he makes no reference to *ressourcement*, which Merton was reading, and which refused to separate nature from supernature, although he notes Merton's reading of eastern orthodoxy. As such, he is unable to see how Merton was synthesising western sapiential and eastern sophianic theology into his thinking and re-expressing this synthesis in a catholic idiom more aligned with the Thomism of Maritain.

¹⁸³ Pramuk, *Sophia*, 21.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid, 23.

Still further and more tellingly, Pramuk does not acknowledge the similar refusal on the part of Balthasar's project to sunder the spiritual from the theological. The latter laments the 'estrangement' of theology and spirituality from the high middle ages onward and the severance of dogmatic theology from mystical theology into distinct subjects.¹⁸⁵ His urge is to re-discover and restore 'a new unity' one where form and content are brought together. As revelation, such theology is aiming to understand in faith, is set forth by the use of reason, and is illuminated by faith and love.¹⁸⁶

It seems that Pramuk's concern for a theology which reflects living in intensifying prayer and doxology is indeed assumed by Balthasar. He suggests the most complete theologians of the early church and middle ages were 'embodied exemplars' or saints, who did not separate theology from their lives – theology, spirituality and ordinary living were unified.¹⁸⁷ The more intense their sense of God, the more intense became their theology.¹⁸⁸ The Christian vocation reflected a unity of faith with knowledge and an act of adoration and prayer. If that involved writing theology in a variety of genres and styles, Balthasar suggests this did not detract from being a theologian.¹⁸⁹ Balthasar's call for a return to such a unified

¹⁸⁵ Hans Urs von Balthasar, 'Theology and Sanctity,' *Explorations in Theology I: The Word made Flesh* (San Francisco; Ignatius Press, 1964), 189.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 194.

¹⁸⁷ Mark A. McIntosh comments that Balthasar's theology is expressed in terms of patterns drawn from spiritual life so he does not seek a division between spirituality and theology. Balthasar's Christ emulates Maximus the Confessor's understanding of Christ: the eternal Son possesses divine essence according to his particular mode of existence as the Son. So Christ's humanity is lived according to that pattern of life in perfect accord in human terms with the Son's eternal mode of existence. So the humanity of Jesus is in perfect accord with the Sonship of the eternal Word. Mark A. McIntosh, *Christology from Within*, 1.

¹⁸⁸ Balthasar comments that true theology is the theology of the saints, as its whole aim is to bring the whole person, intellectual and spiritual, into relation with God. It should also have the pattern of revelation at its heart. *Ibid.*, 196.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 206. All is done as Christian believers, members of the church faithful to revelation, therefore as theologians. For this standpoint, Balthasar draws upon St. Anselm to make the point of the importance of prayer in thinking and writing theology: 'I cannot seek you if you do not teach me how, nor find if you do not show yourself.' Through the disposition of prayer one seeks understanding of knowledge, seeking as an 'indwelling' property of faith which if deprived of it would cease to be faith. Balthasar also suggests that theology may well be written in what seems to be an 'amateurish' idiom because it must conform to its object because it seeks in

vision requires a disposition gradually lost with the advent scholastic manuals and a ‘theology of the desk,’¹⁹⁰ which split spirituality and knowledge. The concern for unity is a theme in Merton and *ressourcement* scholars like de Lubac and is directly related to their understanding of catholicity.¹⁹¹

However, Karen Kilby protests that Balthasar’s portrayal of saints is done in a rather generalised way, with ‘an incautious directness’ towards their inner disposition and feelings. She claims that this approach is either intellectually sloppy or a description given to him by his collaborator-friend Adrienne von Speyr.¹⁹² However, she offers no direct evidence for von Speyr’s involvement with the essay, only a selective quotation from near the end of the piece, which she suggests is illustrative of the whole. Kilby omits to note that Balthasar’s numerous examples of saints are drawn from sources in scripture, history and tradition, although written in the literary style of his distinctive idiom.¹⁹³ However, the key point remains that Balthasar advocates a return to a unified theology and spirituality.

1:6:2. Is it Merton and Balthasar or Merton and Rahner (Maximus the Confessor)

Pramuk’s next reason for enlisting Rahner rather than Balthasar as a western theological ‘mentor’ of Merton is due to his reading into Balthasar’s eschatology a lack of historicity,

prayer. Therefore how the writer expresses himself can differ markedly from the method of natural sciences or scientific theology. Augustine’s *Confessions* is a case in point, where Augustine does not speak dispassionately but he is no less a theologian. (207). Balthasar is suggesting that the genre or style is less important than the seeking of the object of knowledge within the disposition of prayer – this fits with Merton’s own informal style of theologising.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 208.

¹⁹¹ A. M. Allchin notes how significant it is that Merton’s lecture notes on the Fathers make absolutely no break between the New Testament writers and the post-apostolic writers. Scripture and tradition form one whole as do spirituality and theology. A. M. Allchin, ‘The Worship of the Whole Creation: Merton and the Eastern Fathers’ in Bernadette Dieker and Jonathan Montaldo eds., *Merton and Hesychasm: The Prayer of the Heart* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2003), 108.

¹⁹² Kilby, *Balthasar: A (very) Critical Introduction*, 158.

¹⁹³ Balthasar, *The Word Made Flesh*, 188-189. Balthasar outlines the perspectives of numerous saints such as Augustine, Ignatius and Bonaventure, basing his observations on their writings and lives, to illustrate how their lives formed a whole e.g. St. Ignatius Loyola and the *Spiritual Exercises*.

worldly fulfilment and apocalyptic expectation;¹⁹⁴ while Merton and the Russians realise, that ‘history matters.’¹⁹⁵ In other words, he reads in the two theologians two ways of evaluating a theological response to the modern world. Rahner’s ‘turn to the subject’ occurs because he thinks modern man is in danger of finding Christian doctrine mythological, thus ‘unintelligible,’ in a scientific age, whereas Balthasar’s response to the modern is that modernity itself presents a problem for Christianity.¹⁹⁶

However, Merton scholar A.M Allchin, reads Merton differently, as a theologian in the orbit of Balthasar, de Lubac and the Russian school,¹⁹⁷ whose study of history was ‘anything but antiquarian.’¹⁹⁸ In the context of the bitter experience of Nazism and fascism, *ressourcement* scholarship was stimulated and developed by contact with Russian theologians,¹⁹⁹ sharing in their opposition to post-Enlightenment rationalism, dualisms of faith and Kantian pure reason. This theology was therefore, profoundly contemporary in its aim to restore faith with reason, grace with nature.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁴ Pramuk, *Sophia*, 26.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 21.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ A.M. Allchin, ‘Worship of the Whole Creation,’ 105.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 106. What is interesting is how Pramuk quotes Allchin’s comments on aligning Merton with *ressourcement* scholars like Balthasar, de Lubac and LeClerq and relates them inappropriately to Rahner. See Pramuk, *Sophia*, 21-23. However, Rahner was not a member of this school, being primarily a philosopher rather than a patristics expert, so for me, Pramuk is forcing the materials to suit his own agenda of appropriating Merton into the Rahnerian tradition. Both the Sophiologists such as Bulgakov and Soloviev draw on western reactions to those tendencies such as Jacob Boehme and Schelling’s ‘world soul’ drawn on and admired but critiqued as idealist by Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord III: Lay styles*.

¹⁹⁹ The school of theologians of the Russian emigration Allchin is referring to was based in Paris in the 1930s and 40s and Merton is well aware of their writings in his lecture notes on Mystical and Ascetic theology. A.M. Allchin, ‘The Worship of the Whole Creation,’ 105-107. Allchin comments that Merton’s reading of the Russian theologians was broad, not just confined to the Sophiologists but writers such as Florensky, Berdyaev and Bulgakov, Schmemmann, Clement, Meyendorff and Lossky and the Athonite monk, Fr. Silouan. Ibid., 128.

²⁰⁰ The Radical Orthodoxy School led by John Milbank also argues, after Balthasar and de Lubac, that the work of theology must seek to overcome the ‘modern bastard dualisms,’ of modernity, which sever nature from grace and faith from reason. The theme of participation is also important. Milbank is critical though of both Balthasar’s and de Lubac’s ‘capitulation’ to papal authority and failure to tackle patriarchy in the church. John Milbank, *The Suspended Middle: Henri de Lubac and the Debate Concerning the Supernatural* (Grand Rapids, MN: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2005), 104.

In addition, Pramuk insists on aligning Merton with Rahner by attacking what he sees as the deficiencies of Balthasar, without making a sustained case for Rahner. Crucially, Pramuk neglects to unpack the key link between Merton, Balthasar and Russian theologians like Bulgakov - the cosmic thought of Maximus – beyond aesthetic retrievals.²⁰¹ The latter suggests each created thing has its own reality and manner of reflecting God's glory; yet he can also say God is everything – there is no being apart from God. This vision contains the whole of created existence and the freedom and destiny of humanity is inseparable from the work of creation: participation in God or 'deification' (*theosis*) is the goal of human existence.²⁰²

Following Maximus, Balthasar suggests that if all knowledge is essentially participatory, having a place within a network of relations, it is inseparable from history and praxis - there is no neutral 'teachable truth.'²⁰³ The beauty, glory and purposes of God can never be determined in advance by a theological *a priori*.²⁰⁴ Following Maximus, it is possible to see 'God in all things' and grow in knowledge of his presence as a cosmic indwelling in creation, 'The mystery is not divine namelessness but the freedom of the infinite to choose to *be expressive*, to disclose ultimate love in the finite.'²⁰⁵ Finite beings who participate in being

²⁰¹ This is clear in Merton's lecture notes on Maximus, where he quotes and paraphrases Balthasar's book, *Cosmic Liturgy*, to reinforce the point that there is no division between the contemplative and the cosmos, for example: Balthasar says, 'The meaning of each natural thing and the meaning of every law and commandment is to be an incarnation of the divine word; to realise fully its proper nature or its proper law is to co-operate fully in the total realisation of the Word in the world.' See Merton, *Merton and Hesychasm*, 436-7.

²⁰² John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes*, rev.2nd ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 1983), 163.

²⁰³ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 1, *Prolegomena*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius press, 1988), 16.

²⁰⁴ Williams, 'Balthasar and Rahner,' 13-14. Williams comments that Rahner's concept of *Vorgriff* or 'formal pre-understanding' sets out that which determines in advance the possibility of categorical knowledge. It opens up the idea that when the spirit responds to its pre-conceptual grasp of the transcendent, it is in fact responding to grace unknowingly. So in advance of formal knowledge of the particularity of Jesus Christ, one can potentially know Jesus of Nazareth, its fullness realised in formal acceptance of Christianity (17).

²⁰⁵ Mark A. McIntosh, *Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 95.

share its freedom, and as this freedom grows, they become more themselves by participating in being, and more free to be themselves through participation in infinite freedom. This movement is not regarded as a transport beyond one's nature but a completion of that nature in its very structure.²⁰⁶ This suggests that in order to be oneself, one must go out of oneself towards an - other in encounter and participation in the world around. The full implications of this are realised in 'readiness' to fulfil one's God-given potential.

However, Balthasar could press the idea of participation borrowed from Maximus further by not imposing constraints on its movement in time, through the analogy of proportion. This has led to criticism that he is framing the action to fit a specific ecclesial shape.²⁰⁷ Pramuk is correct to locate some reluctance in Balthasar to embrace the full cosmic implications of patristic thought, although he describes it unfairly as 'neglect.' Instead, Merton's reading of the Russians expands the dynamism of Maximus' cosmic liturgy of participation and freedom further than Balthasar's analogy of proportion allows. Like Balthasar and the Russians, Merton sees the human person as 'in the middle' of a network of participating relations, in a cosmic order which does not allow for a neutral standpoint away from the action.

²⁰⁶ Dalzell, *The Dramatic Encounter of Divine and Human Freedom*, 70.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 292. Here Dalzell argues that there is room for a development of Balthasar's thought for an application to the social plane of co-operation with God which he argues for in the realm of the individual and inter-personal. Balthasar stresses an interpersonal relationship *with* God on the one hand and an interpersonal relationship *in* God on the other, with the accent on the individual's 'yes' to the other as the peak of their subjectivity, 'Rather than the transformation of worldly structures, it is the transformation of the heart that interests him, the liberation of the individual's liberty.' Dalzell suggests that the restriction comes because the analogy of proportion schema adopted by Balthasar in the Dramatics has not been left behind but still operative. Balthasar's theological interest lies rather more in the relationship of an inter-personal and relational trinity than a social one, that is, the inner life of God is the site of dramatic encounter between Father and Son as a presupposition of human-divine encounter – centred on the Son's 'Yes.' Dalzell suggests that it is the influence of Karl Barth on Balthasar which gives rise to his emphasis on the centrality of a Christologically-centred analogy of being in the Dramatics. (279). Further criticisms of Balthasar's position and Merton's corrective will be discussed in the next chapter.

Moreover, Merton's interpretation can serve as a corrective to Balthasar in not placing a distinctive ecclesial shape on the activity of God in humanity and creation. Merton's reflections on participation in infinite freedom within creation is found in his reading of Maximus and a conflation of ideas gleaned in Bulgakov and Berdyaev, documented in his journals.²⁰⁸ He is struck by Bulgakov's dynamic description of realised eschatology as a 'powerful Pentecost'²⁰⁹ in Christian life, an idea which becomes more important for Merton than the figure of *Sophia*, as it helps clarify his monastic vocation as a 'cosmic vocation', as he notes in a journal entry,

Most important of all - man's creative vocation to prepare, consciously, the ultimate triumph of divine wisdom. Man the microcosm, the heart of the universe, is the one called to bring about the fusion of the cosmic and historical process in the final invocation of God's wisdom and love.²¹⁰

Merton's vocation may have involved a separate way of living yet it could not entail flight from the world but instead going out of oneself towards the world.²¹¹ In other words, his growing realisation of interests in matters in the world develops precisely from his patristic understanding of man as a cosmic mediator or 'microcosm',²¹² between the universal and particular and realising his life of prayer, worship and contemplation has to be lived in a

²⁰⁸ Merton, *A Search for Solitude*, 85-89.

²⁰⁹ This is a phrase which, Valliere comments, is related to Bulgakov's theology of grace and a way of explaining the role of the Holy Spirit in the world. After the incarnation of the Son into the world as a human being, the Spirit, concealing itself, reveals its divinity through the outpouring of divine gifts. The Spirit remains in the world to 'effect the continuing Pentecost.' Church festivals and liturgies become powerful festivals of the Spirit's work but every human-being is in a sense a 'spirit-bearer.' See Valliere, *Modern Russian Theology*, 354-355.

²¹⁰ Merton, *A Search for Solitude*, 86.

²¹¹ A.M. Allchin, 'Our Lives a Powerful Pentecost: Merton's Meeting with Russian Christianity' in Bernadette Dieker and Jonathan Montaldo, eds., *Merton and Hesychasm: The Prayer of the Heart* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2003), 126.

²¹² Merton, *A Search for Solitude*, 86-87. Merton's journal entries summarise the works of Bulgakov and Berdyaev, before making a commitment to unify in himself with the thought of east and west, of the Greek and Latin fathers, in order to bring about the unity of the Church – containing both and transcending them both in Christ.

cosmic sense – in solidarity with creation and in real attention to the discipline of personal prayer.²¹³

In summary, Balthasar embraces the notions of participation and freedom but places constraints on their movement in time, whereas Merton stresses the person's relation to God by embracing the fully cosmic dimension of Maximus. The next section deals with Merton's concept of time and presence and it is further suggested that there are greater resonances between Merton and Balthasar than between Merton and Rahner.

1:6:3. Is it Merton and Balthasar or Merton and Rahner (time and presence)

Merton thinks through his understanding of time and presence in his reading of Orthodox writers such as Olivier Clement, (not referenced by Pramuk). Indeed, revising his understanding of time, as a 'perpetual present and a time of positive expectation,' helps Merton evaluate the space of the 'common life' of the monastery and beyond and his search for a form of 'silent action.'²¹⁴ This perspective grew out of a sense of obligation to speak for 'true civic identity'²¹⁵ and to re-claim a space where 'speech' or 'restored' language in redeemed time becomes possible again. According to Rowan Williams, this 'deeper discovery' of eastern orthodox thought takes on more significance than the notion of *Sophia* in Merton's valuation of the space of the common life in the monastery and beyond.²¹⁶

On this reading, Merton is offering a similar critique of modernity as Balthasar and an understanding of language which draws a similar diagnosis of the state of the public space.

²¹³ Merton notes in his journal, 'In the hermitage, one must pray or go to seed. The pretence of prayer will not suffice. ...One prays to pray. And the reality of death....' Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Waters of Life: The Journals of Thomas Merton Volume Five, 1963-1965*, ed., Robert E. Daggy (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), 174-5.

²¹⁴ Rowan Williams, *A Silent Action: Engagements with Thomas Merton* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2011), 62.

²¹⁵ Ibid., 55 (63).

²¹⁶ Ibid., 62.

Balthasar argues that language and speech is the means to open the human subject to 'being'. It is sacramental and it testifies to the fact that consciousness is not self-originated but is called to response, not just linguistically but in speech, symbol, action and relation. As Rowan Williams suggests:

Balthasar's theo-dramatic may be rather unsystematic and aphoristic but is remarkable for its historicity of understanding, the inseparability of the knowing subject's mental history from the encompassing structures of language and culture.²¹⁷

Hence, Balthasar is also clear that it is not sufficient to argue that Christian image or language gives shape to existing forms of action – as he accuses Rahner of doing – but that distinctive forms of action arise in response to a fundamental address or call and are interwoven with speech and image in a single process of interpretation – a testimony of love to love.²¹⁸ Even the simple response of a child to the loving smile of its mother is illustrative of a discovery of openness to being and this encounter opens up unlimited possibilities.²¹⁹

Conversely, Rahner's theory of knowledge, essentially Kantian, links grace with nature via this a priori in the nature of knowing.²²⁰ Difference is played down between being and existence so that events in salvation history simply make explicit what was there from the beginning.²²¹ The problem with this for critics is that it tends towards naturalising the

²¹⁷ Williams, 'Balthasar and Rahner,' 29. Williams is also clear that there are convergences with Ricoeur and Balthasar when one widens the notion of the text to include all systems of significant human action capable of interpretation through present responses of significant action. (28).

²¹⁸ Ibid., 29.

²¹⁹ Angelo Scola, *Hans Urs von Balthasar- a Theological Style* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 26.

²²⁰ J.A. Di Noia affirms this by stating that in his philosophical theology, Rahner employs the Kantian cognitional a priori and transforms it into a metaphysical a priori. Fundamentally, beyond the transcendental structures of reason, there is the readiness to affirm being as a precondition for knowledge. For Di Noia, Rahner's enthusiastic though not totally uncritical embrace of modern conceptions and the subjective turn has entwined his theology with its fortunes. In a theological climate critical of enlightenment notions, he suggests, 'Rahner's theological program will seem to be wedded to outmoded interests and conceptions.' DiNoia, 'Karl Rahner,' 129-131.

²²¹ Tracey Rowland, *Ratzinger's Faith: The Theology of Pope Benedict XVI* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 22.

supernatural.²²² Thus, the theologian who investigates the relationship between nature and supernature, according to Balthasar, doesn't need to 'abandon his post'²²³ by mediating between revelation and reason as a neutral observer or presiding judge.²²⁴

Therefore, the irony of his own position can surely not be lost on Pramuk. He notes that Merton himself was coruscating in his criticism of 'historical consciousness' in Christology and makes repeated appeals for the retrieval of the unified vision of fathers and the mystics.²²⁵ This fact, although acknowledged by Pramuk as 'raising questions',²²⁶ is used to shore up his idea that *Sophia* is a mediating hermeneutic for a new Christian humanism.

In summary, Pramuk's critique of Balthasar as simply a theologian connected to Merton through retrievals but not in understanding the implications of the cosmic dimension of existence is too limited and restrictive a reading. It has been argued that Balthasar saw no distinction between spirituality and theology and placed prayer and doxology at the heart of theology. Further, his understanding and use of the theme of participation in divine-human relations in creation, following Maximus the Confessor, is a key link between Merton, the Russians and the Swiss theologian.

²²² John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 230.

²²³ Balthasar accuses Rahner of succumbing to the temptation of modernity by introducing Kantian ideas into mankind's relationship with God in *Spirit in the World* and in losing all sense of the distinctiveness of Christianity: 'Karl Rahner frees us from the nightmare with his theory of the anonymous Christian who is dispensed at any rate from the criterion of martyrdom.' Balthasar, *The Moment of Christian Witness*, 101. See also, Karen Kilby 'Balthasar and Karl Rahner' in Edward T. Oakes and David Moss eds., *The Cambridge Companion to von Balthasar* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 261.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 195.

²²⁵ After the so-called sophianic turn of the early 1960s, Merton is still questioning the epistemological assumptions of historical consciousness, 'Is the long tradition of Christian mysticism, from the post-Apostolic Age, the Alexandrian and Cappadocian Fathers, down to Eckhart, Tauler, the Spanish mystics and the modern mystics, simply a deviation? When people cannot entrust themselves to the Church as she now is, nevertheless look with interest and sympathy into the writings of the mystics, are they to be reproved by Christians and admonished to seek rather a more limited way and more communal experience of fellowship with progressive believers on the latter's terms? Is this the only way to understand Christian experience?' In Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968), 21. This appeal to a post-Vatican II world suggests that in 1968, Merton didn't see sophiology as his 'found' means of presenting Christology in the modern age and is clearly a criticism of those Christians who put activity above the distinctive contemplative way he was retrieving in his reading and writing.

²²⁶ Pramuk, *Sophia*, 294.

Finally, I suggest, against Pramuk, that Merton is a wise theologian because he avoids the kind of Kantian epistemology in Rahner, criticised as disastrous by Balthasar and Russian theologians like Bulgakov and other Orthodox writers not mentioned in Pramuk. Instead, Merton's interest in matters outside of the monastic setting are the fruit of intensified study of a wide circle of Orthodox and other writers, a growing dissatisfaction with monastic life.

In the next section there will be a brief discussion of the theme of *Sophia* of Sergei Bulgakov which is central to Pramuk's book and a comparison with Balthasar's 'God of the evermore,' a theme rejected by Pramuk as ahistorical. My suggestion is however, that both theologians are engaging in the use of dense metaphorical idioms and both have been accused of harmonising tendencies to the point - in the case of Bulgakov - of being accused of introducing a fourth hypostasis, which renders *Sophia* problematic in eastern orthodoxy.

1:6:4. The contribution of Sergei Bulgakov (Pramuk's source)

Pramuk's criticism of Balthasar is linked to his understanding of Merton's *Sophia* as a 'mediating discipline' between high Trinitarian and Patristic Christologies and Christologies which speak to the postmodern world shaped by historical consciousness. Pramuk hails the end of myths and meta-narratives²²⁷ in a world which is pluralistic and polycentric in its horizons.²²⁸ Further, Pramuk maintains, Balthasar's 'law of the evermore' in the inner-trinitarian relations, is more dramatic than concrete temporal relations. However, it is questionable why Pramuk seems able to accept the distinctly mythological overtones of the

²²⁷ Pramuk, *Sophia*, 281.

²²⁸ 'If sophiology begins with the doctrines of the trinity and the incarnation in the very centre of the picture frame, its profound exposition of the humanity of God has the effect of pulling into the foreground of the picture, what in patristic theology tends to remain (conspicuously) in the murky background, namely the diversity of peoples, cultures and natural landscapes.' Ibid., 285.

‘Sophia myth’²²⁹ into his thinking, while hailing the end of myths in modern theology - simultaneously rejecting Balthasar’s dramatics on the grounds of ahistoricity.²³⁰

This criticism appears all the more unusual when much of Merton’s most poignant social criticism was concerned with the lamentation and loss of the sense of theophany, myth and redeemed time²³¹ and the rise of mass technological society; where man’s true identity is submerged in the din of mass advertising, media and ‘pseudo-events.’²³² It seems that for Merton, it is the end of ‘myth’ that concerns him or at the very least, modern man’s loss of the mythological way of seeing the world, which he suggests has entailed a disastrously dualistic thinking.

In essence, Bulgakov posits *Sophia* as the living or non-hypostatic kenotic love between the divine persons – as the basis for unity and difference between God and creation. *Sophia* is God’s own nature, God’s own life considered under the aspect of God’s freedom to live the divine life in what is not God. God as Trinity is a continual giving away so the very Godhead presupposes the concept of there being an object of love or gift beyond itself. It is a radically kenotic concept of the Godhead.

²²⁹ Williams, ‘Eastern Orthodox Theology,’ 576.

²³⁰ Pramuk, *Sophia*, 27.

²³¹ The clearest example of Merton’s attention to myths is found in *The Geography of Lograire*. This anti-poem is structured as universal map of human experience by integrating mythic material from a variety of religious cultures. Again the theme is western culture’s inability to communicate and its tendency to dominate the weak or outsiders by force of will. See Thomas Merton, *Collected Poems*, 455. Merton is alert to the extent of inhumanity which Christ’s kenotic brokenness heals and becomes an expression of hope. Kilcourse, *Ace of Freedoms*, 193.

²³² The theme of the loss of meaningful language and the rise of advertising, linked to war and violence, occurs in Thomas Merton, ‘War and the Crisis of Language,’ in Thomas Merton, *Thomas Merton on Peace* (Oxford: A.R. Mowbray, 1976), 138-151. The anti-poetry of *Cables to the Ace* characterises the ontological lapse of man of Genesis 3, which leads to a human identity crisis and then mass communication problems – it’s through the ‘ace of freedoms’ or kenotic Christ introduced in the mythic environs of *Cable 80* of the poem, which manifests the love of God in a world he has not abandoned. Kilcourse, *Ace of Freedoms*, 178; See also ‘Events and Pseudo-Events’ in Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 162-164.

Furthermore, Bulgakov insists that *Sophia* is not a hypostasis but an impulse in things towards harmony and order and unity, this impulse being the world's 'eros,'²³³ identifying Christ as the place or meeting point of uncreated and created *Sophia*, a radical kenotic divine life generating an historical life of the same quality.²³⁴ The question then arises whether *Sophia* distorts the creator/creature relationship by obscuring any sense of distance between them.²³⁵ Furthermore, *Sophia* as a figure in ontological continuity with the divine essence is for many orthodox thinkers, 'dangerously close to suggesting a fourth hypostasis of the holy trinity.'²³⁶

It could be therefore that *Sophia* is more a sustained metaphor than a theory²³⁷ or an attempt to articulate a sense of God's presence and yet distinctiveness from creation- cosmos; and a critique of western scholastic theology.²³⁸ If so, one might argue that Bulgakov's divine *Sophia* is simply a way of unifying a string of theological propositions.²³⁹ As a 'fundamental intuition,' wisdom/*sophia* is a kind of 'metaxu' or 'in between' notion to express the relationship between God and creation ex nihilo, 'Wisdom...is the face that God turns towards his creation and the face that creation in human kind turns towards God.'²⁴⁰

²³³ Williams, 'Eastern Orthodox Theology,' 576.

²³⁴ Ibid., 577.

²³⁵ Katy Leamy, *The Holy Trinity: Hans Urs von Balthasar and his Sources*, 4.

²³⁶ *Sophia* was suspected of being a gnostic idea in not taking seriously the reality of a universe created ex nihilo; and of unravelling the fathers' synthesis by revisiting gnostic and neo-platonic 'systems of intermediaries' between the divine and the created. See Elizabeth Theokritoff, 'Creator and Creation' in Mary B. Cunningham and Elizabeth Theokritoff eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Eastern Orthodox Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 68.

²³⁷ Ibid., 576.

²³⁸ Andrew Louth, *Introducing Eastern Orthodoxy* (London: SPCK, 2013), 39-40; idem, 'Wisdom and the Russians: The Sophiology of Fr. Sergei Bulgakov,' in Stephen C. Barton, ed., *Where Shall Wisdom be Found?: Wisdom in the Bible, the Church and the Contemporary World* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 169-81.

²³⁹ Ibid., 44.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

In similar vein, and within the similar creative thematic of kenosis and radical love of the Godhead for what is not-God, Balthasar's theology of the inner- trinitarian relations ²⁴¹ has also been read as part of an impulse to seek harmony²⁴² and has been accused of mythologising the action of the trinity and Christ's crucifixion and descent as an inner- trinitarian event.²⁴³ However, both Balthasar and Bulgakov engage creatively in dense metaphorical idioms in working out a theology of divine kenosis, the reality of self-love, sin and tragedy in the world.²⁴⁴ The point of the idioms is to express the inherently relational aspect of God in and with his creation and his super-abundance of love for the created order.

For Balthasar, God's 'evermore' in the love of the trinitarian relations is not fixed but always dynamic – *analogia entis* – in the finite realm as, 'the experience of an invitation forward (a thing that in arriving represents a new departure) is latent in the experience of Being itself and has a frame that is not entirely fixable.'²⁴⁵ In other words, if in God there is eternal liveliness or 'evermore,' in the sense of an increase and surpassing of expectations, then the human person will take an active part in the increase.²⁴⁶ This aspect in Balthasar and his similarity with Bulgakov in visions of the Godhead in communion with humanity, in the

²⁴¹ The love and mutual self-giving within the persons of the trinity holds within itself the supra-conditions in God's freedom to bear the suffering of the obedient Son on Holy Saturday.

²⁴² Quash wonders whether Balthasar's rendering of *maior dissimilitudo* in his analogical framework, which would allow for difference, is strong enough to bear the weight of the supra-form of both Christ and the Trinity. There is a danger that similarity not properly suspended from dissimilarity, seeing things as a whole, ends up as an excessive tidying up of loose ends. The name of Hegel is associated with the tendency to harmonious resolution though Balthasar fiercely critiqued him for insufficient historicity. See Quash, 'Hans Urs von Balthasar,' 118.

²⁴³ Ibid., 120. Balthasar's meditation on Holy Saturday and the descent of Christ to Hell has been regarded by some as most concrete when at its most mythological, diverting attention from the realities of political, structural and social aspects of human history. However, if seen as a meditation rather than a theory, it is a powerful existential confrontation with evil and despair which sees the hope of redemption in Christ through his kenotic out-pouring.

²⁴⁴ Donald MacKinnon praises the 'remorseless emphasis on the concrete' of Balthasar's meditations which resist all harmonious visions of worldly relations, especially if seen in the light of the evil of the Holocaust. See Donald MacKinnon, 'Some Reflections on Hans Urs von Balthasar's Christology with Special Reference to Theodramatik II/2 and III,' in John Riches ed., *The Analogy of Beauty* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986), 167.

²⁴⁵ Ben Quash, *Theology and the Drama of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 181.

²⁴⁶ Dalzell, *Dramatic Encounter of Divine and Human Freedom*, 201.

impulse to unity and harmony,²⁴⁷ is not considered by Pramuk in his bid to press similarities with Rahner.²⁴⁸

For Bulgakov, creation was the first form of kenosis as God ‘surrenders a piece of his freedom’ but God does this in view of the second kenosis, of the cross, in which he includes and overtakes all the final consequences of human freedom, made possible due to the selflessness of the divine persons. For Balthasar, the goal of the incarnation is the kenosis of the cross.²⁴⁹

The creative way of conceiving God’s relationship of love with the world in the two theologians opens up a space for seeing Merton differently from Pramuk, as a wise theologian whose concern for humanity rests within a very pre-modern, yet post-modern notion of participatory reason over modernity’s use of reason. Merton’s turn through reading the fathers like Maximus, is in the theological trajectory of Orthodox writers and in alignment with the work of Balthasar, opening himself up to being truly inclusive of ‘the flowering of ordinary possibilities’²⁵⁰ in everyday life and with the impetus to unity and wholeness, living in eschatological hope, without embracing the modern turn.

²⁴⁷ Paul Valliere notes that Bulgakov embraced idealism as it seemed to him to offer a transcendental grounding of the moral law, Valliere, *Modern Russian Theology*, 243.

²⁴⁸ Rather Pramuk suggests Balthasar’s ‘law of the evermore’ suggests the real drama is taking place in the intra-trinitarian realm and not in concrete reality, without a discussion of Balthasar’s whole *Theodrama* where he makes it clear that all the action takes place in concrete reality, Pramuk, *Sophia*, 27.

²⁴⁹ Raymond Gawronski SJ, *Word and Silence: Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Spiritual Encounter Between East and West* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 96; Mehl also notes that the concept of universal salvation and universal hope in the end times is a commonly shared view between Balthasar and Eastern Orthodoxy. See Mehl and Loser, *Von Balthasar Reader*, 45; See also, Lucy Gardner, David Moss, ‘Something like Time; Something like the Sexes-an Essay in Reception,’ in Lucy Gardner, David Moss, Ben Quash and Graham Ward eds., *Balthasar at the End of Modernity* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 119. Gardner and Moss note that Bulgakov’s kenotic theology bears some relation to the *Urkenosis* or dispossession of the Godhead of the Father to the Son in Balthasar. Katy Leamy’s recent account, *The Holy Trinity: Balthasar and His Sources*, suggests that Balthasar’s theology of the trinity and the *descensus*, were influenced by Bulgakov’s kenotic trinitarian theology, (see footnote 48).

²⁵⁰ Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (Tunbridge Wells: Burns and Oates, 1977; reprint, Tunbridge Wells: Burns and Oates, 1980), 160.

1:7. Chapter conclusion

We have attempted to clarify the idea of Merton as a ‘wise theologian’ through discussion of Pramuk’s writing on the links between Thomas Merton and the notion of *Sophia*. Also we have considered whether Merton turns to the motif to ground his theology or as part of an ongoing synthesis and intensification of different influences in his monastic life.

I have argued that *Sophia* is not turned to as a theological ‘method’ by Merton but is a clarification and revision of ongoing epistemological intuitions. Merton’s *sapiential* or *sophianic* consciousness developed throughout the 1950s in his role as Master of Novices and dialogues with various interlocutors. These years were characterised in a series of exchanges and interactions with numerous other ‘mentors’ and correspondents, which Pramuk acknowledges. It is also a period in which he studied the fathers of the church as part of his role as master of novices. The *sophianic* is certainly an important aspect of Merton’s incorporation and integration of wisdom, perhaps as a way of unifying a series of intuitions and insights gleaned from reading and experience.

It has been argued that as an intuition of the ‘in between’ nature of God and creation, Merton found the *sophianic* resonated with his thought. Merton realised his ‘cosmic vocation’ could not entail flight from the world but instead involved going out of oneself towards the world. His growing interest in matters in the world develops precisely from his patristic understanding of man as a cosmic mediator or ‘microcosm’ between the universal and particular. Like Balthasar and the Russians, rather than Rahner, Merton sees the human person as ‘in the middle’ of a network of participating relations, in a cosmic order which does not allow for a neutral standpoint away from the action.

Therefore, it has been argued that Merton sits in the stream of thought which aligns Orthodox writers of the twentieth century such as Clement and Bulgakov with a western

theologian, Balthasar, a trajectory away from Kantian/Cartesian notions of pure reason towards participatory reason centred in the humanity of God in Christ, and is critical of scholastic two-storey thinking about the world and God.

Additionally, Pramuk's suggestion that the turn to the Russian Sophiologists is the single most important retrieval of Merton's mature years is selective, as cases can be made for other Orthodox theologians such as Olivier Clement and Alexander Schmemmann. As was noted in his journals, Merton was transposing western and eastern Christian insights, absorbing and integrating them into his own understanding of sacramental presence of the divine in which in every passing moment the 'fully awake' person can participate.

Furthermore, Pramuk's call to turn sophiology into a Mertonian method to read the 'signs of the times,' leaves it unclear as to how Merton's poem *Hagia Sophia* can serve as a new way to conceive of doctrine. As argued in section 1:3, *Hagia Sophia* gives lyrical expression to Merton's intensifying synthetic approach to theological and poetic symbols, distinguishing in order to unite, as well as serving as a personal response to his experience.

The next chapter considers the research question, which theologian most resonates with Merton's way of seeing? Merton's aesthetics and epistemology are important in considering him as a wise theologian, especially as they inform his way of responding to the world and in expressing his own theology.

CHAPTER TWO

‘WISE RESSOURCEMENT’ – HANS URS VON BALTHASAR AND THOMAS MERTON

In the previous chapter, there was discussion and analysis of the first question in this thesis: in what ways can Merton be understood as a ‘wise theologian’, alongside the question of *Sophia* which arises in question three. It is necessary now to consider the second question alongside these: what resonances can be discerned between Merton’s thought and that of Hans Urs von Balthasar? The work of Balthasar is highlighted, not only as one of many interlocutors with whom Merton exchanged letters but especially because his ground-breaking works on St Maximus and other Greek Fathers, as well as his aesthetics - directed towards recovering the ‘lost unity’ between spirituality and theology and the restoration of beauty to the grammar of expression²⁵¹ - shed light on themes retrieved by Merton in his essays and poetry, as well as his attempt to engage with authors and poets outside of the church.

At the beginning of the thesis, it was argued that the reception of Merton by some in the church was ‘controversial.’ This designation could be assigned specifically to the last decade of his life when he wrote on political and social issues. Likewise, the name of Balthasar is associated by some with controversy over whether he offers a form of world-denying conservatism.²⁵² In this chapter, I set out to argue that both Merton and Balthasar bear similarities which suggest the labels ascribed to them are somewhat limited. Balthasar was one of many interlocutors with whom Merton exchanged letters but his ground-breaking works on St Maximus and other Greek fathers, as well as his aesthetics - which was directed

²⁵² See footnote 34.

towards recovering the ‘lost unity’ between spirituality and theology and the restoration of beauty to the grammar of faithful expression²⁵³ - shed light on themes retrieved by Merton in his own epistemology. However, the problems in Balthasar’s aesthetics will be discussed and I shall argue that Merton acts as a corrective to Balthasar - whose theology is mainly concerned with the active-interpersonal – in order to show how to unify an aesthetic apprehension of reality with concern beyond this to the wider public space. This is a concern which Balthasar’s framework is too cautious to address in depth and which leaves Balthasar’s theology at a distance from the social aspects of ordinary living. I suggest that Merton’s wise way of theologising is more in line with an understanding of wisdom which is integrated into the whole of life and is open to the other, in ways which Balthasar at times is too tentative with his own presuppositions to pursue.

2:1. Merton in engagement with Balthasar

The first shared feature is that both Merton and Balthasar have a tendency to polarise opinion. Although Merton did not claim to be a scholar, he has been criticised variously as holding liberal assumptions and displaying a lack of critical judgement.²⁵⁴ In fact, in reading Thomas Merton on any subject one finds out more about Thomas Merton than anything else.²⁵⁵

²⁵³ See Footnote 34.

²⁵⁴ G. T. Dempsey, ‘The Tears of Thomas Merton,’ *Irish Theological Quarterly*. 67, no.353 (2002): 362. Dempsey critiques Merton’s political views of a ‘leftish intellectual’ who made ‘simple-minded’ judgements about the American way of life and policy, with an ‘elitist disdain’ for the man in the street. Merton redeems himself - in Dempsey’s view - when he confines himself to works about the human condition (i.e.: racism) but not in his attacks on the American government; a judgement which may betray Dempsey’s own political leanings.

²⁵⁵ Dempsey comments that readers should take Merton’s writings for what they are: ‘Merton, lacking trained faculties, was in fact an ahistorical reader, taking on board what he read as if it were immutable... and then writing up his thoughts as the product of monkish isolation in which time is flattened before the presence of faith. But this was also his strength, you read Thomas Merton not for what any piece of writing will tell you about its subject matter: You read it for what it tells you about Merton.’ Ibid, 357.

Conversely, Merton's writings have been treated in almost adulatory and uncritical fashion by many of his numerous admirers.²⁵⁶

In similar vein, Balthasar has been criticised as the one-time underdog now the subject of an extensive even adulatory reception.²⁵⁷ His most persistent critics point to the 'indirectness' of Balthasar's theological style, which shows an impulse to comprehensiveness on the one hand but also a lack of intellectual accountability on the other in not becoming a member of the academy.²⁵⁸ He is perhaps too 'unfettered' as a theologian,²⁵⁹ so that reading his treatment of various historical figures affords us a better insight into Balthasar than into them.²⁶⁰

Therefore, it seems that Merton and Balthasar share idiosyncrasies, and tendencies 'to go against the grain' and also of being 'outsiders,' although for different reasons.²⁶¹ However, the work of Balthasar was contributory in ridding the Catholic church of the two-storey thinking of neo-scholastic doctrine of grace, and Merton's reading of him contributed to the development of his own thinking on the relationship between nature and grace, as a critic of Neo-Scholasticism and post-enlightenment thought, and as someone for whom beauty was not an addition to faith but that which radiates from within.

²⁵⁶ For example, art historian Roger Lipsey comments in glowing prose on the importance of mature Merton as Artist: "For present purposes, it is enough to recognise that Merton was acting profoundly in character, by his own lights if not that of the institutional Church, as he found his way toward being something like Sengai, something like (William) Blake, and entirely himself: a priest-artist of our time." In Roger Lipsey, *Angelic Mistakes: The Art of Thomas Merton* (Boston: New Seeds, 2006), 13.

²⁵⁷ Angelo Scola's *Hans Urs von Balthasar: A Theological Style*, is an excellent summary and exposition of Balthasar's thought but offers no critique of the theologian's work.

²⁵⁸ Kilby suggests Balthasar's tendency to remain an outsider was due to his aversion to Neo-Scholasticism but also his engagements with Karl Barth, an usual ecumenical move at the time, and the influence of Adrienne von Speyr, a Swiss doctor, with whom he set up the Secular Institute of St. John in Basel. This move meant he had to leave the Jesuit Order. This also meant that he was not invited to Vatican II. Kilby, *Balthasar, A (very) Critical Introduction*, 8.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 39.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁶¹ See also footnotes 32-35.

2:1:1. Merton in engagement with Balthasar (*Ressourcement*)

The second shared feature is the emphasis on retrieval of patristic sources, *ressourcement*, in order to critique the two-storey Neo-Scholastic thinking of the pre-Vatican II church. Merton encountered Balthasar's theology as novice master at Gethsemani. As part of his role, he prepared and delivered lectures and conferences for the young monks on mystical and ascetic theology.²⁶² Balthasar was one of a number of theologians who attempted to recall the Roman Catholic tradition back to the sources of its tradition, the fathers of the church, as opposed to the prevailing philosophy of the Church, from the sixteenth century on, of Tridentine and Scholastic philosophy.²⁶³ The latter posited a sharp division between nature and supernature, reason and faith, which both men reacted decidedly against. Merton himself was immersed in the Great Tradition, as many of his books testify, so it is not surprising that themes and retrievals in the writing of Balthasar would resonate with the Cistercian monk.²⁶⁴

However, a key early primary source for understanding the world-view of the young Merton is *The Seven Storey Mountain*, which became an instant best-seller on publication. The book presents the outlook of a young man steeped in the Roman Catholic thought of the 1940s, subscribing to the idea that 'outside the Church there is no salvation.'²⁶⁵ As such it presents a rather dualistic view of the world between 'Saved and Unsaved,' 'God and the

²⁶² Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, 288.

²⁶³ Tracey Rowland, *Ratzinger's Faith*, 21. and according to theologian Tracey Rowland, Balthasar: '...broadly fits into the camp of *ressourcement* scholars, since he published many patristic works and was influenced by de Lubac under whom he studied; however his own project, described as a theological aesthetics, can stand alone as one of the greatest theological achievements of the twentieth century.' (22).

²⁶⁴ See Thomas Merton, *Cassian and the Fathers: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition* 2, ed. Patrick F. O'Connell, Monastic Wisdom Series, no.1 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2005); idem, *Pre-Benedictine Monasticism: Initiation into the Christian Tradition* 2, ed. Patrick F. O'Connell, Monastic Wisdom Series no.9 (Kalamazoo, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2006); idem, *The Wisdom of the Desert: Sayings of the Desert Fathers of the Fourth Century*, (New York: New Directions, 1960). As Master of Novices from 1955-65, Merton was required to give weekly conferences to the young monks, on topics such as the monastic fathers and the Cistercian tradition; a role he took very seriously.

²⁶⁵ Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, 224f.

World.’ According to George Kilcourse, there is a conflict between the early Merton’s Christological insights and those of the later Merton. The Merton of the 1940s and 1950s reflects a near docetic denial of Christ’s humanity as he succumbed to the prevailing orthodoxy of the Church at the time.²⁶⁶ However, the later Merton was rather embarrassed by the rather narrow approach taken in his spiritual autobiography.²⁶⁷ As he developed spiritually in his monastic life and as he retrieved ancient monastic resources, he revised his understanding of Christ and the grace/nature division.

Therefore, in order to explain why Merton the contemplative and novice master might find Balthasar’s theology and patristic retrievals compelling, it is necessary to delve deeper into his thought and recognise the resonances between them.

2:1:2. Merton and Balthasar (common perspective)

To understand Balthasar’s thought it is necessary to realise from the outset, that his theological style was wide-ranging or inter-textual. Unlike Karl Rahner, whose starting point was philosophy and the study of Kant, Balthasar’s starting point was literary in origin²⁶⁸ and it is this deep interest in literature, narrative and poetry that Merton and Balthasar share in their approaches to theology and spirituality. Like Merton, Balthasar’s approach was catholic in the sense of inclusive; it, ‘took, every text... on its own terms and none are to be excluded by

²⁶⁶Kilcourse, *Ace of Freedoms*, 5.

²⁶⁷ Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: The Letters of Thomas Merton in Times of Crisis*, 310, quoted in William H. Shannon, *Thomas Merton: (An Introduction)*, (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2005), 131. Writing to a correspondent on January 10, 1964, Merton comments: ‘A lot of water has gone under the bridge in the years (almost twenty) since I wrote *The Seven Storey Mountain*. I would have said many things differently today.’(130).

²⁶⁸ Balthasar’s PhD was taken in German Culture, not Theology. He called himself a “Germanist”. The stress on the Form or figure in his work could well be influenced by Goethe. Equally the term occurs in *Cosmic Liturgy*. Balthasar has been accused of reading Goethe and Hegel into his patristic and theological writings, although Balthasar went to great lengths to critique Hegel’s idealism.

reason of its genre.”²⁶⁹ Merton’s eclectic and wide-ranging and rather unsystematic reading enabled him to engage in a wider cultural discourse while remaining within his tradition; and Balthasar’s project is characterised by its cultural breadth, drawing on ancient and modern literature, music, and theatre for parallels and drawing out points for theological elucidation.²⁷⁰

In addition, Balthasar laments the ‘Copernican turn’ where the subject is no longer embodied in the world but becomes distinct from it, finding in the *nouvelle theologie*, a way of thinking:

...that expressed itself in symbols more than in conceptual analysis; that is, he met a way of doing theology that drew its inspiration from a more typographical reading of Scripture and a broad awareness of the Christ-centred unity of salvation-history, than from distinctions inspired by Aristotelian logic – a theology more keyed to the liturgy than to the classroom.²⁷¹

In this he shares much common ground with Merton in their analysis that the scriptural senses, the sapiential way of seeing and being, was disastrously being lost to the post-Enlightenment world, and that their task was to recover something of the ‘form,’ climate or way of seeing to modern people.²⁷² For Balthasar, despite our human perspective, we can

²⁶⁹ Edward T. Oakes, *Pattern of Redemption: The Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar* (New York: Continuum, 1997), 75.

²⁷⁰ Balthasar did not regard himself as a systematic theologian but as someone labouring to renew the church and breathe new life into Christian communities in the world, Mark A. McIntosh, *Christology from Within* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996), 3.

²⁷¹ Brian E. Daley, ‘Balthasar’s reading of the Church Fathers,’ in Edward Oakes, David Moss eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 189.

²⁷² Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord IV: The Realm of Metaphysics in Antiquity*, ed. John Riches (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989), 26, ‘...the loss of the synthesis of the patristic, medieval and Baroque periods forces the Christians of our time to reflect wholly on what is decisive in biblical glory...so that from that standpoint they may become responsible guardians of the glory of creation too.’ and ‘Before aesthetics was reduced in late rationalism and in critical idealism (Kant) to a science confined to a particular area of knowledge...it was an aspect of metaphysics.’ (19).

succeed in grasping being, the bedrock of reality, by way of the senses through concrete things,

...philosophically then, Balthasar is an epistemological optimist – he holds that our powers of knowing are reliable. And ... he is an ontological realist – he considers that those powers give us access to things as they really are: participations, varying in scope and intensity, in being itself.²⁷³

Common ground with Balthasar is evident in Merton's last book *The Inner Experience*,²⁷⁴ where Merton laments the loss of a sapiential way of seeing in the West, which would cultivate the kind of environment for the development of the whole person; common materials in the form of archetypal symbols, liturgical notes, art, poetry, philosophy and myth, which nourished the inner self from childhood to maturity:

In such a cultural setting no one needs to be self-conscious about his interior life, and subjectivity does not run the risk of being deviated into morbidity and excess. Unfortunately, such a cultural setting no longer exists in the West... It is something that has to be laboriously recovered by an educated and enlightened minority.²⁷⁵

Certainly, Balthasar will agree with Merton on this point; that the west has lost a common unity of tradition that has fractured being and the self – now a self-positing cogito – and that a lost sense of unity must be 'recovered' by a minority. This last point could leave Merton open to charges of elitism; although Merton understands it to mean it is a task for monastic orders in their renewal.²⁷⁶

²⁷³ Aidan Nichols, *Key to Balthasar: Hans Urs von Balthasar on Beauty, Goodness and Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 1-3.

²⁷⁴ Thomas Merton, *The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation*, ed. William H. Shannon (London: SPCK, 2003).

²⁷⁵ Ibid., 3.

²⁷⁶ Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 58-84, (193-200).

2:1:3. Merton and Balthasar (Balthasar's aesthetics)

When Merton embarked upon Balthasar's *Glory of the Lord*, he noted in his journal entry,

This morning I began on Balthasar's *Herrlichkeit* – a long book to try to read in German but the first pages are very promising and I respond to them completely. Perhaps this is the theology we have been waiting for.²⁷⁷

In re-reading this book once more in 1966, he notes, 'Realised to what extent my own theology goes along with that of Balthasar and I should read him more deeply.'²⁷⁸ Therefore, it is worth considering what it is about Balthasar's theology which Merton finds promising. I will suggest two areas of similarity. Firstly, the concept of radiance or luminosity of the divine within creation, not as a separate form of knowledge and secondly, an intuition which Merton had since reading Etienne Gilson at Columbia – God as *pure act* – present and participating in the world in each moment.

Balthasar's central goal is to reconfigure an understanding of aesthetics to recover the classical understanding of 'perception.'²⁷⁹ In classical tradition, being itself has luminosity and intrinsic splendour – linked to eros or desire which,

... offers Balthasar an entirely new analysis of the ground of faith, which is now removed from the propositional realm and is refigured in a movement of the soul which is akin to the response we feel before the immense complexity of meaning, expression, 'form' of a major work of art.²⁸⁰

In other words, Balthasar aims to write a theological aesthetics rather than aesthetic theology as the latter cuts beauty off from other transcendentals and makes into a separate object of knowledge – this ruptures the analogical relation between theological beauty and

²⁷⁷ Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life*, 140.

²⁷⁸ Merton, *Learning to Love*, 343.

²⁷⁹ Patrick Sherry, *Spirit and Beauty: An Introduction to Theological Aesthetics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992) 17.

²⁸⁰ Oliver Davies, 'The Theological Aesthetics' in Edward T. Oakes and David Moss, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to von Balthasar* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2004), 134.

creation.²⁸¹ It is this rendering of aesthetics which in Balthasar's view owes its origin to Kantian idealism and the kind of Enlightenment thinking which has been 'fatal to the Church.'²⁸²

Rather, Balthasar's concern is with restoring to the west the continuous sense of 'glory' in the divinity of God, which is the prelude to the encounter or 'main event' in creation and history between infinite freedom and finite freedom.²⁸³ The central material image for Balthasar is 'Form' or 'Gestalt' which means both sign and appearance, is the 'fundamental configuration of being'²⁸⁴ and as 'revelation of the depths, is an indissoluble union of two things. It is real presence of the depths and of the whole reality, and a real pointing beyond itself to those depths.'²⁸⁵ When 'we behold the form' it is not as a detached form, as if we are observers, observing an object, but as a unity with the depths that make its appearance in it – because it evokes response in us.²⁸⁶

Ultimately what is aesthetic is, 'properly theological, namely as reception, perceived with the eyes of faith of the self-interpreting glory of the sovereignly free love of God.'²⁸⁷ This

²⁸¹ Ibid, 133. The analogy of being is another key element of Balthasar's thought, shaped by the thought of Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas, turning to the Biblical encounter with "I Am who I AM" on which he based his synthesis with Aristotle, put the stress on Being/God as 'Pure Act.' See Oakes, *Pattern of Redemption*, 31. Balthasar takes on the development of this basic idea from his mentor Erich Przywara, who develops the doctrine of analogy to mean that in the relationship between transcendence and immanence, there is an oscillation or tension, "polarity", and this dynamic in creation is never exhaustive – in every likeness to God, there is 'greater dissimilarity'. The moment of analogical thinking begins in the life of faith (a consciousness which is rooted in desire). In the act of faith there is recognition that it must go beyond itself and deny to itself what it has already seized.

²⁸² Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-drama: Theological Dramatic Theory, Volume IV: The Action*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), 464.

²⁸³ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *My Work: in Retrospect* (San Francisco: Ignatius press, 1993), 97.

²⁸⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord, A Theological Aesthetics, Volume I: Seeing the Form*, ed. Joseph Fessio SJ and John Riches (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1982), 119.

²⁸⁵ Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord I*, 118.

²⁸⁶ Ibid., 119. In this transposition, the Incarnation is central as it is the definitive event for Balthasar of the appearance of the form – the site of encounter of the divine taking on the human but it does so while at the same time, allowing for a human response. (121). This is against Kant's concept of faith as 'cognition' separated from reason as understanding.

²⁸⁷ Ibid.

suggests Balthasar is trying to resolve the tension between hearing and vision in the life of faith in recovering the sensorium of faith through beauty, ‘... if the stance of hearing is fundamentally one of assent, so too we may say the same of the inherent response to the vision of beauty.’²⁸⁸ Beholding beauty for Balthasar evokes a response. When these two are fused together we can assent to God’s gifts of creation and revelation, ultimately associated in his mind with the Incarnation - the God-man who is sensed and touched.²⁸⁹ Hence with ‘eyes to see’ and ‘ears to hear’, a contemplative ‘seeing’, the form of beauty becomes transparent all around.

In summary, the act of faith is a lived response of the whole person to God, who freely gives himself in the form of Christ. The act of faith involves embodied reception and response to a gift. Through this act of perception and response, hearts and minds are transformed and drawn into participation in God. Hence, the person can only know God as truth if they are receptive to God as the beautiful and through their desire for participation in that love. All knowledge is essentially participatory, experiential and embodied and the fundamental response to this gift is worship and prayer. Beauty opens the finite person towards infinite being which is trinitarian in nature and bears some analogy to it.²⁹⁰ However, creatures can only participate in a partial way despite their openness to being, which suggests dynamic, unfinished ‘always more’ nature of creation.

In borrowing concepts from Aquinas such as ‘clarity’, ‘radiance’ and ‘integrity’ as the characteristics of beauty, Balthasar is making a comparison with the Cartesian cogito,

²⁸⁸ Oakes, *Pattern of Redemption*, 142

²⁸⁹ Nichols, *Key to Balthasar*, 12.

²⁹⁰ Sherry, *Spirit and Beauty*, 107-108. Sherry suggests Balthasar offers a ‘subtle reading’ of the Trinity and the role of the Holy Spirit. His trinitarian aesthetic suggests that the love between Father and Son which is the Holy Spirit overflows onto our hearts, suggests by analogy that the beauty of the Godhead of which the spirit is the locus or impression overflows as excess into the radiating forms of things. Whereas in the East, there is posited a more linear model with roles for the Persons: Source, Image, Manifestor.

And whereas the Cartesian idea is in scholastic terms an intuited potential essence – something that may or may not be the case about the world – the Thomistic ‘radiance’ is expressed by a form actually enacting its own essence its being-in – act.²⁹¹

The more one is grasped by beauty and its illumination, the more one is grasped by being and becomes more open towards it. It means one goes out of oneself to become more ‘Christ-like’ in actions and speech and one sees the trace of infinite being in others²⁹² in the heart of reality. The stress on reverence for the finite, ontologically dependent, concrete reality of individual material things is important and is the site for the ‘breakthrough’ of divine glory into consciousness.

2:1:4. Merton in engagement with Balthasar (resonance with Balthasar’s aesthetics)

The extent of Merton’s resonance with an aesthetic way of seeing is clear in a letter to Balthasar, ‘I am very much in agreement with you on the importance of poetry as being, ever so often, the locus of Theophany,’²⁹³ intimating that what is ‘of God’ is knowable in response to a poetic word.

For example, in their mutual admiration for the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins both men see the flowering of poetic imagination in the unfolding ‘inscapes’ or ‘glory’ of revelation in created things. In Hopkins, all created things are saturated with God’s glory, their *logoi* and this way of seeing is to be emulated.²⁹⁴ Indeed, Merton tried to do so in his

²⁹¹ Ibid, 17.

²⁹² Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord I*, 37.

²⁹³ Merton, *School of Charity*, 227.

²⁹⁴ Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord III*, 390-391. The task achieved by Hopkins and other writers and poets chosen by Balthasar in *Glory of the Lord III*, is to have ‘learned to read’ the forms of God’s revelation in Christ in the universe. These images not abstract concepts have to be interpreted and for Balthasar poetry is the ideal theological language. So ‘inscapes’ are ‘discovered’ and unfold. The skill of the poet in interpreting the natural world is brought to a higher creative unity through faith: ‘The fact that all natures and selves are fashioned and determined for Christ, who is their ultimate inscape and instress, means that there is no other possibility of reading them objectively and understanding them than in relation to this centre in which they are integrated. Hopkins does not thereby confuse nature and grace but the concrete telos of natures and persons is none the less

own writing.²⁹⁵ He had been an influence on Merton from boyhood in England, as was noted earlier in the thesis.

The theme of poetry as theophany is extended to art and especially the icon by Merton in *Disputed Questions*.²⁹⁶ We see a familiar resonance with Balthasar's theology of beauty as a way of restoring real presence to the world as sacred art is described as 'theology in line and colour' which speaks to the whole man, mind, heart and senses. Sacred art has the task of 'conveying a hidden spiritual reality' rather than producing copy of visual reality.²⁹⁷ This is something which is not just a matter of taste or snobbery at 'cheap sentimentality' in modern religious art but something we must 'learn to see' by the cultivation of artistic discernment.

Beauty therefore, is not reducible to the symbolic as a definition and appropriation of the term symbol to serve an epistemological end. It is not,

... a speculative appropriation of the aesthetic moment in the service of a supposedly more vital and essential meaning: the symbol is that which arrests the force of the aesthetic, the continuity of the surface, in order to disclose the depths.²⁹⁸

Although this is a discussion on beauty, the thrust of the argument is to attempt to restore a way of perception which Merton, like Balthasar, believes has been obscured.²⁹⁹ In other words, the awakening to being as encounter and response in art or poetry is a 'Christian

that for the sake of which they exist; and out of the glory of the incarnate God there breaks forth the truest and most inward glory of forms both natures and persons.'

²⁹⁵ Ross Labrie, *Thomas Merton and the Inclusive Imagination* (Columbia, MI: University of Missouri Press, 2001), 40.

²⁹⁶ Thomas Merton, *Disputed Questions* (London: Hollis & Carter, 1961), 151-164.

²⁹⁷ Ibid, 162.

²⁹⁸ David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids, MN: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2011), 25.

²⁹⁹ Balthasar in particular is concerned to show that theological disengagement of aesthetics from Christian thought has had fateful consequences. In, *Glory of the Lord*, vols. II and III, he attempts an analysis of how it happened. Sherry and Hart are also concerned in their writing with the debasement of the word 'beauty' in language, to mean 'fanciful' or 'pretty', leading to an over-emphasis in time on praxis, historical criticism and what Balthasar denounces as the 'dead-end' of dualism and immanence found in works of Bultmann and others.

optics’³⁰⁰ which learns to see the other beyond labels and can by analogy see Christ in the other, as the ‘beauty of the infinite.’

For Merton, like Balthasar, it is ‘being’ which radiates and illuminates the object and the person from within. Indeed, in his essay criticising the ‘death of God’ theologians, *Blake and the New Theology*, penned in the last year of his life, Merton comments:

Afflicted as I am with an incurable case of metaphysics, I cannot see where the idea of Godhead as *process* is more dynamic than that of God-head 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’.³⁰¹

In a reference to the dynamism of being as opposed to ‘static quiescence’ Merton points to the *glory* or *logoi* of created things which illuminate and radiate God’s presence:

... Traditional metaphysics is in accord with Blake in regarding it as the source and ground of all life: The pride of the peacock is the glory of God; The Lust of the goat is the bounty of God; The wrath of the lion is the wisdom of God; The nakedness of the woman is the work of God.³⁰²

In summary, both Merton and Balthasar have a common outlook on reality, through their shared concern at the secular world’s turn toward the technological via Kant and the Cartesian cogito and away from the sapiential and spiritual senses. Both see the human person not as a neutral observer over against the world but part of concrete reality, who is open to the breakthrough of the divine into consciousness in the form of word and response. Hence, the act of faith is in the participation of the whole person in a network of relations. Both men believe that there is such a thing as a ‘Christian optics,’ a way of seeing reality as displaying the intrinsic radiance of the divine in creation. Both see that the aim of the Christian is to integrate fragmented reality into the whole and the way to do this is through engagement with

³⁰⁰ Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 343f.

³⁰¹ Thomas Merton, ‘Blake and the New Theology’ in *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. Brother Patrick Hart (New York: New Directions, 1985), 9.

³⁰² Ibid.

the literary and poetic/artistic genres. This is also clear in the following section documenting the correspondence between the two men.

2:1:5. Merton in engagement with Balthasar (Maximus the Confessor)

Merton corresponded through letters several times with Balthasar during the 1950s and early 60s.³⁰³ On each occasion, there appears to be in Merton's tone, a great affinity between his perspective and that of the Swiss theologian. In fact in one journal entry he noted how near Balthasar's theology was to his.³⁰⁴ The patristic revival in Orthodoxy in the twentieth century was mirrored in the west by scholars such as Balthasar in an ecumenical collaboration of the rediscovery of Maximus, offering a fresh orientation to spirituality in the modern world. This could be one reason for the deep attraction of Merton to the patristic sources and writers engaged in this recovery.³⁰⁵

During the course of preparation for a series of lectures, he read Balthasar's *Cosmic Liturgy*,³⁰⁶ a detailed study of the thought of St. Maximus the Confessor. In a letter to Balthasar, he writes of his appreciation, 'I failed to mention to you that the book of yours

³⁰³ Merton, *School of Charity*, 119. In reply to a letter from Fr. Mark Weidner on 15th April 1959, Merton describes Balthasar as 'controversial' but generally 'very good.' He recommends 'some books' of other *ressourcement* theologians like Danielou and de Lubac. I suggest Merton's caution reflects the way *ressourcement* was still a source of controversy in the Church in the years before the Second Vatican Council.

³⁰⁴ Merton, *Learning to Love*, 343.

³⁰⁵ Andrew Louth documents the rediscovery of texts of theologians such as Evagrius, the Desert Fathers as well as Maximus and Gregory of Nyssa helped present these figures in a fresh perspective. In the west it was Balthasar, Polycarp Sherwood and Lutheran scholar Lars Thunberg who revived knowledge of Maximus. The effect of this revival informs attempts to develop a spirituality which would help heal the anxieties and divisions of secularist and consumerist attitudes in the west. See Andrew Louth, 'The Patristic Revival and its Protagonists' in Cunningham and Theokritoff, *Cambridge Companion to Eastern Orthodox Theology*, 198.

³⁰⁶ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy: The Universe According to St Maximus the Confessor* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003).

which says most to me has always been the one on St. Maximus. I seem to find these themes again and again and even more so in your more recent work.’³⁰⁷

The book put forward the perspective that Maximus was not so much a complier of early tradition but a synthesiser, bringing forth ancient cultural strands, Christian thought and oriental religious learning with originality.³⁰⁸ It is not hard to conclude that Merton, a great synthesiser, would find this approach conducive to his own theology and he incorporates much of Maximus’ teaching on wisdom into his own thought via Balthasar’s book.³⁰⁹ In another letter, Merton praises Balthasar’s approach as a theologian who has the monastic spirit, and is, ‘a beacon of the contemplative ‘light’.’³¹⁰

Merton stresses this affinity in a letter to Balthasar thanking him for agreeing to translate some of his poetry into German, on July 3rd, 1964, Merton writes back with evident admiration:

It is a comfort to me to know that you, whose works we know so well here and whom we so profoundly respect, should be interested in such things. Too few theologians are I imagine. But you are an Origenist: how can you fail to be alert to the seriousness of the poetic word, which has its own place in the world of the sons of God since Adam was appointed to name the animals. ...But I am completely convinced that without the emergence of an occasional poetic word into consciousness, my monastic life would be fruitless. *Theoria* demands not just gazing but response and statement. Don’t you agree? Statement of course in the sense of praise and lamentation....³¹¹

³⁰⁷ Merton, *School of Charity*, 227. In this letter, Merton again shows his admiration for Balthasar’s theology, praising his work on St. Maximus and according with the themes in his thought.

³⁰⁸ Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy*, 15.

³⁰⁹ This is evident from Merton’s lecture notes on Maximus and references to the logoi of created things, *theoria physike* and the unity of action and contemplation. See Merton, *Merton and Hesychasm*, 431-445. Merton’s lecture notes cross-reference wisdom in *theoria physike* with the term *sophianic* as a way to describe the orientation of the person to the hidden wisdom of God, (434).

³¹⁰ In this letter, Merton writes after thanking him for his German translation and selection of his poetry: ‘Yes, I feel it is very important for us other monks to show gratitude towards a theologian such as you, who are, after all, more contemplative and more monastic. These are the beacons that are most helpful to us and not arguments or novelties. As monks we ought to live ... with eyes open to the deifying light.’ *Ibid.*, 312.

³¹¹ Merton, *School of Charity*, 219.

By this, I understand Merton to mean that poetry is a response intuitively to the concrete reality of existence in which is found the divine.³¹² It also demands a response which suggests that Merton is in agreement with Balthasar in seeing divine reality made present in the world, brought forth in poetry and available as pure gift. The next section evaluates where the points of agreement and difference lie between the two men.

2:1:6. Merton in Engagement with Balthasar (evaluation)

In returning to the second research question, what resonances can be discerned between Merton's thought and that of Balthasar, Merton shares with Balthasar the concern for the whole from their love of the fathers and a belief that poetry is the locus of theophany. Both share the teaching of St. Maximus the Confessor who posits a unified vision without subject and object divisions. The apprehension of *inscape*, *glory* or the *logoi* of created things is never abstract but attends to the concrete nature of reality in relation to the whole. As Milbank points out, Balthasar is located in the 'suspended middle' in seeing creation and humanity as desiring God and open to participation in being, which is also where we can locate Merton.

The difference lies in the way that Balthasar tries to frame the nature of the encounter, which opens him up to charges of residual extrinsicism and of not explicitly incorporating a social praxis within his framework. Through Merton's reading of Orthodox writers such as Clement, he is taken in the direction, not of framing existence around a single event - as Balthasar tends to do - though he revises his notions of the seriousness of ontological wrath upon reading Barth,³¹³ but as a continuous breakthrough of the divine life into his solitude. In this sense, he keeps the locus of theophany as the dynamic source of life - as the in-dwelling

³¹² Mark A. McIntosh argues that Balthasar consistently pursued a 'mystical Christology' or 'Christology from within,' McIntosh, *Christology from Within*, 1; idem, *Mystical Theology*, 102- 103.

³¹³ Rowan Williams *A Silent Action: Engagements with Thomas Merton* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2011), 81.

of *glory* or as *sophianic* - the lack of which tends towards prioritising instrumental, technological or purely material exchange.³¹⁴

Further to this, Balthasar's theology has variously been accused of 'eliding time'³¹⁵ and 'bad meta-chronics,'³¹⁶ as well as undertaking a grand survey of the material and then 'reporting the view.'³¹⁷ Critics suggest this means that he writes as a theologian who 'sees the whole' rather than dealing with distinct issues, although the tendency to 'seeing the whole' was due to the influence of de Lubac.³¹⁸ This criticism focuses on Balthasar's style of theological writing and expression. However, to compare Balthasar's style of theology to standard academic theology would be to miss what is distinctive about it.³¹⁹ His view of the wholeness of theology is in seeing his task as interrelating and integrating the tensions and intensities of human life and thought in all their variety. In this sense his holistic concern resonates with Merton, although the latter frames 'wholeness' within the integrated person, rather than within a comprehensive church theology. This is an important difference. The work of Jacques Maritain in relating the aesthetic to the personal is influential on Merton's outward look, as shown in the next chapter.

³¹⁴ For Balthasar, aesthetics has been reduced to a bourgeois comfort while ordinary communities are exposed to, 'a cold, heartless world of technology, a world that at best understands the 'beautiful' to mean elegantly built tools and machines.' See *Glory of the Lord* IV, 28. Merton also uses several of his essays and poems as criticisms of technology as will be seen in Chapter Three.

³¹⁵ Ben Quash, 'Making the Most of the Time: Liturgy, Ethics and Time,' *Studies in Christian Ethics* 15:97 (2002), 101.

³¹⁶ Ibid., 102. Quash criticises Balthasar of 'betraying time' because of the particularity of the structural form of the Church he develops in his theo-drama. Quash believes this move fixes and frames time in the church as a kind of 'crystallised stasis,' (101f.), when the church ought to be as yet 'unfinalisable.' (102).

³¹⁷ Karen Kilby, 'Balthasar and Karl Rahner' in Edward T. Oakes and David Moss eds., *The Cambridge Companion to von Balthasar* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 265.

³¹⁸ Ibid.

³¹⁹ Quash describes its distinctiveness as springing from his sense of 'commission' which led Balthasar to develop a new form of religious life in the Catholic church – the secular institute – with its distinctive Johannine and Ignatian spiritual tradition. His role was as spiritual director and chaplain to the institute of St. John. Second, his theology developed in close collaboration with mystic Adrienne von Speyr. See Quash, 'Hans Urs von Balthasar,' 106-107.

However, John Milbank comments that in his theological trilogy, Balthasar heads in the right direction as he is located in concrete reality or ‘the suspended middle’ but compromises himself at times by being too Barthian and Rahnerian.³²⁰ Milbank argues the Swiss theologian does not entirely escape from an older extrinsicist theology. For instance, although Balthasar is right to insist in aesthetics that objective properties of harmony and hidden depth, and subjective properties of ‘pleasing to the sight,’ draw us to the reality it discloses, there is a tendency to see aesthetics as a spectacle and not sufficiently as a play within beauty. Balthasar isn’t seeing aesthetics as interpersonal or interactive enough, unlike drama. There is too much forward movement from the aesthetic towards the dramatic and the idea of the beautiful as ‘passive spectacle’ ‘betrays a Kantian attitude towards the aesthetic’.³²¹ Milbank suspects that the paradigm of the beautiful is the lonely spectator looking at a picture, not the participant in the dance or the dweller within the building.³²²

Milbank is not being completely fair to Balthasar. His insistence that aesthetics is ‘theophany’ in interplay with ‘theo-praxy’ i.e. an encounter and a conversation,³²³ means aesthetics is not so separate in Balthasar’s mind from the dramatics as Milbank appears to suggest. Otherwise aesthetics does become merely a picture to be gazed at. On the contrary, ‘man is a spectator only in so far as he is a player: he does not merely see himself upon the stage, he really acts on it.’³²⁴

³²⁰ Milbank, *Suspended Middle*, 73. Balthasar is too Barthian at times, because he says the good which God brings about can only be explained and shown from within itself and will not allow itself be dragged into the world theatre, before becoming sin and death – Milbank suggests this is a Lutheran adoption of a role as opposed to positive and continuous aspects of kenosis and transfiguration. He also shows a Rahnerian tendency in the aesthetics by appealing to a set of initial appearances which seem to be an entry point to subjective human understanding, later to be left behind. This is too much like a supernatural existential. (76).

³²¹ Ibid, 72

³²² John Milbank, *Suspended Middle*, 72

³²³ Balthasar, *Theodrama I*, 15.

³²⁴ Ibid., 18.

However, does he really achieve this synthesis, because a more pressing criticism from liberation theologians is how Balthasar's theological aesthetics seems to make little room for its socio-political implications, 'the preferential option for the poor.'³²⁵ There is a danger of reducing theological aesthetics to an affective experience of the beautiful by inattention to a theological aesthetics of liberation: 'For an authentically Christian theological aesthetics the fundamental criterion of beauty will be the body of the tortured, scarred criminal hanging from a cross – and therefore the bodies of those whom Jon Sobrino calls the crucified people of history.'³²⁶ Surely, the temptation of a theological aesthetics is to remain on Mt. Tabor and not follow Christ to Calvary?³²⁷ There is a risk that despite Balthasar's assurance that praxis is at the heart of theological aesthetics, its social nature at best, remains implicit.³²⁸ Yet, as Gutierrez comments, the reception and response to the love of God is always conditioned by the social location including the practice of worship.³²⁹ Hence the task is not to make social praxis an idol, as Balthasar fears, but 'situate justice within the framework of God's gratuitous love.'³³⁰

³²⁵ Balthasar sets out his criticism of liberation theologies in *The Glory of the Lord VII: Theology: The New Covenant* ed. John Riches (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989), 181f. He regards 'the time of Christ' in which the life, death, resurrection and parousia are played out affects our time, 'the time of the Church.' If 'the time of Christ' contains the whole eschatological act of God then 'the time of the Church' can only give a wholehearted response towards its goal. This helps to clarify why Balthasar sees liberationist theologies as problematic: 'The believer has been made Christ's own and therefore the absoluteness of this forward movement which results, transcends every other absoluteness, however utopian, of human hope or of the programming of the future. Simply by being lived, this absoluteness can take its place at the spearhead of all worldly hopes for the future, and can preserve them from acquiescing in the established present.' (181). In a sense the pilgrim character of the church is such that it's 'eyes' are fixed on the future and it cannot allow itself to be diverted by provisional or partial theologies misdirecting away from the ultimate goal. In other words, he cautions against making liberation into an absolute goal in theology.

³²⁶ Roberto S. Goizueta, 'Theo-drama as Liberative Praxis,' *Crosscurrents* (March 2013), 63.

³²⁷ Ibid, 68.

³²⁸ However, Donald MacKinnon argues that Balthasar understands suffering, is mindful of the horrors of the murder of six million Jews and the fundamental issues this throws up for theology. The extent of Christ's God-forsakenness on the cross and suffering on behalf of humanity is put into sharp, concrete perspective in his meditation on the Easter Triduum in *Mysterium Paschale*. MacKinnon, 'Reflections,' 165.

³²⁹ Gustavo Gutierrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People*, 2nd ed. (London: SCM Press, 2005), 111-113.

³³⁰ Roberto S. Goizueta, 'Theo-drama as Liberative Praxis,' *Crosscurrents* (March 2013), 73.

Conversely, as his reading and experience intensify, Merton's personal understanding of theophany and of participation leads to direct engagement with other religions and with social issues. In the next section, I will set out in summary, the areas of theology in Maximus which appealed to Merton's sapiential consciousness.

2:2. Merton in engagement with Balthasar (Maximus the Confessor)

In trying to locate Merton as a 'wise theologian' and to situate him along a trajectory with Balthasar in the west and the Orthodox writers of the east,³³¹ it is necessary to account for Merton's orientation to the Church Fathers, specifically Maximus the Confessor through Balthasar's *Cosmic Liturgy*. To explain this I will draw on the text itself but also Merton's lecture notes on Maximus which some scholars have noted are 'among the most evocative and fully realised sections' ³³² of Merton's conferences.

In this text, Maximus is presented as a world-affirming thinker, fully accepting the natural world, which, contemplated in the light of revelation, emerges as a source of wisdom. For Merton, he presents 'the broadest and most balanced view of the Christian cosmos.'³³³ There are four main areas where one discerns the wisdom or glory³³⁴ of God for Maximus:

³³¹ Merton ran a series of lectures entitled, 'An Introduction to Christian Mysticism' in the Spring of 1961 for young monks of Gethsemani. Merton cites his principal sources in his first lecture: Balthasar, Danielou from the West and Lossky, Meyendorff and Evdokimov in the East. In the eighth lecture, Merton draws on Balthasar's *Cosmic Liturgy* to introduce Maximus. See Thomas Merton, 'Contemplation and Cosmos: Chapter VIII of Thomas Merton's Lecture Notes on Theology and Mysticism,' ed. Jonathan Montaldo in Bernadette Dieker and Jonathan Montaldo eds., *Merton and Hesychasm* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2003), 432-445.

³³² Patrick O'Connell, 'Introduction' in Thomas Merton, *An Introduction to Christian Mysticism: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition* 3, Patrick F. O'Connell ed. (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications), xxx.

³³³ Ibid.

³³⁴ *Wisdom and Glory* are complimentary attributes of God. In David F. Ford, *Christian Wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 239-251, David F. Ford explains that glory is linked to blessing, and blessing God's name for God's own sake. Glory signifies abundance and completeness without losing the dynamic of life and constant overflow towards others. This idea is linked to the *perichoresis* of the Trinity – a dance of mutual blessing, giving and receiving. In this sense it is also connected to

Knowledge from contemplation of nature and of the structures of meaning, i.e. knowledge of God hidden within it; Creation is affirmed as are the physical senses and the spiritual senses in the reading of Scripture; the inner meaning of history; the inner sense of divine judgements.³³⁵ This orientation affects the whole man, his spiritual senses and his sense of the presence of the divine in creation. Above all, man is an intellectual and material ‘microcosm’,³³⁶ who appears ‘at the midpoint of the universe’³³⁷ who finds in all things, the hidden glory of God. For Merton this orientation is at the heart of what it means to be wise: ‘The soul does not contaminate itself by its turn toward the world of sense: It is not food that is evil but our gluttony; not procreation but fornication...not glory but our thirst for glory...’³³⁸ The pattern of existence is reciprocal as man only gives back to God his own gifts, in a constant interchange of giving and receiving. This imitation is patterned after the laws of nature and in turn leads to a kind of universal approach to salvation in that all has its source in God from the beginning,³³⁹ ‘also returns to his first pure, paradisaal state.’³⁴⁰

Additionally, the emphasis on contemplation of natural created things is a way of looking into and grasping something of the mystery of God. This view is readily discernible in other Eastern patristic writings such as Gregory of Nyssa, familiar to Merton and

worship, enabling creation to bless its creator, and for persons to bless each other. It has strongly inter-personal connotations of love, so wisdom binds both love and glory, as the latter is associated with intelligence, discernment and judgement, (242). Wisdom as an attribute is: ‘... God’s own knowledge, purposeful understanding and judgement, conceiving and in forming the super-abundance of God’s own life and activity, interrelating God’s many perfections and delighting in the radiant intelligibility of himself and the creation.’ (245). This radiance cannot be kept within God and must be shared generously with creation.

³³⁵ Pramuk, 144.

³³⁶ Peter Bouteneff comments that the Fathers describe man as a microcosm. This means man is a summation of the composition of the created world but unique in being both spiritual and physical. As a microcosm, the human person is also a mediator between the material and spiritual, heaven and earth. See Peter Bouteneff, ‘Christ and Salvation’ in Mary B. Cunningham and Elizabeth Theokritoff eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Eastern Christian Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 94.

³³⁷ Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy*, 175.

³³⁸ Ibid, 305.

³³⁹ Ibid, 307-308.

³⁴⁰ Ibid, 92

Balthasar.³⁴¹ This teaching is ‘absolutely central to the understanding of Merton’s spiritual development and outlook’³⁴² and Maximus presents it in its fullest form. As a microcosm, the task of the Christian is the overcoming of divisions (*diaipeoeis*) caused by the fall; divisions which are healed by the Incarnation. It is the task of each person ‘in Christ’ to realise this victory in his own life and so work for a restoration of the cosmos,³⁴³

It is by *theoria* that man helps Christ to redeem the *logoi* of things and restore them to himself....This *theoria* is inseparable from love and from a truly spiritual conduct in life. Man must not only see the inner meaning of things but he must regulate his entire life and his use of his time and of created beings according to the mysterious norms hidden in things by the creator...³⁴⁴

Further still in his lecture on Maximus, Merton reflects on *Theoria Physike* as also *sophianic*, uniting Maximus with a modern Orthodox idea, and meaning:

...man is able to unite the hidden wisdom of God in things with the hidden light of wisdom in himself. The meeting and marriage of these two brings about a resplendent clarity within man himself and this clarity is the presence of the divine wisdom, fully recognised and active within him. Thus man becomes a mirror of the divine glory and is resplendent with divine truth, not only in his mind but in his life.³⁴⁵

³⁴¹ Ibid, 144. Also, Abbot John Eudes Bamberger OCSO, points to Gregory of Nyssa as another influence on Merton, who writes about him in *The Ascent to Truth*. At the time of reading the Russian Theologians in 1957, Merton was also reading Balthasar’s book on Gregory of Nyssa: *Presence and Thought*. Abbot Bamberger points to Gregory’s teaching on *epektasis* or ‘dynamic movement’ as having spiritual satisfaction but also it was an invitation to further movement into God, as having great appeal to Merton. This teaching of Gregory is also influential on Balthasar’s understanding of the dynamic movement of the Trinity and movement of the individual towards God. See also, John Eudes Bamberger OCSO, *Thomas Merton: Prophet of Renewal* (Kalamazoo, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2005), 59f.

³⁴² M. Basil Pennington OCSO, ‘Thomas Merton and Byzantine Theology’ in M. Basil Pennington OCSO ed., *Toward an Integrated Humanity: Thomas Merton’s Journey* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1987), 136.

³⁴³ Williams, *A Silent Action*, 35.

³⁴⁴ Merton, ‘Contemplation and the Cosmos,’ 434f.

³⁴⁵ Ibid., 435.

In the above passage Merton interchanges words such as *wisdom*, *sophianic* and *glory*³⁴⁶ to describe the presence of the divine in creation; borrowing words from eastern and western authors like Balthasar to convey his point. It was Merton's understanding of mankind as made in God's likeness that enables each person to be transformed by grace and thus encounters with others are moments of connection with the 'divine light' shining through every person.³⁴⁷

In addition, according to Maximus, and the theory of the *logoi* of created things, conscious experience is experience of being *in* the world and being part of the whole. To experience another is to experience and sense them as a part of the whole – this is the moment of participation - of 'beings in being.' In my view, this insight is linked to Balthasar's and Merton's understanding of being, along with Orthodox writers described in the previous chapter. Merton quotes Maximus to show how developing the spiritual life is a movement of flexible inter-dependence, which is both fullness (limitless possibility), and poverty or emptiness, since it wills to keep nothing back but is love and gift alone. As such it is total freedom. In his lecture, Merton quotes from Balthasar's book to reinforce the point of entering into the dynamism of the presence of God hidden in Scripture but also the poetic word,

The whole world is a GAME OF GOD. As one amuses children with flowers and bright coloured clothes and then gets them later used to more serious games and literary studies so God raises us up first of all by the great game of nature, then by the scriptures [with their poetic symbols]. Beyond the symbols of scripture is the Word.³⁴⁸

³⁴⁶ By 'glory' is meant not simply beauty but 'radiance' which illumines the whole. Another word used by Balthasar is 'kabod' and is one of the determinations of being itself. See Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord* IV, 20.

³⁴⁷ Pennington, 'Thomas Merton and Byzantine Theology,' 136-137.

³⁴⁸ Allchin, 'Our Lives a Powerful Pentecost,' 131-132. This text is also found in Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy*, 310-311.

It is for a balance between theology and spirituality, action and contemplation, away from ‘the illusion of agency,’ and a contrast to the scientific/technological approach to the cosmos that Merton turns to Maximus through Balthasar. This is the heart of the mystical theology in which Merton was immersed and it is central to his thought.

However, Pramuk’s alternative suggestion, that Merton’s reading of Maximus at this point is a breakthrough to the *Sophia* of his theological imagination, seems to be pointing to a wisdom-figure rather than an ontological orientation.³⁴⁹ As I suggested in chapter one, the *sophianic* is a sustained metaphor for God’s presence in the world which Merton uses alongside other metaphors. It also describes an orientation to contemplation. Later as we shall see, he extends his notions to writing for an audience outside the cloister.

Indeed, Merton is clear from the outset of his lectures on the mystical tradition in 1961, that a lack of what Maximus terms *theoria physike* is the thing that accounts for the stunting of spiritual growth.³⁵⁰ It is only from *theoria physike* and *theologia* or contemplation without forms that a balanced life can develop:

It is contemplation according to nature. It is also contemplation of God in and through nature... in and through the things he has created, in history. It is the *multiformis sapientia*, (wisdom adhering in all forms and uniting all forms), the gnosis that apprehends the wisdom and the glory of God, e.g. His wisdom as creator and redeemer.³⁵¹

³⁴⁹ Pramuk describes it thus, ‘Whoever Sophia is at this point in Merton’s theological imagination there can be no doubt that her subsequent remembrance in his writings is bound to Christianity’s communal memory and experience of Jesus Christ.’ Pramuk, *Sophia*, 147. However, in looking at the same sources there is no suggestion in Merton’s notes that he is referring to a ‘figure’ as such.

³⁵⁰ Thomas Merton, ‘An Introduction to Christian Mysticism (from the Apostolic Fathers to the Council of Trent),’ Lectures given by Merton at the Abbey of Gethsemani., Mss. Vigil of the Assumption, (1961), quoted in M. Basil Pennington, OSCO, ‘Thomas Merton and Byzantine Spirituality,’ in M. Basil Pennington ed., *Toward and Integrated Humanity: Thomas Merton’s Journey* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1987), 147.

³⁵¹ Thomas Merton, ‘Contemplation and Cosmos,’ 431.

Therefore, in summary, Merton finds in Maximus that wisdom works through the person, their senses and through his whole life's orientation to the *sophianic, glory* of the creative wisdom of God. No longer does the world appear to be a negative in place, history and judgements of God. The world is seen to be saturated with the spiritual. The task of the Christian, the microcosm of creation who stands 'in the middle,' is the overcoming of divisions caused by the fall and restoring the cosmos to its original unity in Christ. This can be done in the fully wise and integrated person, who overcomes divisions in himself in the quest for a higher unity.

2:3. Merton and recovering a paradise consciousness (Maximus the Confessor)

In outlining the theology of Maximus and the Balthasar/Merton correspondence on the importance of the poetic word breaking through into consciousness, one can trace themes in Merton's writing where he takes upon himself the recovery of integrated wisdom: the cultivation of the spiritual senses; paradise consciousness in creation and in others.

The importance of the pattern of existence as mirrored and recreated in the cultivation of scriptural senses is commented upon in Merton's *Bread in the Wilderness*.³⁵² It is clear that Merton's exposition of scripture describes how the spiritual senses are awakened and deepened through the regular chanting of the Psalms and taking of the sacraments by the monks. The repetition of biblical texts and the liturgical cycle of prayers, become more than literature but an 'inexhaustible actuality' in which each monk comes to participate, live and experience, as if they were his own songs and prayers.³⁵³

³⁵² Thomas Merton, *Bread in the Wilderness* (New York: New Directions, 1997), 3f, (28f).

³⁵³ Ibid.

The return to paradise consciousness is explored in an early 1960s work, *The New Man*. Merton draws on biblical and patristic themes derived from Maximus and Gregory of Nyssa to describe the *Parrhesia* or dialogue or ‘free speech’ of Adam with God before the Fall as, ‘the free spiritual communication of ‘being with Being.’ Adam’s existential communion with the reality around him in and through the reality of God is constantly experienced within himself.’ In the fall, Adam turned into himself by a ‘wilful acceptance of unreality’. In paradise there was no separation of action and contemplation and so the aim is restoration ‘in Christ,’³⁵⁴ recovered by Him, of the unity of the two lost by Adam’s wilful belief in his own self-sufficiency. Hence, the fall and creation are not about competing power relations but an affirmation that being a part of the natural order and having a role is ‘of God’: it is because God wants it to be so –the ‘illusion of agency’ is part of the illusion of the fall that denies dialogue, conversation and the need for the other.³⁵⁵ The theme of *Parrhesia* and fall recur again and again in Merton’s later poetry and essays, as will be seen in the next chapter.

Once again, the movement between the divine and human freedoms is described as sensory and experiential, involving a free consent of the will. Merton defines sapiential experience or ‘*sapida scientia*’ as an existential tasting of the knowledge of the divine good. He describes *sapientia* as the highest form of existential communion with God, contrasting this wisdom of the divine with St. Bernard’s teaching on ‘*sapor mortis*’ or the taste for death, which is at the very heart of original sin,

...for there is no full and total experience of God that is not at the same time an exercise of man’s fundamental freedom (of spontaneity) and of God’s mercy. It is a

³⁵⁴ Merton, *The New Man*, 53-54.

³⁵⁵ Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 69-70.

free consent in an act of mutual giving and receiving that takes place between two wills, two 'persons' finite and infinite.³⁵⁶

A good example in Merton's writing of inter-locking themes of wisdom is found in his description of '*the General Dance*' in *New Seeds of Contemplation*.³⁵⁷ Merton's own adherence to the vision of Christ as image and icon present in the world hidden in playful rhythms is lyrically expressed. Merton articulates the *sophianic* depth of things, as a 'true presence,' weaving multiple themes of cosmic unity and restoration, word as image and participation as wisdom, a 'man-child' playing in the world. His biblical and mystical account of the incarnation is the necessary act of a creator whose love is relational.

As such, his presence in the world as man depends in some measure upon man. The loving and kenotic action or free and healing initiative of God in Christ, according to Merton, demands a response and a new way of seeing and being in the world which recognises, in encountering others, 'God, wandering as a pilgrim and exile in his own creation;' in which creation already participates as the 'joy of the cosmic dance, which is always there.'³⁵⁸

A distinctive example of Merton's attention to *logoi* in the world around him is found in his study of the minority religious community, The Shakers, and their distinctive art and craft. The simplicity of the Shakers attracts in their mutual search, as he saw it, for the core spirit or *Logos* – a core belief often described in his mature writings as 'paradise consciousness.' For Merton, the simple furniture and architecture of the Shakers was made, so they thought, as God would make it; it could not have been made better, having within it a

³⁵⁶ Merton, *The New Man*, 53f.

³⁵⁷ It is an account of a God who cannot bear to be remote from his creation; Christ as image and icon - the *Pantokrator* - freely enters ordinary time as one powerless, yet in Christ, God became not only 'this man' but 'every man.' See Merton, *New Seeds*, 303.

³⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 303.

certain, ‘Edenic innocence,’³⁵⁹ as he notes, ‘Example of work sensitive to *logoi*: “Shaker handicrafts and furniture, deeply impregnated with the communal mystique of the Shaker community...a real epiphany of *logoi*. Characterised by spiritual light.’³⁶⁰

Further images of paradise consciousness are found in Merton’s mature poetry, in which the innocent true self, the inner *logos*, is experienced, where, ‘Love walks gently as a deer.’³⁶¹ In the poem *Louisville Airport*, Merton reveals his attachment to a student nurse but with his insight describes the relationship between them as like a, ‘gentle liturgy, Of shy children have permitted God to make again His first world,’³⁶² and in verse five, he compares this meeting on the Airport grass as, ‘paradise’. Merton employs Edenic metaphors of original innocence and purity, unspoiled by sin, to express the experience of encounter with the original, true self: ‘A tall spare pine/Stands like the initial of my first/ Name when I had one.’³⁶³

These examples show how through poetry and art, Merton is attuned to the biblical/patristic concepts of paradise, the restoration of innocence and of *logoi* throughout creation. It is the location of theophany and the inner radiance of the divine glory in all things that he discussed with Balthasar.

2:3:1. Merton and *Theoria Physike* (Maximus the Confessor)

The work of integration and of recognising humanity’s full identity in Christ preoccupied Merton for much of his monastic life. Indeed, he underlined its importance as part of his

³⁵⁹ Paul M. Pearson, *Seeking Paradise: The Spirit of the Shakers* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2003), 42.

³⁶⁰ Merton, ‘Contemplation and Cosmos,’ 443, (the underlining is Merton’s emphasis).

³⁶¹ Szabo, *In the Dark Before Dawn*, 97.

³⁶² Ibid, ‘Louisville Airport,’ 196.

³⁶³ Ibid. ‘O Sweet Irrational Worship,’ 97. Other examples of Merton’s ‘paradise consciousness’ in poetry include ‘Song for Our Lady of Cobre,’ ‘Elias – variations on a Theme,’ ‘Grace’s House’ and ‘Night-Flowering Cactus.’

insistence that monasticism and the work of a solitary is ‘therapy’ whose aim is restoration of the world.³⁶⁴ Understanding *theoria physike* helped Merton turn from his early years in the monastery as a ‘world-denying’ monk to the person who reintegrated his natural appreciation for the created order.

Further still, monastic writer Basil Pennington OCSO, comments that Merton’s personal experience in Louisville on the corner of two streets, ‘Fourth and Walnut,’ is an insight into *theoria physike*, as it deeply integrates his own perception of reality:

In Louisville, on the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the centre on the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness. The whole illusion of a separate holy existence is a dream.³⁶⁵

Merton’s experience in Louisville as the flowering of *theoria physike* or the realisation of ‘the pure glory of God in us,’³⁶⁶ does not change the value of solitude for him but intensifies it, in a growing sense that his solitude belongs to others, especially through his writing. The earlier sharp distinctions between the natural and supernatural are replaced by his deep realisation of *theoria* and where he had once seen the monastic life as a haven from the corruption of the world he now writes with an awareness of the ‘ghetto’ possibilities of religious life when it turns its back on the world in order to ‘keep the Holy Spirit in the monastery.’³⁶⁷

³⁶⁴ Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, 208.

³⁶⁵ This is brought to light in a moment of insight documented in, Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Tunbridge Wells: Burns and Oates, 1995), 156.

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 158.

³⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

Further examples of Maximus' teachings on *logoi* and restoration³⁶⁸ are explored in *Raids on the Unspeakable*, a small book of essays on various topics and a clear example of how Merton now synthesises spiritual, literary and socio-political themes circling the subject of authentic freedom. It is a development away from the devout books of earlier decades, although Merton claims it has been 'meditating in its own way.'³⁶⁹ In an essay, *Rain and the Rhinoceros*, Merton contrasts the presence and freedom of the woods where he lives and the cities, where people have created an unreal 'world within the world':

The night became very dark. The rain surrounded the whole cabin with its enormous virginal myth, a whole world of secrets, of silence, of rumour....What a thing it is to sit absolutely alone in the forest at night, cherished by this wonderful, unintelligible, innocent speech...³⁷⁰

Immersed in this extract are references which reveal the *logoi* of created things and return to paradise here and now – Merton is present to the rain, falling in paradisaal innocence on the woods and in the gullies; recalling the virginal myth of Eden, which is present, though busy city dwellers aren't aware of it. It is in the rain, whose speech, 'no clock...can measure'³⁷¹ which is in stark contrast to the advertising message on the box of his Coleman lantern, which stretches his days, he notes sardonically, 'to give more hours of fun.'³⁷²

In other words, Merton re-turns to ancient sources in order to make a serious comment on the way modern people live. He reminds the reader that man's entire being is made in order to understand *logoi* and to praise them, rather than quantifying time or saving time to

³⁶⁸ 'The world is full of *Logoi*, expressions of God's creative will and purpose. They meet together in the One who is *Logos*, the Word, in whom and for whom, all things were made.' Allchin, 'The Worship of the Whole Creation', 110.

³⁶⁹ Merton, *Raids*, 1.

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

³⁷¹ *Ibid.*

³⁷² *Ibid.*

have ‘more fun.’ After all, the freedom of the contemplative is not freedom from time but freedom in time in a realised eschatology. Merton recalls in a later work that, in biblical experience, time is not quantifiable but can give a growing sense of urgency towards *Kairos*, ‘...a moment of breakthrough towards which history itself...has gradually been maturing.’³⁷³ This *Kairos* is not only a time of breakthrough but ‘a time of decisive response,’³⁷⁴ which Merton suggests we are living through and requires not sticking with acquired answers or formulas but openness to the unexpected.³⁷⁵

Further still, in returning to the spiritual theme of paradisaal innocence and *Parrhesia* of the woods and gullies around his hermitage, Merton contrasts the ‘linear flight into nothingness’ of modernity with the cyclical rhythms of traditional societies. In his ‘myth’ of *Atlas and the Fatman*, Atlas juxtaposes the patterns and cycles of nature with the technical efficiency and destructiveness of the Fatman, ‘faithless mad son of clocks and buzzers’.³⁷⁶

This expansion in understanding of *theoria* in his own thinking means that he sees encounter and dialogue outside the cloister as the natural flowering of his monastic life. Merton points towards meeting God not in a confined space but in emptiness: ‘This little point of nothingness and of absolute poverty is the pure glory of God in us. It is so to speak, His name written in us, as our poverty, as our indigence, as our dependence, as our sonship.’³⁷⁷ The ‘point of nothingness’ described is a realisation of man’s finitude and the liberative sense of non-attachment to the ego-self. Following Maximus, Merton shows how,

³⁷³ Thomas Merton, *Opening the Bible* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1972), 82.

³⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 83.

³⁷⁵ This view of time and attentiveness to the present moment had also been influenced by Orthodox writer Olivier Clement as noted in the previous chapter.

³⁷⁶ Merton, *Raids*, 75.

³⁷⁷ Merton, *Conjectures*, 158.

in developing the spiritual life as a movement of flexible inter-dependence, both fullness and poverty or emptiness draws the will to keep nothing back but the fruits are love and gift alone.

The poetic and spiritual dynamic at play in his writing and poetry shows Merton's insight of analogical relationships between the things of this world and the infinite. The inner, original unity of humankind is mirrored in the Logos and it permits itself to be patterned and re-created through the world. This view is shared in Eastern patristic thought where Christ, not just as 'pre-existent Logos' but as 'the crucified', is regarded as the foundation of history and creation, 'by whom all things were made.'³⁷⁸ It is resonant of Balthasar's aesthetics as a way of seeing Christ in all things, responding and opening up the self to encounter and relationship with others. Thus, the task of the wise monk-theologian is to be a microcosm in the cosmic liturgy of creation and to remind the world, 'Here is an unspeakable secret: paradise is all around us and we do not understand. It is wide open... "Wisdom," cries the dawn deacon but we do not attend.'³⁷⁹

We have seen therefore in the survey of Merton writings above, the recurrence of certain themes in Merton's mind developed from concepts in Maximus the Confessor, such as the presence of *theoria physike* in the world, beyond subject-object divisions; the importance of *Parrhesia* or free speech in the return to 'paradise' or original consciousness before the fall. The intensification of questions and themes lead to his exploration of them beyond the cloister and beyond Christianity, which will be suggested in the conclusion.

³⁷⁸ Peter Bouteneff suggests this view contrasts with western 'linear' readings of Christ's role in salvation history which regards Christ's lifespan as an eruption of the Logos into history. Rather the Fathers see Christ as the foundation of all history, the centre of creation and image of God. Salvation as 'Restoration' means not a return to a pristine state but the restoration of the will of God for a united humanity, united to him in perfect freedom and love. See Peter Bouteneff, 'Christ and Salvation,' *Cambridge Companion to Eastern Christian Theology*, 94-96.

³⁷⁹ Merton, *Conjectures*, 132.

2:4. Evaluation: Merton in Engagement with Balthasar

In returning to the research question posed at the beginning of the chapter: what resonances can be discerned between Thomas Merton's way of seeing and Balthasar's, I have suggested a number of clear similarities. It was argued that Merton and Balthasar are both somewhat controversial figures, outsiders even, and that labels often ascribed to them are limited, as both have an affinity of view, which goes beyond crude labelling.

I have argued that there is a shared way of seeing between Merton and Balthasar regarding the pervasiveness and destructiveness of western secular thought as a dominant mind-set. Both are suspicious of a technological outlook that splits man from creation and they see the concept of a separate 'secular realm' as a human refusal to see being as the basic reality of existence. It is a symptom, rather, of the disruption by the subject in its self-conscious awareness of itself.

Thus, Merton agrees with Balthasar on the damage to humanity of the subject-object distinction of Kantian reason, the importance of poetry as the locus of theophany, made present through the practices of prayer, liturgy and the development of the scriptural senses. The human person is called to be a 'mediator' and participate in the unity and dynamic relationality of creation - such ideas are found in St. Maximus the Confessor and shared by the two men.

However, man's ontological fall and return to himself remain the existential priority for Merton, rather than the undertaking of a comprehensive church theology. Despite Balthasar's emphasis on concrete reality, some detect a reluctance to engage directly in existential contexts.³⁸⁰ Balthasar tends to an Augustinian emphasis on 'two cities' and seems

³⁸⁰ Gerald O' Hanlon SJ, 'Theological Dramatics,' in *The Beauty of Christ: An Introduction to the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar*, Bede McGregor and Thomas Norris eds. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 108.

to put arbitrary limits on what can and cannot be achieved in the social realm - the real drama is a work of the heart. However, he does critique modern technological society; his suggestion for change is for humans to root themselves in the freedom of God and from there will follow ‘dramatic collaboration’ to change society. It flows from this that true discipleship leads to an ethic of justice and a need to work to change situations of injustice, cautioning against facile and even utopian optimism regarding social change.

Likewise, Merton warns against utopian political visions which offer little real change, suggesting the monk’s refusal of the world also is precisely because he desires its change. The difference between the monk and the Marxist for example, is that the monk works for a change of consciousness, while the Marxist desires sub-structural and material change.³⁸¹

Both men stress the importance of a personal transformation and the movement of love of the divine life is open to all. Balthasar’s theological aesthetics and dramatics are interrelated so the further the individual is open to the divine life, the more open the person will be to the other – for Balthasar, Merton is a good example of this logic,³⁸² a ‘theological person’ of Balthasar’s dramatics who lives ‘in Christ.’³⁸³

On the other hand, for Merton, *Koinonia* formed by the work of the heart, means going out towards true encounter with the other, otherwise Catholics, whether progressive or conservative, fall victims to ‘Cartesian thinking.’³⁸⁴ What matters is a change of

³⁸¹ Thomas Merton, ‘Marxism and Monastic Perspectives’ in Naomi Burton, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin eds., *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1975), 330.

³⁸² Abbot John Eudes Bamberger OCSO notes Balthasar’s assessment of Merton as one of the most influential spiritual writers of contemporary times alongside St. Therese of Lisieux, Elizabeth of the Trinity and Charles de Foucauld. Bamberger, *Thomas Merton: Prophet of Renewal* (Kalamazoo, MI: 2005), 12.

³⁸³ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-drama: Theological Dramatic Theory, Volume Three: Dramatis Personae: Persons in Christ* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 263 (456-457).

³⁸⁴ Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968), 21.

consciousness which places less reliance on structures and is more ‘concerned with this business of total inner transformation.’³⁸⁵

In other words the logic of the monk is to work for inner transformation, *theoria physike*, and crucially to share its fruits with others beyond the boundaries of the cloister. This means rejecting status quo attachments to structures and programmes, ‘You cannot rely on structures. The time for relying on structures has disappeared. They are good and they should help us... But they may be taken away and if everything is taken away, what next?’³⁸⁶

In this sense, I suggest Balthasar does not take forward his findings on Maximus and his theological aesthetics as far as Merton. He seems to want to restrain the desire to find ‘God in all things’ through imposition of a framework on the divine-human encounter. The danger is - although Balthasar denies this – of too much resolution of the aesthetic into the dramatic so that the beautiful becomes a spectacle. For Balthasar’s theological aesthetics not to remain a question of taste, and the dramatics not to be restricted to an ecclesial praxis, he must press beyond the boundaries of the ecclesia,³⁸⁷ for the flowering of participation of beings in being. However, Balthasar’s reluctance to be thrown into the social and political could be as much personal sensibility as theological judgement.³⁸⁸

³⁸⁵Merton, ‘*Marxism and Monastic perspectives*,’ 340.

³⁸⁶Ibid., 338.

³⁸⁷O’Hanlon suggests Balthasar can be taken further beyond a personal call to transformation into structural and political spheres, to complete his theology. He moves beyond Balthasar to suppose the drama between God and Man affects God while preserving his transcendence, called to transfiguration of all areas of human living, including the social, economic, political and cultural dimensions. Ibid, 111. This would bring an urgency of engagement with structural evils to Balthasar’s consciousness of the reality of evil, within the theologian’s own theological idiom. I suggest in this chapter that Merton is an exemplar who can take Balthasar forward.

³⁸⁸Ibid., 110. O’Hanlon comments that Balthasar is very much a creature of his own milieu, the product of a highly cultivated Swiss culture. This may suggest why he is cautious about Liberation Theology as a theology of the poor rather than warning about the mixing of politics and theology. He suggests his rather detached approach to politics could risk accommodation with the ‘status quo’.

In the following chapter, more examples are given of how I argue Merton is a wise theologian, through the expansion of his understanding of the whole person to interest in the social realm, restating the role of a monk in the world. He goes beyond Balthasar's cautious but shared concern for the restoration of a lost unity of theology with spirituality, through engagements in the social sphere beyond the cloister.

CHAPTER THREE

THOMAS MERTON'S OUTWARD LOOK

The key questions this thesis has posed thus far are: in what ways Thomas Merton can be understood as a 'wise theologian,' and secondly, what resonances can be discerned between Merton's thought and that of Balthasar. In chapter two, I argued Balthasar and Merton share a way of seeing and sensibility which is aesthetic, poetic and also patristic, particularly the thought of Maximus the Confessor. I suggested the latter's synthesis of spiritual and practical knowledge also provides a way for Merton to expand his monastic and literary interests. I suggested that because of their shared way of seeing, Merton can take Balthasar's own suppositions further by engaging in social concerns beyond the cloister.

Therefore, in this chapter, I shall consider further ways Merton is a wise theologian in the development of his sapiential /sophianic consciousness toward an outward look. The aim is to show how Merton is a theologian of sapiential wisdom through his assessment of his role as a monk and how his pre-Kantian grasp of poetry and art expands beyond the explicitly religious toward creative and critical encounters with literature and poetry.

These themes will be discussed in the following way. Firstly, there will be a brief discussion of the influence of Maritain's Thomist aesthetics and the vitality of the artist to 'imitate God' in creative works. Secondly, I suggest how Merton revises his understanding of his vocation by engagements with the world, particularly through artistic creativity, as he searches for integrity and wholeness in his religious life. The idea Merton analyses and embraces as his own is whether, as an intellectual and a monk, he should participate in the world or remain a neutral observer aloof, 'innocent' in the face of the upheaval of the 1960s. His role as an 'innocent' poet yet 'guilty bystander' implicated in the troubles of the world

will be highlighted. I show how Merton integrated this idea with eastern ideas of the monk-artist as iconographer, the ‘microcosm’ of man who reproduces the things of God in his work and rest. Thirdly, I discuss some of Merton’s anti-poems and essays which engage with themes of mass society and authors outside of the explicitly religious and discuss how language is the means for Merton to open up to being in *Parrhesia*.

3:1. The influence of Jacques Maritain

Thomas Merton’s aesthetic and practical sense was influenced first of all by his artist-father and then by the Thomism of Jacques Maritain.³⁸⁹ Merton made extensive use of *Art and Scholasticism*³⁹⁰ in his master’s thesis, particularly the idea of the creative and intellectual character of art as a virtue in the artist – so slavish imitation is never real art. As a virtue, art demands as primary the integrity of the artist before God.³⁹¹

For Maritain, the worthwhileness of something having been created, out of creative intuition, indirectly reflects on ethical and political spheres, because neither the artist nor the politician are independent of ‘*what is*’ – each are orientated to desired ends and purposes for which they are created.³⁹² The key virtue is prudence or judgement and the highest practical wisdom is understood in the artistic and political spheres when the intellect is used to its proper ends, ‘To turn away from wisdom and contemplation and to aim lower than God is for

³⁸⁹ The influence of French Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain through their personal friendship over forty years is evident in Merton’s emphasis on the intuitive relationship between the intellect, the practical order of the human and Being itself. See Jacques Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism with Other Essays*, (Breiningsville: Filiquaria publishing, 2007), 7-9. For Merton, the intuition of wisdom as explained by Maritain stayed with him for the rest of his life. The sapiential approach is the highest form of cognition in Thomistic ‘wisdom’: ‘...Wisdom is not only speculative but also practical; that is to say, it is also lived. And unless one lives it, one cannot have it.’ See Merton, *Literary Essays*, 99.

³⁹⁰ Ibid., 88.

³⁹¹ Anne E. Carr, *A Search for Wisdom and Spirit: Thomas Merton’s Theology of the Self* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 18.

³⁹² Maritain, *Art and Scholasticism*, 83.

Christian civilisation, the first cause of all disorder.³⁹³ In terms of art, when the artist creates out of his developed intellectual virtue (habitus), he ‘becomes an imitator of God,’³⁹⁴ whose work participates in something superhuman as its object is to create beauty. As we shall see, Maritain is influential upon Merton’s understanding of participation with his concept of ‘distinguer pour unir’ (distinguish in order to unite).³⁹⁵

It is also noteworthy that Maritain’s theory of the ‘person’ as opposed to the ‘individual’ as someone who allows the life of spirit and freedom to dominate that of the passion and the senses is an important influence on Merton’s reflections on the social issues of the 1960s;³⁹⁶ and his ‘apostolate of friendship’ with intellectuals. In the next section, there is a discussion of Merton’s evolving understanding of the role of the monk, the influence of Maritain and his growing outward look.

3:2 Merton’s Outward Look (The expansion of sapiential wisdom)

In brief, several factors account for Merton’s development of an outward look toward the world from the late 1950s: Firstly, there was his increased involvement with the problems of young Americans in his role as novice master at Gethsemani and through his extensive correspondence with people outside the monastery. Secondly, it burgeoned through an expansion of his reading and thinking about the cosmic vocation of a monk, as was discussed in chapter one. Thirdly, it developed through his enduring preoccupation with the search for authenticity and integrity – the true identity of the self – in a monk, artist or poet. This interest

³⁹³ Ibid, 84-85.

³⁹⁴ Ibid, 88.

³⁹⁵ Pramuk, *Sophia*, 101.

³⁹⁶ Anne E. Carr notes that Maritain’s integral humanism is evident in *New Seeds of Contemplation*, in Merton’s discussion of the true and false self: “Maritain’s distinction between the individual and the person is strikingly present in Merton’s discussions of the false and true selves.” See Anne E. Carr, *A Search for Wisdom and Spirit*, 19, (27).

emerges from his early autobiographical works to his reflections on the place of the monk in the modern world in essays and books.

From the role of ‘innocent bystander’ or world-denying monk of the early years at Gethsemani to the ‘guilty bystander’ of the late fifties and sixties, Merton’s development is evident in both prose and poetry.³⁹⁷ In this period, he sees no longer any contradiction between his vocation as a contemplative monk and a more expansive recognition of its compatibility with artistic creativity. The idea Merton wrestled with was whether a person like himself, an intellectual, should participate in the world or remain detached, a neutral observer aloof from or ‘innocent’ in the face of the crises and upheaval of the 1960s.³⁹⁸

However, Merton’s use of the term ‘guilty bystander’ in his later work *Conjectures* and the publication of *My Argument with the Gestapo*³⁹⁹ could suggest that as he engaged with social questions, he cultivated an existential image of a bystander whose failure to address the crises and crimes of the age made him complicit and ‘guilty’ in the collective suffering. Like Albert Camus, an outsider, whose writings he embraced,⁴⁰⁰ he protested his innocence and thereby only implicated himself further in crimes he did not commit.⁴⁰¹

At this time, Merton reflects that the monastic lesson is to renounce allegiance to an impossible ideal or obedience to an ideology. Being a monk involves fidelity to the demand of

³⁹⁷ The event that is often pinpointed for Merton’s change of consciousness or turning towards the world is his experience on the corner of Fourth and Walnut in Louisville, documented in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. He saw that he loved all the people around and about him and felt he was a member of the human race. However, the journals reveal that this experience was part of a gradual development rather than as ‘stand-alone’ event.

³⁹⁸ Thomas Merton, ‘Letter to an Innocent Bystander’ in Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable*, (New York: New Directions, 1977; reprint, *Raids on the Unspeakable*, New York: New Directions, 1988), 34-44.

³⁹⁹ Thomas Merton, *My Argument with the Gestapo* (New York: New Directions, 1968).

⁴⁰⁰ There are seven essays, mainly literary reviews of Camus’ work, written by Merton between 1966 and 1968 in *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. Brother Patrick Hart (New York: New Directions, 1985), 181-292.

⁴⁰¹ James G. Cronin, ‘No Such Thing as Innocent Bystanding: the Bystander Motif in the Social Writings of Thomas Merton,’ *The Merton Journal* 21, no. 2 (2014): 79.

God's love which does not bear rational justification.⁴⁰² What is important is to live a unified life without rigid divisions or 'arbitrary fantasies' which hem monks into following obscure rules for the sake of it. Merton as a writer therefore explicitly implicates his monk's guilt in that of a bystander through 'parrhesiastic self-examination.'⁴⁰³

In addition, Merton analyses whether monks are part of the world and have a responsibility for it. He comes to see that the monk could no longer defend a static construct locatable in a space, while at the same time remain conscious of God's wrath, 'The civic language of the Christian needs to utter all this.'⁴⁰⁴ In fact, by confronting or vomiting up 'the interior phantom'⁴⁰⁵ the false self of pride and ego, as his special task, the monk may have a particular service to perform in the world.⁴⁰⁶ '*Letter to an Innocent Bystander*' argues with passion against any rejection of responsibility for the 'world crisis' on the grounds of innocence or passive resistance – no bystander is innocent. This theme becomes focussed upon Merton himself in *Conjectures*. A monk is one whose situation makes one into a bystander but he counters this assumption by arguing for the monk to be seen as having some wisdom that the world needs, as one who is not an individualist intent on perfecting their own lives but in solidarity with the world – struggling against alienation. Gone is the voice of the younger Merton of his spiritual autobiography, leaving behind the world as he saw it.

Merton was aware that speaking out on political and social matters risked 'activism' or sloganeering to 'take a stand.' Therefore, he does not go so far as to take part in direct

⁴⁰² *Conjectures*, 292.

⁴⁰³ Cronin, 'No Such Thing as Innocent Bystanding,' 81.

⁴⁰⁴ Williams, *A Silent Action*,

⁴⁰⁵ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures*, 338f.

⁴⁰⁶ This issue preoccupied Merton's thinking as the Catholic Church began its renewal at the Second Vatican Council (1962-65).

action.⁴⁰⁷ The bystander's 'innocence' must avoid any definitive plan and keep speaking truth to power by keeping the dialogue open, while not falling into the trap of the easy answer.⁴⁰⁸ Rowan Williams suggests he develops the notion of 'silent action' as a protest against the age, 'The silent action is not so much a coherent form of witness satisfactory to Merton and his imagined public as a consistent habit of turning on his own language, his own scripts in the name of a better truthfulness.'⁴⁰⁹ However, this is a contemplative task not an activist one. It falls to the contemplative to recover the lost sense of the polis.⁴¹⁰ The contemplative must guard against process and management which he finds in technological society but which can also be found in monasteries:

...our task is to dissociate ourselves from all who have theories which promise clear cut and infallible solutions, and to mistrust such theories... for since man has decided to occupy the place of God he has shown himself to be by far the blindest, cruellest and pettiest of all the false gods.⁴¹¹

Merton is critical of those in the church who rely solely what has been 'defined'⁴¹² as reliance on certainties and blind obedience mask a lack of a real conversion to the gospel. Furthermore, Merton had come to see that wisdom was not inborn. The seed was there to be

⁴⁰⁷ Merton's response to the self-immolation of a young Catholic worker in New York in 1965, as a protest against the Vietnam War, was to distance himself from such activism, although he later returned to writing for the peace movement.

⁴⁰⁸ Cronin, 'No Such Thing as Innocent Bystanding,' 77.

⁴⁰⁹ Williams, *A Silent Action*, 61.

⁴¹⁰ Ibid., 57. Williams points to Merton's reading of Hannah Arendt's *Human Condition*, which crystallised the monk's thinking about the connection of the contemplative with the public space.

⁴¹¹ Merton, *Raids*, 42.

⁴¹² Merton, *Turning Towards the World*, 5. Merton notes incredulously in the same journal entry, (May 29th, 1960), 'To live on formal definitions rather than on the ordinary magisterium is like living on vitamin capsules rather than bread and meat and milk and eggs.' Second, it displays a 'complete lack of appreciation for the real sources of contemplative reflection – liturgy, the Fathers and the Scriptures as understood by monastic tradition.' (5).

cultivated and developed through hard discipline and training.⁴¹³ In taking this stance, through his reading of Maximus the Confessor and Orthodox writers, there is an implicit criticism of post-war scholastic philosophy and the kind of monastic identity which simply reproduces prevailing cultural norms.⁴¹⁴ In contrast, sapiential awareness brings a person to ‘authenticity’, it apprehends man’s value and destiny in its global and ultimate significance – it resorts to poetic myth and archetypal symbols to push past ‘dead social routine’ and foster an integrated perspective.⁴¹⁵

Merton’s early work, *Seeds of Contemplation*, considers the issue of ‘integrity’ for the poet and for the monk – the problem of being oneself. With his own experience as a son of artists, his own struggles as a writer and the influence of Maritain’s Thomism, he is conscious of the dangers of conforming to an imitation of what is popular, meaning one wastes life in vain efforts,’ to be some other poet, some other saint.’⁴¹⁶

The monk’s advice to readers is to learn humility from the anguish and struggle in keeping balanced,⁴¹⁷ ‘continuing to be yourself without getting tough about it and without

⁴¹³ Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Press, 1998; reprint, Notre Dame: University of Notre Press, 2003), 101.

⁴¹⁴ Williams, *A Silent Action*, 64.

⁴¹⁵ Ibid., 61.

⁴¹⁶ Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation*, 65. In this early text, Merton indicates his attraction to the Apophatic mysticism of John of the Cross. The theme of darkness and obscurity are brought to bear in the life of serious prayer and personal integrity. In accepting one’s own mediocrity and flaws, vulnerability in relation to others, and the love of God, which will bring one to acceptance of others – yet the value of solitude was important too – as long as it did not become a desire to escape from others. This is pertinent to Merton’s own life as his autobiography shows his own struggle with relationships.

⁴¹⁷ Merton, *New Seeds*, 103. ‘Balance’ is the word used by Merton himself to describe the integrity of the Monk. It suggests that the promise of the monk to *conversatio morum* is one of a struggle and tension to become the person intended by God. The temptation for the monk is to adopt a system or set of pieties which he thinks makes him look like a monk when the real work of being a monk is ridding oneself of the ‘interior phantom’ of pride. Merton describes saints such as the Carthusian, St. Benedict Joseph Cabre, as those who other people cannot fathom because their lives do not seem to equate with the idealised portrait of saints in books. The saint may well end up as a tramp, a fool for God. (105). This may not sound like ‘balance’ but in Merton’s terms it means the saint is someone who is being what God intended them to be – thus restoring the world to itself.

asserting your false self against other people.’⁴¹⁸ The danger of spiritual pride for a monk is too much concern to adopt a system which he thinks will achieve sanctity and thereby turns his face away from the will of God. In fact like the successful artist, spiritual pride allows the monk to ‘become commercial’ yet cut off from others in a false humility which takes itself too seriously. The struggle for authenticity and integrity through humility is to learn to be content with the person one is before God, ‘to be nobody but the man or the artist that God intended you to be.’⁴¹⁹ There is a hint of irony about these words though in the light of his well-documented strained relationship with his Abbot, Dom James Fox.⁴²⁰ Perhaps Merton wrote these lines as a way of expiating his own feelings of frustration with the way the Abbot ran the monastery and his own struggles with spiritual pride.⁴²¹

In themes resonant of Maritain, what is not acceptable to Merton is a society which perpetuates confusions through its propaganda, idol-making and misuse of language. This concern is developed in *Conjectures*, where the reality of propaganda is systematically orientated to ambiguity and double-talk that no parody can equal its macabre humour, ‘There is nothing left but to quote the actual words.’⁴²²

Particularly in Adolf Eichmann, one of the leading Nazis who was tried and then executed at the Nuremburg trials, Merton saw an example of the ‘sanity’ of the modern ‘rational’ man led into justifying acts of unspeakable evil, in the name of ‘blind duty’ to the Fuhrer. Hannah Arendt’s account of Eichmann’s trial prompts Merton to analyse the meaning

⁴¹⁸ Ibid.

⁴¹⁹ Ibid, 67.

⁴²⁰ Michael Mott, *Seven Mountains*, 471f.

⁴²¹ Michael W. Higgins, *Heretic Blood*, 7. Indeed, it was the rebellious heart of Merton, argues Michael W. Higgins, that influenced him in pushing at the boundaries of conventional modes of perception and satisfaction with outworn structures in his monastery and in the sixties, in wider society.

⁴²² *Conjectures*, 241. Merton’s horror of war and the link between technology and death occurs in other poems like *Original Child Bomb*, a prose poem which narrates the events up to the unleashing of the atomic bomb on Japan in 1945. Its understated tone is deliberate to reinforce the horror of mass death.

of language drained of moral depth and the reality that the world has not seen the last of someone like Eichmann.⁴²³

In the next section one of Merton's preoccupations, the integrity of the monk in relation to restoring the world, is explored still further.

3:2:1. Merton's Outward Look (The monk as iconographer)

In the last decade of his life, Merton is preoccupied with how the work of the monk and its integrity effects and shapes the spiritual health of the world outside the cloister. In an era of talk about church 'renewal,' the reality in which the monk must live is to witness to the 'necessary dialectic between incarnation and eschatology,' 'The monk's work, his shaping of the materials of the world is not merely a prophylactic against acedia, it is an integral part of his being in Christ, his sharing in the Word of Christ.'⁴²⁴

For Merton, the monk is not just someone living with the duty of smashing idols, whether worldly, secular or monastic but in having his feet firmly on the ground and his hands in the dirt.⁴²⁵ It is the role of the monk to be attuned to the presence of Christ in his own community and elsewhere - even in the action of the monk baking his bread for the table and for Eucharist - and baking it well. This is an expression of the monk's efforts to restore man's use of created matter to its proper wholeness. His work is part of his cosmic vocation and

⁴²³ Ibid, 290. Merton surmises that the words of Eichmann at the gallows, 'After a short while gentlemen, we shall all meet again. Such is the fate of all men,' means a promise that the world is full of people like him and that his name is 'legion.'

⁴²⁴ ' Rowan Williams, 'Bread in the Wilderness: The Monastic Ideal in Thomas Merton and Paul Evdomikov' in Bernadette Dieker and Jonathan Montaldo, eds., *Merton and Hesychasm: The Prayer of the Heart* (Louisville: Fons Vitae: 2003),189.

⁴²⁵ Ibid.

witness to the goodness of God.⁴²⁶ Merton suggests the ‘way of the desert’ of monastic life is the reason why the world today needs hermits and solitaries,

We must liberate ourselves in our own way from involvement in a world that is plunging to disaster...But we must be as thorough and as ruthless in our determination to break all special chains and cast off the domination of alien compulsions to find our true selves, to discover and develop an inalienable spiritual liberty and use it to build on earth, the kingdom of God.⁴²⁷

The wise monk must stand outside all categories underpinning a false society and share in the divine task of restoring to humanity its lost unity,

The monk is quite simply, man-in-Christ, engaging in his work as an artist, showing the world its sophianic truth by first confronting and rejecting falsehood in society and in himself.⁴²⁸

As the entire contemplative attitude is rooted in interior prayer, experience of God in the ‘wilderness as paradise’ of a monastic setting, allows for going beyond the narrow confines of restrictive attitudes towards relationships with others which appear at first to be utterly different from one’s own. Whether in the city or the desert, the monk works for his living and his work is of the world. He does not have to prove that technology is good or bad – it is enough for him that God is good.⁴²⁹ Merton agrees with Paul Evdokimov that,

... the monk is *homo liturgicus*, is icon and iconographer: his material is himself and his personal world; and his holiness and that of his world, the measure of their participation in the energies of God are inseparable.⁴³⁰

However, this outlook allows him to critique the deficiencies of the modern way of working. Indeed in one of his most powerful essays,⁴³¹ Merton suggests there are three ways of living, from superficial reality surfeited with distractions - another form of slavery in

⁴²⁶ Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, 184.

⁴²⁷ Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert* (New York: New Directions: 1960), 18.

⁴²⁸ Williams, ‘Bread in the Wilderness,’ 191.

⁴²⁹ Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, 185.

⁴³⁰ *Ibid.*, 189.

⁴³¹ Thomas Merton, ‘Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude’ in Thomas Merton, *Disputed Questions* (London: Hollis and Carter, 1961).

Merton's view - to the existential, which suggests alienation with all life's hardship; to the final level of the contemplative. The contemplative 'breaks through' the surface of alienation to enter their true self. For the solitary hermit, argues Merton, separation from society does not mean abandoning it; rather it is undertaking a responsibility to society. Hermits are reduced to silence because they place their trust in God's presence and live with the questions.⁴³²

Similar themes of alienation and superficial distractions in modern society are exemplified in an essay on the theology of creativity.⁴³³ It is a sustained argument against the misuse of the word in a 'commercialised degradation' of the concept and its reduction to 'pure cliché';⁴³⁴ there is the danger of equating 'creativity' with productiveness, and the 'promethean' elevation of the artist to the 'myth of genius as hero.'⁴³⁵ Merton's uncanny ability to spot falseness in those who yearn to 'be commercial,' strikes an autobiographical note. He attacks the quasi-religion of some modern intellectuals who are incapable of committing themselves to a religious, philosophical or political ideal, preferring to devote time to a 'cult of creativity' which then becomes despair.

Having also brought Maritain into the discussion on the role of the artist,⁴³⁶ Merton himself warns of the 'wizardry and idolatry' of an artist who debases his art, 'since there is no genuine creativity apart from God'⁴³⁷ and a true theology of creativity is recovered when the artist enters into his own Christian vocation and restores all things to Christ.⁴³⁸

⁴³² Merton, 'Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude,' 194.

⁴³³ Merton, 'Theology of Creativity' in Brother Patrick Hart ed., *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1981), 355-371.

⁴³⁴ Ibid., 355.

⁴³⁵ Ibid., 361.

⁴³⁶ Thomas Merton, 'Theology of Creativity,' 361 (366).

⁴³⁷ Ibid., 367.

⁴³⁸ Ibid., 368.

As a theologian of wisdom, Merton draws on the fathers and scripture to explain that creativity is restored only when a person unites his freedom with the divine freedom. Once the artist abandons his self-consciousness in art, he will restore his own likeness to God – as a co-worker in creation.⁴³⁹ Hence, creativity as Merton sees it is to be intimately involved in the restoration of the cosmos:

If man was first called to share in the creative work of his heavenly father, he now became involved in the ‘new creation’ the redemption of his own kind and the restoration of the cosmos, purified and transfigured, into the hands of the Father.⁴⁴⁰

So if, as I have suggested in this thesis, Merton is a theologian of wisdom, here he is calling artists, as well as he does monks, back to their cosmic vocations, their innocence and integrity. This is inseparable from the creativity and freedom of God. As such, it seems that the aesthetic or sapiential imagination is ‘primarily ontological’⁴⁴¹ or a way of apprehending truth either through intellectual discernment or creative joining of things to restore their original unity – to regain their sense of depth or the authority of their being.⁴⁴²

3:2:2. Merton’s Outward Look (poetry and anti-poetry)

We saw in chapter one that Merton embraced the notion of participatory reason over modernity and that language was the means to open up the human person to being. In terms of this thesis, Merton’s use of poetry and anti-poetry is another way for a wise theologian to critique a fractured society and the refusal of man to live in divine freedom and practice free speech, *Parrhesia*.

⁴³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁴¹ Labrie, *Inclusive Imagination*, 15.

⁴⁴² Ibid 152.

Further theological themes arise in relation to Merton's poetry. For Merton, authentic poetry is his monk's labour, a doing of something which has its own integrity and value, a breakthrough of the divine into consciousness. For Merton it is acceptable to engage in writing without an explicitly religious character, 'because of the character of the writing as a labour of this instant,' escaping the prisons of memory and fantasy.⁴⁴³ The poet becomes a witness to or embodiment of life in fullness and must evade the effort of society to neutralise him or speak to order. For Merton, writing becomes a religious act and a way of attunement to God, attentive always to the spectre of ego – writing as 'pure act' – is a unification of contemplation with poetic creativity.⁴⁴⁴

The poet's innocence means he is open to life, inured to political propaganda and the lure of advertisements. Such language deceives and is contemptuous of prophecy. As far as Merton is concerned, the poet is called to 'seize upon reality in its moment of highest expectation.'⁴⁴⁵ The poet must avoid labels and social identity to preserve his freedom, 'in the choice of his work and not in the choice of his role as artist which society asks him to play.'⁴⁴⁶ Higgins notes one could easily substitute 'artist' for 'monk' to get a good reading of Merton's own refusal to be labelled and tied down to an image but to remain, as he saw himself, marginal and useless.⁴⁴⁷ Merton's understanding of poetry is defined against what it is not such as power, will and control, or usefulness – Poetry as an advert is not true poetry.⁴⁴⁸

⁴⁴³ Ibid, 49

⁴⁴⁴ Williams, *A Silent Action*, 48. Williams also suggests writing as 'pure act', as a way of being present to God, was fundamental to all Merton said about the activity of poetic writing, (48).

⁴⁴⁵ Thomas Merton, 'Message to Poets,' in Brother Patrick Hart, ed., *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1981), 373.

⁴⁴⁶ Thomas Merton, 'Answers on Art and Freedom' in Brother Patrick Hart ed., *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1981), 379.

⁴⁴⁷ Asian Journal.

⁴⁴⁸ Michael W. Higgins, *Heretic Blood*, 159.

Rather poetry is, ‘the flowering of ordinary possibilities. It is the fruit of ordinary and natural choice. This is its innocence and its dignity.’⁴⁴⁹

Another way to view Merton as a wise theologian therefore, is as someone who becomes an exemplar of a ‘new word for God’, a *logos* of God’s utterances in creation. Merton’s style of writing aligns itself not with the Cartesian ego but action, or with what is being made and done in one’s life. It is anything but passive; rather it is ‘an attempt to be where the action is.’⁴⁵⁰ In other words, God’s action is where reality and the self meet what is fundamental – in encounter and dialogue - which puts Merton very much in the orbit of Balthasar and the notion of living and acting in the ‘middle’ or, in patristic terms, as a microcosm.

To illustrate these themes, Merton’s anti-poem⁴⁵¹ *Cables to the Ace*,⁴⁵² is a good example. It reflects Merton’s concern to expose the uniformity of popular culture and mass communication, the failure of socio-political systems, while linking it to his own memory and deepest self.⁴⁵³ Such themes are parodied and fed back as ‘static,’ in a ‘kaleidoscope of ...poetic experimentation’ which raises the problem of ‘word’ to a new intensity.⁴⁵⁴ The cable is a message to the *Ace*, the Father, but the liturgies of modern life, its rituals and frenzy,

⁴⁴⁹ Thomas Merton, ‘Message to Poets,’ 373.

⁴⁵⁰ Williams, *A Silent Action*, 48.

⁴⁵¹ Merton defines an anti-poet’s role as one who suggests, ‘a tertiary meaning which is not ‘creative’ and ‘original’ but a deliberate ironic feedback of cliché, a further referential meaning, alluding by its tone, banality etc.. To a customary and abused context, that of an impoverished and routine sensibility and of the mass-mind, the stereotyped creation of quantitative preordained response by mass-culture.’ Merton, *The Asian Journal*, 286.

⁴⁵² Thomas Merton, *Cables to the Ace or Familiar Liturgies of Understanding* (New York: New Directions, 1968).

⁴⁵³ Malgorzata Poks suggests memories of his French birth and childhood re-surface in his mature poetry. The anti-poem *Cables to the Ace* was written at a time when Merton had withdrawn to the hermitage and was writing poetry in French; and reading French structuralist writers. *Cable 35* reflects this autobiographical interest: ‘...in his last years, Merton was ‘on a David Copperfield sort of trip’, mining his past in order to make the present explicable.’ Malgorzata Poks, ‘Glimpses of Merton’s Abiding Frenchness,’ *The Merton Journal* 21, no.2 (2014):118.

⁴⁵⁴ Higgins, *Heretic Blood*, 181.

destroy communication, ‘We have forgotten the name by which God is to be called, the language by which the message we send can be read. The laws of technology have taken the place of the language of the heart.’⁴⁵⁵

The eighty eight sections or cables, (electric wires or means of communication), are written with a sense of urgency ⁴⁵⁶ and irony... ‘Form is content, it does not contain or transmit a message; it is a message.’⁴⁵⁷ The main problem with mass communication is its all-consuming unity which masquerades as unity but is no more than an ‘electric jungle.’ In the prologue, Merton conveys his contempt for the advertiser in consumer society, ‘My attitudes are common and my ironies no less usual than the bright pages of your favourite magazine.’⁴⁵⁸ As *Cables* is sub-titled, *familiar liturgies of misunderstanding*, it’s clear that Merton urges the reader to join in the parody and reject the clichés in a deliberate ironic feedback. This theme preoccupied him during his fateful Asian pilgrimage,

Marcuse has shown how mass culture tends to be an anti-culture – to stifle creative work by the sheer volume of what is produced or reproduced. In which case, poetry, for example must start with an awareness of the contradiction and use it – as anti-poetry – which freely draws on the material of superabundant nonsense at its disposal. One no longer has to parody; it is enough to quote – and feedback quotations into the mass consumption of pseudo-culture.⁴⁵⁹

The superabundance of what is produced in the media, reflected in Merton’s anti-poetry, is even more pertinent in the digital age,⁴⁶⁰ as the ‘cacophonous din bombarding ever

⁴⁵⁵ Anthony Padovano, *The Human Journey: Thomas Merton, Symbol of a Century* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1982), 111.

⁴⁵⁶ Higgins, *Heretic Blood*, 182

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁸ Merton, *Cables*, 1.

⁴⁵⁹ Merton, *Asian Journal*, 11.

⁴⁶⁰ Daniel P. Horan links the growing digital world inhabited by a large numbers of young people with Merton’s description of the ‘false self’ or how virtual identities and realities are constructed as evasions of reality. See Daniel P. Horan, ‘Striving Toward Authenticity: Merton’s ‘True Self’ and the Millennial Generation’s’ Search for Identity’ *The Merton Annual* 23 (2010): 80-89.

shortening attention spans with ever-briefer and simpler sound-bites', reflects a spiritual malaise and absence of silence.⁴⁶¹

The power of the technocrats repudiates its source and instead sows division and alienation. The false and force-fed unity of media immediacy is not a communion of vital entities or participation in the mystical body of Christ, as opposites are eliminated or reduced, 'there is no indication where to stop. No messages to decode. Cables are never causes. Noises are never values.'⁴⁶² However, by weaving in his memories and experiences, such as references to his relationship with a student nurse, as well as English and French allusions,⁴⁶³ he suggests his own responsibility for and place in such a society.

Furthermore, Merton's final anti-poem, *The Geography of Lograire*,⁴⁶⁴ reflects Merton's interests in myths of marginalised and primitive peoples woven in with his own role as a 'guilty bystander.'⁴⁶⁵ It also reflects Merton's on-going preoccupation with language and its power to distort or reveal reality.

It centres on cultural myth-dreams, their rise and fall but with the recurring theme of man's refusal to be his original self before God, by immersion in material desires. The poem focusses on the myth of Cain and Abel with Cain's fratricide as a means by which cultures are destroyed. Merton weaves part of his own biography into the poem to illustrate that the poem

⁴⁶¹ Roger Gregg, 'Reinterpreting Cables to the Ace for the Twenty First Century' *The Merton Journal* 18, no. 2 (2011): 59.

⁴⁶² Merton, *Cables*, 1.

⁴⁶³ References to his relationship with the nurse are found in *Cables* 75 and 76; while references to England and English poetry are found in *Cable* 74 and French poetry in *Cable* 35 suggest the importance to Merton of memory and bringing memories of the past into the present, making himself part of the liturgy of 'misunderstanding.'

⁴⁶⁴ The name 'Lograire' was invented by Merton based on the French poet and outlaw, 'Des Loges' the alternate surname of Francois Villon. The word 'loge' also means cabin or hut, which reinforces the idea that Merton sees himself as an outsider and an outlaw, See Malgorzata Poks, 'Glimpses of Merton's Abiding Frenchness,' 119.

⁴⁶⁵ As an outsider, the guilty bystander is able to see and critique the flaws of society, as well as being implicated in them.

concerns all human experience, even his own and the capacity for forgiveness.⁴⁶⁶ Padovano describes it as, ‘the history of a human family tragically torn asunder but pathetically persistent in its dream for harmony.’⁴⁶⁷

It is a long poem divided into four points of the compass, encompassing the whole world. Conflict and dislocation are themes throughout. In north and south cantos it is racial conflict, in west and east it is cultural conflict of epic scale and dramatic loss. An illustration of the themes in this poem is *Cargo Catechism*, from the East Canto. It reflects his reading about Cargo cults⁴⁶⁸ in New Guinea and how natives coped with cultural change when the white man arrived.

Merton tells this story in order to draw a comparison with western advertising. Just as natives desired cargo, advertising projects images of possessions and goods which promise a better, more complete life, evoke desire in the western consumer. In Merton’s terms it is a myth-dream and all societies make them, ‘the lines from past to present to future are not forged logically but by means of dreams and myths.’⁴⁶⁹ The function of cargo, whether in the United States or New Guinea, is to close the gap between needs and hopes. For instance, in the USA, goods that were once considered satisfactory are suddenly discovered to be inadequate, obsolete even though they still function, because they no longer fascinate. One of the most persistent fears is the fear of nonentity and obsolescence according to Merton. But

⁴⁶⁶ Padovano, *The Human Journey*, 137.

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid., 165. Poks notes that the Abel and Cain reference is an allusion to Merton’s memory of his fraught childhood relationship with his brother, John Paul. *Lograire* is the ‘ultimate autobiography... of Thomas Merton’ and reflects his indebtedness to Francophone thought. See Malgorzata Poks, ‘Glimpses of Merton’s Abiding Frenchness,’ 119.

⁴⁶⁸ Paul M Pearson, ‘The Artist in a Time of Crisis: Thomas Merton’s Artistic Response’ in Angus Stuart ed., *Across the Rim of Chaos: Thomas Merton’s Prophetic Vision* (Radstock: Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland, 2005): 89.

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid.

the acquisitions continue in an effort to find true happiness or status among peers. As Padovano comments, ‘When the myth-dream is presented on television and proclaimed in the mass media we become convinced that the compulsion for cargo is the normal way to live, that the illusion of affluence is the same as reality.’⁴⁷⁰ In this sense, money and status function like conch shells in Melanesia.

In telling the story of native cargo, Merton parodies western culture and portrays how apparently different peoples are looking for the same thing. For Merton, cargo cults are a symptom of the universal crisis in communication and communion in the modern world, ‘We have lost contact not only with one another but with our own inner depths.’⁴⁷¹

In summary, Merton’s use of poetry and anti-poetry outside of the explicitly religious is a way for a wise theologian to critique a fractured society and to highlight the refusal of man to live in divine freedom and practice free speech, *Parrhesia*. By weaving the mythologies of mass society and failures at communication with his monastic and personal experiences, Merton makes writing poetry a way of re-making the cosmos, remaining at once an ‘innocent’ poet who helps in restoring the world’s wholeness and integrity, while remaining a ‘guilty bystander,’ implicated in the sins of the world. In these late writings, Merton is expressing the universality of his outlook in the midst of his own personal search for ‘wisdom.’⁴⁷²

⁴⁷⁰ Padovano, *Human Journey*, 134.

⁴⁷¹ Ibid, 135.

⁴⁷² Carr, *Search for Wisdom and Spirit*, 73.

3:2:3. Merton's Outward Look (engagements with literature)

Merton had written essays and other works as a young monk but the period 1950-68⁴⁷³ saw a growth in his understanding of contemplation as embracing all of life. With his articles on Boris Pasternak's novel *Dr Zhivago* signalling an expansion of interest away from writing on matters of Catholic piety, the restatement of standard religious sentiments no longer reflected his sense of vocation as a writer.⁴⁷⁴

Merton interpreted the novel as a triumph of the human spirit in its natural intuition of Christian wisdom. Pasternak's work 'reveals the cosmic liturgy of Genesis,' writes Merton, and in Lara, Merton sees a *sophianic*, Eve-like quality, while Zhivago himself is described as Christ-like, a man of Eden and paradise.⁴⁷⁵ In other words, his intuitions of innocence and purity as revealing a breakthrough of the divine life into consciousness are revealed he believes in an author outside the Christian tradition.

The same quality is found in novelist William Faulkner, in whom Merton came to identify an imaginative awareness of meaning in sapiential consciousness. In an engagement with his novel, *Baptism in the Forest*,⁴⁷⁶ Merton praises Faulkner for being one of the few modern authors whose writing goes to heart of the human predicament without the,

...obsessive insistence that one's whole experience of life has to be dominated from without by a system of acquired beliefs and attitudes ... and that every other experience, for instance, that of reading a novel, has first to be tested by this system of beliefs.⁴⁷⁷

⁴⁷³ Patrick F. O'Connell, 'Introduction, Merton the Essayist' in Patrick F O'Connell ed., *Thomas Merton: Selected Essays* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2013), ix.

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁵ Merton, *Disputed Questions*, 18.

⁴⁷⁶ Thomas Merton, 'Baptism in the Forest: Wisdom and Initiation in William Faulkner, in Brother Patrick Hart ed., *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1984), 92-116.

⁴⁷⁷ Merton, 'Baptism in the Forest,' 97.

Ultimately, ‘Sapiential awareness deepens our communion with the concrete: it is not an initiation into the world of abstractions and ideals,’⁴⁷⁸ and goes beyond purely religious structures. Merton points out that living in wisdom is finding a balance and harmony between “values and verities” to achieve wholeness and integrity. In Faulkner’s story, ‘*Go down, Moses*,’ the counterpoint between sapiential wisdom and the shallow, trifling mythology of modern society is played out. One character, Cass Edwards, says: ‘We live together in herds to protect ourselves from our own sources.’⁴⁷⁹ Such an attitude to life is indicative of a state of alienation from ‘wisdom,’ for:

If people who have had the wisdom ‘turned out of their blood’ by civilisation simply relinquish civilised society, without being trained in the difficult work of recovering another wisdom, they will be as helpless as the convict in the flood and will be destroyed, in spite of themselves.⁴⁸⁰

For Merton, the understanding of wisdom he finds in Faulkner has two aspects: as a metaphysical apprehension of the radical structure of human life; a moral, practical and religious awareness of man’s life as a task entailing great risk and deep understanding. Ultimately, ‘sapiential awareness deepens our communion with the concrete: it is not an initiation into the world of abstractions and ideals’⁴⁸¹ and goes beyond purely religious structures, to relate to other wisdoms, wherever they are found.

As a wise theologian concerned with the re-invocation of the ancient sources of tradition, he approaches the texts, even pre-Christian ones, for the ‘experience’ they reveal of God. As certain postmodern theologians are at pains to stress, the native paganism of figures such as Herakleitos and Parmenides, introduces and perpetuates a brute violence into the modern secular world - in fact Greek paganism supplies the genealogical and ontological roots

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid.,100.

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid.,109.

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁸¹ Ibid.,100.

of the secular disorder.⁴⁸² Merton's sapiential reading of the attitude of Herakleitos is radically different. Rather than seeing the pagan of antique Ephesus as symptomatic of pagan idolatry and a rebel against the Olympian static order and formalism of society preached by Homer and Hesiod, Merton reads him as a , '...spokesman for the mysterious, the unutterable and the excellent. He spoke for the logos, which was the true law of all being – not static or rigid in form but a dynamic principle of harmony in conflict.' ⁴⁸³

Far from Herakleitos inciting violence as a will to power, he had 'prophetic insight' but his enigmatic sayings have been misunderstood in the West.⁴⁸⁴ For Merton, Herakleitos looks upon the world from the perspective of experience. His sapiential intuition cuts through multiplicity to reveal an inner harmony, where God sees all things not by their separateness but through the inner harmony of apparent opposites.⁴⁸⁵ Although as a pagan Herakleitos sums this unity up as 'Fire' rather than God, Merton reads this as analogous to the energies of God, *logoi*, working in the world of objects:

He Himself is the Logos, the Wisdom, not so much 'at work' in nature but rather 'at play' there. In one of the fragments, the 'dark one' speaks of the logos in the same terms as the sapiential literature of the Bible speaks of divine Wisdom: 'as a child playing in the world...Proverbs 8:27-31.' ⁴⁸⁶

For Merton, this pagan figure's way of seeing reveals divine Wisdom/Logos at work in the world, likened to biblical and patristic interpretations of participation in being. As Time is described as a child playing draughts, Merton draws on Maximus to interpret this insight,

The reference to the game of draughts is a metaphor for his basic concept that all cosmic things are in a state of becoming and change and this... is the expression of

⁴⁸² Post-modern writers John Milbank and David B. Hart could be described as exemplars of this view. See Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*; See Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*.

⁴⁸³ Thomas Merton, 'Herakleitos the Obscure' in Thomas P. McDonnell ed., *A Thomas Merton Reader* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 258.

⁴⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 259.

⁴⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 260.

⁴⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 258.

divine Law, the ‘justice,’ ‘hidden harmony’ or ‘unity’ which constantly keeps everything in balance...⁴⁸⁷

Whereas a post-modern philosophical reading underscores the ontological violence of the pagan mind, Merton turns to Gerard Manley Hopkins to underscore his vision, that the ‘wise man’ is one who sees the pattern (*inscapes*) of the universe, the logos.⁴⁸⁸

3:2:4. Merton’s Outward Look (the language of political propaganda)

A powerful example of Merton’s preoccupation with the stifling of free expression, *Parrhesia*, in language bereft of encounter or dialogue comes in an essay, *War and the Crisis of Language*.⁴⁸⁹ At root, language is a casualty of war, violence and a symptom of a wider sickness. Once again, Merton points towards the language of the poet for redeeming the sickness and restoring purity to the world:

For poets are perhaps ones who, at the present moment, are most sensitive to the sickness of language – a sickness reflecting all literature with nausea, prompts us not so much to declare war on conventional language as simply to pick up and examine intently a few chosen pieces of linguistic garbage.⁴⁹⁰

Merton notes the gap that exists between words and actions, a ‘spastic upheaval’ of language where statements are self-enclosed, esoteric and laden with a basic contempt for humanity, “ The self-enclosed finality bars all open dialogue and pretends to impose absolute conditions of one’s choosing upon everybody else.”⁴⁹¹

⁴⁸⁷ Ibid., 261.

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid, 269-270. In the same passage, Merton describes Hopkins as Herakleitean and Scotistic, with an intuition of the patterns and harmonies and living character impressed by life itself revealing the wisdom of the living God.

⁴⁸⁹ Thomas Merton, ‘War and the Crisis of Language,’ *Thomas Merton on Peace* (London: Mowbrays, 1976).

⁴⁹⁰ War and the Crisis of Language, 138

⁴⁹¹ Ibid, 150

In the language of power and war, words become ambiguous and with an appearance of dialogue but in fact the 'plague of power' engenders a language of escalation – a barrier to peace and a block to communication. It aspires to definitive utterance to which there is no rejoinder.⁴⁹² He sees this particularly in the language of official US Government reports on the Vietnam War, suggesting we do our enemies a favour by killing them. The double-talk, tautology and ambiguous cliché masks total callousness for humanity.⁴⁹³ Yet Merton does not exempt the Catholic Church from critique in seemingly abandoning in its sublime liturgical language and the high eloquence of traditional discourse as a sign of 'anxiety about speech.'⁴⁹⁴

In summary, Merton returns to the theme of the vocation of the poet and anti-poet as the only way out of the self-enclosed circle, who must never be deaf to the use of language and its corruption. Language must be transformed and delivered from its prison and this means also transformed relations through dialogue and encounter. If discourse is about self-interest and power, the world will be violent. His prophetic essay challenges presumptions of innocence and guilt as setting up false binaries in a world of complex interdependence.

⁴⁹² Joseph Quinn Raab, 'A Naked Emperor at the Rim of Chaos: The War on Terror and the Crisis of Language' in Angus Stuart ed., *Across the Rim of Chaos: Thomas Merton's Prophetic Vision* (Radstock: Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland, 2005): 54. Raab notes that George W. Bush's reaction to the Twin Towers destruction by Al Qaeda militants on September 11th 2001, was to pepper biblical allusions through his speeches on terrorism: 'In Bush's language, the terrorist attacks of 9/11 establish America as a modern embodiment of the suffering servant of Israel from the 42nd chapter of Isaiah; America is the messiah who shines in the darkness in John's gospel and Revelation's Lamb of God who will return in glory with a triumphant sword to rid the world of evil.' In contrast, the 'prophetic' response is to denounce use of the gospel for political ends, to justify force, 50-51.

⁴⁹³ For example, ordinary Vietnamese are called 'Vietcong' who must be killed in order to prevent them from becoming communists. Words are given new connotations eg: Pacification, liberation, free-zone, where in fact everything is shot. This is the self-enclosed logic of power, argues Merton, and it is seen in Hitler's final solution.

⁴⁹⁴ Labrie, *Inclusive Imagination*, 173. Merton believed the changing of liturgical language to the vernacular was a symptom of the general dis-ease or anxiety lest speech become entirely deceptive and 'unreal.' Also see Merton, 'War and the Crisis of Language,' 140.

3:3. Conclusion

In this chapter, we have surveyed how Thomas Merton cultivated an outward look. The aim has been to show how Merton is a theologian of wisdom in expanding and integrating his life as a monk with his critical writing beyond the explicitly religious milieu.

The idea Merton analysed was whether a monk cloistered in the monastery should embrace the world or remain distant in the face of crisis. The life-long influence of Maritain's Thomist aesthetics and the vitality of the artist to 'imitate God' in creative works is evident as Merton sees himself as a more authentic monk by engagements with the world, particularly through artistic creativity. He reflects on his understanding of the work of the monk and the poet/writer as sapiential co-workers restoring the cosmos to unity.

Yet Merton's role as an 'innocent' poet but 'guilty bystander' is ambiguous, because although he expands his outlook, he still remains at a distance from 'events' in his life as a hermit in a contemplative monastery. However, uniting his concerns as a monk with the needs of the world, he proclaims solidarity and develops a critical, prophetic voice discerning and commenting upon the signs of the times.⁴⁹⁵

In the next chapter we consider David F. Ford's approach to seeking wisdom through his re-visioning of Christian selfhood and Christian identity in the post-modern world. Ford is concerned with the cognitive aspect of discernment or 'wisdom pedagogy' underpinning the 'dynamics of transformation through involvement with God.' This theme is drawn out through key exemplars such as Bonhoeffer, an example of the wise Christian self, who

⁴⁹⁵ Merton offers a fierce defence of the hermit life in 'Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude.' He suggests that while the solitary might appear to secular society as completely useless or without 'practical utility,' he offers a special form of love for them, 'Their contribution is a mute witness, a secret and invisible expression of love which takes the form of their own option for solitude in preference of social fictions.' See Thomas Merton, 'Notes for a Philosophy of Solitude,' 192f. However, there is a clear irony here that Merton's search for silence, anonymity and solitude involved the spilling out of millions of words.

practised and embodied compassionate responsibility and whose life was transformed by biblical narrative, worship and prayer.

Ford's method is eclectic in the sense that it engages with a range of postmodern voices while rooted in biblical witness and communal worship. It is a theology reluctant to settle for a traditional style, preferring to range into new styles of theologising. Immersion in narrative and context become a way of orientating oneself to God rather than conforming to a set of truths which restrict the superabundance of God's reality.⁴⁹⁶

Ford's search for wisdom through a re-imagining of Christian selfhood sheds light on Merton's approach to living wisely and creatively in the world and searching for one's true self in polyphonic relationship to God. By appropriating themes of selfhood within Ford's theology, we can discern the kind of exemplar of 'embodied wisdom' Merton might be.

⁴⁹⁶ Luther Zeigler, 'The Many Faces of the Worshipping Self: David Ford's Anglican Vision of Christian Transformation,' *Anglican Theological Review* 89:2 (2005): 5.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE CONTEMPLATIVE VOICE MEETS THE VOICE MEETS THE THEOLOGY OF THE ACADEMY

In this chapter, Merton as a wise theologian is brought into engagement with contemporary theologian David F. Ford to explore the research question: in what ways might Merton's life link with Ford's criteria for embodied wisdom and is Merton's method of writing suggestive of a Christian wisdom-seeking as practised and performed in ordinary life?

To answer this we will consider Ford's challenge to traditional theology to re-envision Christian self-hood in the post-modern world and fashion a model of Christian identity which 'speaks' to a diverse society of competing discourses. His approach involves immersion in image, narrative and context as a way of orientating or intensifying desire in the individual for God, rather than conformity to a set of truths which restrict the superabundance of God's reality.⁴⁹⁷ Thus he has developed a twin approach to wisdom as fruitful thinking about salvation and as a 'pedagogy' or practice which enhances all aspects of Christian living, centred on worship, scripture and ethical responsibility. Ford's exemplars of Christian selfhood, particularly Dietrich Bonhoeffer, are embodiments or practitioners of wisdom pedagogy or 'polyphony',⁴⁹⁸ who offer a way of Christian salvation through their moral lives.

⁴⁹⁷ Ibid., 5.

⁴⁹⁸ David F. Ford, *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 264. Ford argues that Bonhoeffer offers a discipline of Christian living which 'serves the secret' of the crucified and risen Christ in his relationship to the whole of reality. He compares Therese of Lisieux with Bonhoeffer but finds Bonhoeffer more conducive to his thinking as an intellectual: 'Bonhoeffer's polyphony is capacious enough to sustain interrogative, intelligent faith in a western civilisation shaped by the Hebraic and Hellenic together, formed in the last millennium by medieval Christianity, Renaissance, Reformation, Enlightenment, and more recent modernity and in fundamental need of a wisdom informed by what is seen from below.' (264).

After considering Ford's approach Merton's style will be assessed using Ford's category of polyphony and his key exemplar of the polyphonic life, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. It will be shown that there are resonances between polyphony and Merton's life. The unfolding of the self before God involves renouncing the Cartesian self and packaged answers, in favour of embodiment in concrete reality; practical living and ethical responsibility, inseparable from the scripture and liturgy.

Ford shares the concerns of phenomenologists Levinas and Paul Ricoeur in rejecting classical metaphysical accounts and traditional methods of doing theology. Instead, we must rely on concrete historical and cultural-linguistic particularities to find God. However, Merton's polyphonic wisdom is rooted in the fathers of the church and the mystics, although he shares with Ford the concern to engage with a variety of voices.

4:1. Searching for wisdom through the Polyphonic Life

As an acclaimed theologian in an era often described as post-modern, David Ford challenges traditional notions of what it means to be a Christian 'self' and what is meant by salvation. Instead, he embarks on a 'journey of intensification'⁴⁹⁹ through a wide-ranging and interrogative exploration of Christian self-understanding.⁵⁰⁰

Therefore, Ford eschews a traditional systematic theology of salvation and centres on a pattern of thinking through the image of facing Jesus Christ, the aim of which intensifies desire for a deeply personal inner transformation, grounded in openness. This indicates how Jesus Christ is the 'face' or harmonising factor of key polyphonic practices in ordinary

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid., 1.

⁵⁰⁰ Ibid., 2f.

Christian living. Ford is not afraid to ‘cross boundaries’ and engage in dialogue with philosophers outside of theology, such as Levinas and Ricoeur.⁵⁰¹ Through a dialogue with Barthian thinker, Jungel, and Levinas, Ford links the enormity of the event of Jesus Christ’s substitution to a particular way of understanding Christian responsibility for the other.

Ford sees Jewish thinker Levinas as a significant interlocutor in formulating the notion of the ‘hospitable self’⁵⁰² and his radical ethical ‘appeal in the face of the other’⁵⁰³ in the light of the Shoah. It is from Levinas that Ford develops the concept of ‘the Face’ as an ethically responsible intensification of Christian theologising,⁵⁰⁴ which rejects the isolated Cartesian ego. He understands the face analogically as the pivotal locus for relationship and ‘the vital aspect of the embodied self.’⁵⁰⁵ Ford’s proposal also appropriates the strategies of Ricoeur’s hermeneutic to connect the concept of the responsible self and the Christian tradition. In particular, he borrows the idea of ‘testimony’ as a constitutive part of selfhood. Narrative is Ford’s key genre in describing the self through time.

The strategy of hosting dialogues with a range of conversation partners is important to developing the concept of ‘human flourishing’, aiming to generate the image of a human identity in flux, emerging interactively within the spaces opened up by the dialogue.⁵⁰⁶ What emerges in Ford’s exploration is a ‘radically dialogical view of the self’⁵⁰⁷ where the notion of

⁵⁰¹ Ibid., 272. Ziegler suggests Ford borrows from Levinas and Ricoeur’s insights on the self substantially to develop his own theology of the self.

⁵⁰² Ford comments that hospitality is a useful way to view the self and human flourishing because it, ‘...combines and distinguishes enjoyment and responsibility, it allows for the notes of abundance, celebration and even extravagance and excess....’ The notion of enjoyment is a Levinasian idea in the constitution of the self as fundamental, knowing being through pain and vulnerability but also joy and love and everyday activities. Ford, *Self and Salvation*, 44.

⁵⁰³ Ford, *Self and Salvation*, 32;

⁵⁰⁴ Ibid., 37.

⁵⁰⁵ Ibid., 20.

⁵⁰⁶ Oliver Davies, *A Theology of Compassion: Metaphysics of Difference and the Renewal of Tradition* (London: SCM Press, 2001), 154.

⁵⁰⁷ Ibid.

human identity is intensified in varying themes related to ‘flourishing’: ‘joy’, ‘responsibility’, ‘substitution’, connected to kerygmatic performance in the language of text, liturgy, testimony, the ‘dead face’ of Christ - explored in analogical formats.⁵⁰⁸

The face represents Christ, the exemplar, not only of selfhood fully realised, but as the face who summons the Christian to ethical responsibility to the point of substitution; through the joy and abundance of worship and the theme of polyphonic living, the model for the fully transformed Christian identity.

The themes are incarnational and open to the ‘appearance of Christ’ in situations not foreseen – hence they are eschatological in character.⁵⁰⁹ Furthermore, the theme of polyphonic living points beyond the self to the other – through a practical and living intensification of personal fidelity, holiness and self-transformation ‘in Christ.’

In summary, Ford’s theology of salvation is made ‘intense’ through its deployment of powerful symbols and metaphors, especially in connection with Christian identity. The harmonising key for Ford is that a fully transformed self has to integrate its Christian identity with concern for the other - a key question to ask is why Bonhoeffer is a good exemplar of this type of integration and whether Thomas Merton also fits Ford’s criteria for a ‘wise polyphonic self.’ In the next section, there will be a brief discussion of Bonhoeffer as an exemplar before going on to explore whether the figure of Thomas Merton is a similar example of polyphonic living.

⁵⁰⁸ The analogies are: *The Singing Self* – described through ‘celebratory flow and excess of harmony’ in Ephesians; the *Eucharistic Self* – the repeated celebration of abundance and blessing and the fellowship of one to another; two reflections on the faces of Christ; two testimonies of exemplary Christian selves, St. Teresa of Lisieux and Dietrich Bonhoeffer; *The Feasting Self* or Eschatological Self - linking themes of joy, abundance with the substitutionary joy of others and Christian substitutionary responsibility – which is never foreclosed. Ford, *Self and Salvation*, 107-281.

⁵⁰⁹ Ford notes that feasting is an intensely ethical and metaphysical concern, in that it is related to God, who is beyond categories; the logic of ‘super-abundance’ is discerned by Christians in history. The Trinitarian orientation of the divine economy is never static in its exchanges. This ‘inexhaustible abundance of meaning’ that ‘continually invites further speech’ though attentive to silence and mystery, is the essence of Ford’s method.

4:1:1. Living the Polyphonic Life (Dietrich Bonhoeffer)

German pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer⁵¹⁰ is an example of the kind of integrated thinker who meets Ford's criteria for a wise theologian; someone who combined academic theology across a wide range of topics and disciplines with deep engagement in the church and his society, including the 'penultimate' of ordinary goodness.⁵¹¹ Bonhoeffer shows that thinking theologically and wisely foregoes packaged answers and involves questioning and debating a range of possibilities.⁵¹² This is the kind of wisdom pedagogy which Ford believes is central to healthy theology.

Ford suggests Bonhoeffer is not only an exemplary communicator but a person whose own personal search for God is 'polyphonic.' He praises the virtues of accessibility and compelling language in the writing of the German pastor through, 'a feast of genres and of energetic, passionate writing....In short, it exemplifies all the elements of theological creativity.'⁵¹³ Furthermore, the range of genres employed points to their importance, especially that of poetry, dance, drama and fiction, for theological thinking.

⁵¹⁰ Ford references Bonhoeffer's more popular books as examples of expressive and creative theological thinking, "*Life Together* and *The Cost of Discipleship* are eloquent and accessible and the felicitous union of form and content in *Life Together* make it the best-selling of all his works." Ibid., 21.

⁵¹¹ Ford's themes are discerned in Bonhoeffer's *Ethics: Ethical Responsibility*-Bonhoeffer is concerned in the light of the barbarism of the Nazis for Christians to form an alliance with non-Christians on behalf of values both of them adhered to – discovering dimensions of goodness that have kinship with Christ rather than compromising faith. To be fully Christian in society meant pointing out that things go wrong when the church either compromises with societal norms or rejects them completely; *Facing and Flourishing*: In his final years, Bonhoeffer thinks of the future shape of the church, (*Singing Self/Eucharistic Self*), continually conforming to Jesus Christ and dedicated to human flourishing. Ethics is a formation, to be formed in the image of Christ and firmly against dualisms which contradict the reality of Jesus Christ. He suggests a dynamic interrelation of ultimate and penultimate 'spheres.' He affirms the essential goodness of creation and ordinary life in its flourishing, supported by the church. Bonhoeffer is also concerned that the church live under the cross, living out its full implications for solidarity with the marginalised and living under judgement. Living 'in Christ' means living fully in the world with the news that God is incarnate without attachment to worldly concerns. This means living responsibly and in solidarity with it and in it, not apart in a sealed off space. It means a radical 'yes' to God in the social sphere. See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. Eberhard Bethge (London: SCM Press, 1971), 46-66 (161-179).

⁵¹² David F. Ford, *The Future of Christian Theology* (Pondicherry: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 115.

⁵¹³ Ibid., 21.

Building once more on the life of Bonhoeffer as a theme, Ford describes ‘polyphonic living’ as a holistic way to live in the world. The exemplified form of Christian life of Bonhoeffer is one which experiences and faces the central figure, Christ, ‘from below.’ ‘The *cantus firmus* is that God wants us to love Him eternally with our whole hearts and the counterpoints are the imperatives of ‘earthly love’. Together these make up the life of free responsibility, before God.’⁵¹⁴ This leads to ‘embodied wisdom,’ a mature conception of faith and responsibility in the world, questioning who Christ is ‘for us’ today, especially the crucified, powerless Christ and intensified through his resurrection.⁵¹⁵ For Ford, the sheer super-abundance of meaning is generated by a faith rooted in scripture, reason and tradition and enables Christian theologians to face the ‘cries of the world.’

Ford suggests Bonhoeffer exemplified the theme of polyphony, through taking up a critical and interrogative stance toward systems and institutions which alienated ordinary people. The German pastor is critical of ‘religion’ as too often setting up dualisms and boundaries which do not reflect the world created by God and the dynamic concept of the penultimate and ultimate is developed to subvert these dualisms. In a ‘religion-less’ world, the secret is to live in the knowledge and reality of Jesus Christ and its ultimate significance, ‘becoming conformed to it (language Bonhoeffer uses in *Ethics*) is intrinsic to knowing it truly and that... will involve prayer and righteous action together.’⁵¹⁶ It is this which generates abundance and life from within the hidden reality of Christ. The reality of God goes hand in hand with the reality of the world (in the incarnate Christ) and Christianity participates in that encounter. In Bonhoeffer’s case, his joyful intention to marry and his wide-ranging friendships are also part of the rounded picture of a healthy Christian self in

⁵¹⁴ Ford, *Self and Salvation*, 257.

⁵¹⁵ Ibid.

⁵¹⁶ Ibid, 263.

relationship with God.⁵¹⁷ Polyphonic living in the *cantus firmus* reflects the mystery of God as ‘fully divine, fully human,’ enhanced by endless counterpoint.⁵¹⁸

In summary, Ford argues that really seeing the face of Christ involves the orientation and shaping of the whole self in relation to God. It is far from any technique enabling seekers to inspect spiritual truths in a detached manner but is involved with the messiness of history. Bonhoeffer’s example of ‘substitution’ by imprisonment then execution as a result of his participation in the plot to assassinate Hitler is a sign of the radical nature of discipleship as involvement in the world.⁵¹⁹

In the next section the theme of polyphony will be discussed in relation to Thomas Merton, who in many ways bears some affinity to Bonhoeffer, in terms of their commitment to authentic Christian living and spiritual renewal in a ‘religion-less world’. Both were concerned with renewal based on prayer and a commitment to spiritual life which was world-affirming not world-denying; and which was engaged with the self before God and the world.

4:1:2. Polyphony as embodied wisdom (Thomas Merton)

Although their contexts were different, Merton spent his writing life from within a well-defined community of faith, while Bonhoeffer was in search of a community - wanting to establish a community which could stand up to the Nazis⁵²⁰ - both men were in search of authentic Christian living and renewal in a world grown hostile to Christianity. In their mature

⁵¹⁷ Ford, *Self and Salvation*, 255.

⁵¹⁸ Ibid., 264.

⁵¹⁹ Ibid., 247.

⁵²⁰ William Apel, ‘Engaged Spirituality: Thomas Merton and Dietrich Bonhoeffer on Christian Renewal,’ *The Merton Journal* 17, no.2 (2010): 27-28.

writing and before both suffered untimely deaths, they called for the spiritual formation of free, strong and mature followers of Jesus Christ, ‘...they envision a worldly holiness, one which begins deep within but reaches out in love for others.’⁵²¹ This is a form of a deeply personal ‘embodied wisdom’ springing from prayer and commitment, moving outward toward the world. Embodied wisdom is expressed in the style of writing of the author and an example of a constant search for transformation of self through the inter-weaving of: autobiography, social concern and spiritual experience with theological themes. In combining the three themes with theological preoccupations, Merton’s life and writing enfold well within Ford’s criteria for a polyphonic self – someone whose search for salvation is inseparable from the unfolding of a life.⁵²² The three areas will be explored in turn in this section with the limitations of the strategy discussed in the concluding section.

It was suggested in chapters one and two that Merton’s way of seeing meant discarding Cartesian notions of self and synthesising his spiritual life with other roles. In melting distinctions between activities, the self is dissipated and one’s ‘ordinary self’ ‘participates’ in humanity.⁵²³ Indeed, Merton’s life can be viewed in its interrelatedness. His wide-ranging gifts interconnected and are part of Merton’s own struggle to unify his life and discover his personal identity.⁵²⁴ However, attaining this unity involves struggle and tension between life as a contemplative monk and writing life. Merton reflects on the uneasy tension he experienced:

⁵²¹ Ibid, 26.

⁵²² Bamberger, *Thomas Merton, Prophet of Renewal*, 1. Bamberger was a confrere of Merton in the monastery of Gethsemani. He suggests that the way to appreciate Merton’s writing is to study him through the lens of his own personal experience and his character. The form and content of his ideas are linked to his singular gifts as a person, his life and the events in it.

⁵²³ Labrie, *Inclusive Imagination*, 230.

⁵²⁴ Also Shannon points to the centrality of writing to Merton’s life: ‘There can be scarcely any doubt that Thomas Merton was born to be a writer,’ Shannon, *Silent Lamp*, 16.

It is possible to doubt whether I have become a monk (a doubt I have to live with) but it is not possible to doubt that I am a writer that I was born one and will most probably die as one. Disconcerting, disedifying as it is, it seems to be my lot and my vocation. It is what God has given me in order that I might give it back to him.⁵²⁵

The uneasy tension Merton felt leads others to view his writing as the embodiment of himself as autobiography,⁵²⁶ a telling and re-telling of his life through journals, poems and essays,⁵²⁷ displaying an intimate quality, drawing the reader into, ‘an exchange like no other and that this friendship could not be duplicated...with anyone else.’⁵²⁸

In addition, there is a suggestion that Merton moved in a creative tension between his writing and vocation as a monk in that the presence of texts was for him an affirmation to enter the silent life, not a burden living within the dialectical boundaries of writing and solitude. In other words, the ‘textuality of the self’ is woven within his life of solitude.⁵²⁹ Although Merton is aware of the contradictions, he finds value spiritually in accepting the paradoxes, learning to find the greatest security as signs of God’s mercy to him, not dependent on anyone’s approval:

Paradoxically, I have found peace because I have always been dissatisfied...When a thought is done with, let go of it. When something has been written, publish it, and go on with something else. What matters is not trying to come up with an original thought but that the old be recovered on a new plane and be itself a new reality. This too gets away from you so let it get away.⁵³⁰

⁵²⁵ Thomas Merton, ‘First and Last Thoughts, 17.

⁵²⁶ Ibid, xxii. Mott highlights the continuity between Merton’s first novel, *My Argument with the Gestapo*, penned in 1939 but only published in 1969, written in the Joycean idiom of macaronic language, and his mature, final poem, *The Geography of Lograire*, (published posthumously in 1969). Indeed, Merton’s ‘anti-poetry’ of the 1960s had continuities with the young Merton’s love of James Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake*. Although Merton is known through his continuing autobiographical books and journals, he is also an ‘anti-autobiographer’ i.e., someone concerned to challenge the form and poke fun at conventions. Merton’s late poems and published novel signal Merton’s push through illusory barriers to find truth. (See footnote 9).

⁵²⁷ For example, Merton scholar Paul M. Pearson in his doctoral thesis concludes that all of Merton’s writing was at heart autobiographical. (See footnote 5).

⁵²⁸ Robert Inchausti, *Thinking Through Thomas Merton*, 7.

⁵²⁹ Robert Webster, ‘Thomas Merton and the Post-Modern Self,’ *The Journal of Religion* 78, no.3 (1998): 395.

⁵³⁰ Merton, ‘First and Last Thoughts,’ 16.

Merton's conscious detachment from his writing is in polyphonic terms a letting go of a self-image – as detachment from an earlier self. This development is evident in the preface to the Japanese edition of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, when in commenting that it was nearly twenty years since the book was written, he affirms that, 'The story no longer belongs to me' as, 'The author no longer has an exclusive claim upon it.'⁵³¹ The 'Thomas Merton' who wrote that book is no longer around as his views on breaking from the world had revised; and in its original form it 'belongs to many people.' Although Merton's spiritual growth changed him, the book remains a version of his earlier self who belongs to someone else. Therefore, his renunciation of this earlier self and the autobiography is a refusal to be content with the artificial image that the book created for him.

In other words, Merton wrote from his trust in his own intuitions and experiences rather than from a set of propositions.⁵³² He went further than simply telling his story in a detached manner or as a series of events. It was more often carefully crafted and theological in the sense that in writing his life and thoughts, Merton was living and seeking God, 'Merton went beyond autobiography into auto-biographical theology: he didn't just write about his life...He wrote his life. Writing was also living.'⁵³³ In revealing himself in his writing, the writing became the means of binding himself over to God, letting go of the false self, by exposing his need for God for the entire world to read.⁵³⁴ This approach is explained more broadly by Rowan Williams,

⁵³¹ Thomas Merton, 'Honorable Reader': *Reflections on My Work*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Crossroad 1989), 63.

⁵³² Ibid.

⁵³³ Gary Hall, 'The Fiction of Merton' *The Merton Journal* 16, no.1 (2009): 10-11. These thoughts are conducive to the argument of this work, that Merton's writing was the way he lived his monastic vocation, to seek God.

⁵³⁴ Thomas Merton, *The Intimate Merton: Thomas Merton's Life from His Journals*, ed. Patrick Hart and Jonathan Montaldo (Oxford: Lion, 2006), 26.

Every telling or writing of one-self becomes a re-telling because it is an act, like other acts in the world and speech of others. The self- lives and moves in acts of telling – in the time taken to set out and articulate a memory, the time that is a kind of representation (always partial, always skewed) of the time my material and mental life has taken, the time that has brought me here. To step aside from this kind of telling and retelling, this always shifting and growing representation of the past, is, in effect, to abandon thinking itself or language itself.⁵³⁵

In reading Merton this way, Ford's own question of what it means to be a 'Christian self' in the contemporary world is answered as the attempt at polyphonic living, that is, a practical and living intensification of personal fidelity, holiness and self-transformation 'in Christ.' It is also a form of wisdom pedagogy in that there is a refusal to be content with one answer and a growing intensity of desire for more knowledge of God through writing his life.

Thus far we have suggested that Merton can be read as a polyphonic monk-writer whose autobiographical approach took the form of revising and reconfiguring thoughts and ideas as they arose, 'mapping the contours of his own spiritual geography.'⁵³⁶

Indeed, the intensity of revising and analysing events as they occurred in his life was thrown into sharp relief in the aftermath of a brief attachment to a student nurse in the spring of 1966. Merton interrogates himself in his journal about the reality of their relationship or whether he was simply carried away by events. He wonders at the integrity of his commitment to the hermit life and life in the monastery, 'the unreality of so much of it.' Merton questions whether the reality he thought he was living was not real but, 'I was living a sort of patched up, crazy existence, a series of rather hopeless improvisations, and a life of unreality in many ways.'⁵³⁷ The bundle of questions and doubts seems absurd to Merton in his

⁵³⁵ Rowan Williams, *Lost Icons, Reflections on Cultural Bereavement* (London: Continuum, 2003), 47.

⁵³⁶ Higgins, *Heretic Blood*, 9.

⁵³⁷ Ibid.

life as a monk and as a writer but for him the presence of God was the only thing that made sense. However, the impetus to wholeness in Merton is evident when he resolves to leave nothing out of the publication of his journals in an effort to make at least the *depiction* of himself less incomplete than it might have been.⁵³⁸

Too much analysing... I think I understand the whole thing better when I read not my own notes but her notes because these are necessary to complete my own ideas and aspirations and love.⁵³⁹

Therefore, translated into the life of Ford's polyphonic exemplar, Bonhoeffer, living in the world for Merton, especially at this time, means being thrown into the arms of God and abandoning any safe image of self, other than Jesus Christ – it can only be improvised not foreclosed – as shown by Merton's self-analysis and writing down of thoughts as they arose. This period also could be suggestive of Ford's theme of 'hospitality' as a sign of the flourishing self. Merton's experience of being loved even within the very short interval of their relationship is an expression of the joy of physical embodiment. Conversely, there is a danger of reading the journals as if they were Merton's final conclusions rather than a series of spontaneous points written down for shaping later on.⁵⁴⁰ However, the telling and re-telling of his life is Merton's attempt to integrate his twin vocations of monastic asceticism and writing, as well as involving an examination of conscience, 'Every book I write is a mirror of my own

⁵³⁸ Labrie, *Inclusive Imagination*, 230.

⁵³⁹ Merton, *Learning to Love*, 125-126.

⁵⁴⁰ Patrick O'Connell comments that there is a danger of setting the journal up as the standard of determining the 'authentic Merton'. There is a risk of 'over-privileging' Merton's immediate impressions and feelings over his more considered judgements and impressions. See Patrick F. O'Connell, 'Introduction' in Patrick F. O'Connell ed., *Thomas Merton: Cassian and the Fathers: Initiation in the Monastic Tradition*, Monastic Wisdom Series no.1 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 2005), xlv.

character and conscience. I always open the final printed job with a faint hope of finding myself agreeable, and I never do.’⁵⁴¹

The second heading Ford gives for living a polyphonic life is weaving autobiography with social concerns. As was discussed at the beginning of the chapter, an important criterion for Ford’s theme of polyphony in an exemplar is their ability to communicate theological ideas in creative formats. Merton fulfils this requirement, as he responded to the dissatisfaction and alienation in the society of his time by critiquing it through literature, poetry and art; attempting to liberate it from the servitude of establishment thinking.⁵⁴²

For example, in the January 1968 introduction to the novel, *My Argument with the Gestapo*,⁵⁴³ Merton suggests this novel, written originally in 1941, was a ‘sardonic meditation’ on the world and an attempt ‘to define its predicament and my own place in it.’⁵⁴⁴ O’Connell suggests that the novel is a kind of modern ‘divine comedy’, ‘... a journey towards God which cannot bypass the hell that each and all have created to frustrate that journey.’⁵⁴⁵ He could only ever have, writes Merton, access to his own myth but as a child of two continents he had to include Europe and America and its wars in it. This theme is clear in a scene in which the leading character - easily identifiable as Merton himself - is confronted by two soldiers who demand that he show them his passport, to reveal his ‘true identity.’

Merton’s riposte is indicative of his preoccupation with subverting the neat categories of their identity system:

⁵⁴¹ Merton, *Entering the Silence*, 287.

⁵⁴² Merton, ‘First and Last Thoughts,’ 16.

⁵⁴³ Thomas Merton, *My Argument with the Gestapo* (New York: New Directions, 1968).

⁵⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁵⁴⁵ Patrick O’Connell, ‘Merton’s Earlier Commedia: Dante and My Argument with the Gestapo,’ *The Merton Journal* 21, no.1 (2014): 35. O’Connell also claims that this myth forms the basis of the autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*. The book is a ‘prequel’ to the next phase of Merton’s life as lived and written. 36.

...if you want to identify me, ask me not where I live, or what I like to eat, or how I comb my hair but ask me what you think I am living for, in detail, and ask me what I think is keeping me from living fully for the thing I want to live for. Between these two answers you can determine the identity of a person.⁵⁴⁶

Merton's unusual background and cosmopolitan upbringing, commented on throughout the novel, makes him a symbolic or representative figure for all the rootless and alienated wanderers of the modern world.⁵⁴⁷ It could be that the novel is more a 'meditation on the state of the world and of the author's own soul' where the fictional elements are simply a framework for an examination of conscience.⁵⁴⁸ The novel is set in war-ravaged England and France of Merton's boyhood but his concern is not with the actual events but the spiritual meaning beneath the surface in a style reminiscent of a key influence noted at the start of the thesis, William Blake.⁵⁴⁹ The hellish conditions of war-torn London are not simply the results of external forces but the inner rot or sickness of a culture based on pure bad faith – in this Merton indicts western civilisation and his own self. In other words, Merton returned to the Europe of his youth through the format of a novel to confront his own sinfulness and the nihilism that made war possible. By recalling events from his own life he exposes his own failures to assume responsibility for his own moral lapses, which precipitated his departure from Cambridge. In the confession before the soldiers he is in some way trying to reclaim and purify his real identity,⁵⁵⁰ and provide a critique of those who worry about neat categorisations.

⁵⁴⁶ Merton, *My Argument*, 161.

⁵⁴⁷ O'Connell, 'Merton's Earlier Commedia,' 30.

⁵⁴⁸ Ibid., 30.

⁵⁴⁹ Merton portrays two Londons, the first being its well-mannered children, its neat parks and galleries, 'Until suddenly, sometime, not for everybody, and never for the innocent, the masks fall off the houses and the streets become liars and the squares become thieves and the buildings become murderers'. Merton, *My Argument*, 34.

⁵⁵⁰ O'Connell, 'Merton's Earlier Commedia,' 33.

To return to the research question posed at the start of the chapter, the medium of Merton's novel fits with Ford's theme of polyphony as a way of theologising that is radically interrogative and ethically responsible. Within the dialogues of the novel he is summoned and faces up to his own ethical responsibility for the war. Through his life and writing, Merton provides an example of how a life of polyphony has the capacity to interrogate the self and express faith afresh within the messiness of history, alert to one's radical moral responsibility for events in the world. However, Merton's own search and struggle or 'ongoing contest' between his own true self or deepest identity and false self or shallow identity, is not a penalty for sin but an 'incentive to change'⁵⁵¹ and this includes seeing the world as part of one's own making. As a monk of the rule of St. Benedict, Merton reads the saint's vision as broad and open, not sealed off - it is the daily practice of hospitality to the stranger and seeing Christ in the face of the other which is the monk's work:

Monks should not lock the doors and windows away from the world but discern the useful from the useless in order to glorify God 'in all things.' Rejection of the world? The monk must see Christ in the pilgrim and the stranger who come from the world, especially if they are poor. Such is the spirit and letter of the Rule.⁵⁵²

Facing Jesus Christ to the point of substitution entails speaking out against injustice and complacency. Merton pens poems⁵⁵³ evoking the horror of racial strife, seeking more ways to identify and integrate his own experience with suffering in others, 'I happen to

⁵⁵¹ Merton, *Opening the Bible*, 67.

⁵⁵² Merton, *Conjectures*, 14-15.

⁵⁵³ For example, 'And the Children of Birmingham,' is a poem testifying to the courage of young children set upon by police dogs, hosed and abused by a white mob, August, 1963. See Merton, *Collected Poems*, 335.

understand something of the rejection and frustration of black people because I am first and foremost an orphan and second a Trappist.’⁵⁵⁴

The poem *Hagia Sophia* is an example of the third criterion of polyphonic writing conducive to Ford’s method.⁵⁵⁵ Merton reveals his intuitions, feelings and thoughts as they arise in his spiritual life, interweaving strands of autobiography, spiritual experience and theological motifs, such as liturgy and the cycle of monastic prayer. The poem’s division into four sections with ‘Lauds’ as the longest reads as a hymn of praise to the wisdom of God. He describes waking up from illusions to realise the ‘hidden wholeness’ of creation, the presence of wisdom experienced in the depths of the self and nature as a divine gift, ‘There is in all visible things an invisible fecundity, a dimmed light, a meek namelessness, a hidden wholeness.’⁵⁵⁶ Once again the theme of polyphony is appropriate as an example of holistic and embodied thinking. In ‘Tierce,’ links between joy and worship, particularly the Eucharist, are evident, ‘*Hagia Sophia* in all things is the Divine Life reflected in them considered as a spontaneous participation, as their invitation to the Wedding Feast....’⁵⁵⁷ Ford notes how worship was an important part of Bonhoeffer’s life, how he referred to it in his prison writings. Worship and joy are fundamental, writes Ford, to loving God with the whole heart and inseparable from a life of responsibility in the world.⁵⁵⁸ *Hagia Sophia* therefore gives lyrical expression to the joy of Merton in response to his expanded understanding of his relationships in the monastery and in the world. He connects these aspects in himself and gives it all back to God in a hymn of praise.

⁵⁵⁴ Thomas Merton, ‘Letter to Robert Lawrence Williams, July 16th, 1968,’ *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns* ed. William H. Shannon (London: Collins, 1985), 605.

⁵⁵⁵ See Section 1:3 of the thesis for a longer exposition of the poem.

⁵⁵⁶ Merton, *Collected Poems*, 363.

⁵⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 368.

⁵⁵⁸ Ford, *Self and Salvation*, 258.

In summary, if Ford's theme of polyphony as 'embodied wisdom' is expressed in the writing of the author, then Thomas Merton, can be regarded as an example of the search for transformation of self. In writing autobiography and integrating his own personal experiences, spiritual life with major social issues in the world like the Second World War, Merton highlights the ethical responsibility he felt as a child of the war years. The self-interrogation of personal motives and participation in the conflict – as a sign of sinfulness - is an active way of contemporary theologising conducive to Ford's method. It subverts static thinking. Merton's revising and analysing in his journals is also suggestive of this activity. The communication of theological ideas through fresh genres is evident though his novel, journals and poetry. For Ford the pursuit of wisdom is always improvised because understanding and situations change,⁵⁵⁹ and seeking wisdom though discernment is not free-wheeling but the fruit of rehearsal and 'performance' of a person's relationship to God. This aspect of Ford's account is exemplified supremely in Bonhoeffer and in the next section Merton's reading of the German pastor is brought into focus to help consider whether Merton meets Ford's polyphonic criteria.

4:1:3. Merton's Reading of Bonhoeffer (the penultimate)

The mature Merton reading Bonhoeffer is challenged to see that real engagement and love for the world means immersion in it - not a kind of detachment which sets up rivalries between God and the world – that is the way of the false self. The wise search for God involves seeing

⁵⁵⁹ David F. Ford, *The Drama of Living: Becoming Wise in the Spirit* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2014), xvii.

this world as ‘penultimate’ as Bonhoeffer argued.⁵⁶⁰ In seeing God’s creation as penultimate, one is drawn towards real detachment from an autonomous, alienating way of being human towards a ‘creaturely way of being human.’⁵⁶¹ In his search for a wise monastic identity in the early sixties, Merton’s thoughts are focussed on debased speech and how even the church and monastery can too often mirror the tired out-worn political norms of wider society. It is in this context that Merton’s reading of Bonhoeffer helps to clarify what constitutes a wise way of living in the world, without blind conformity to structures.

In *Conjectures*, Merton quotes from Bonhoeffer, ‘The news that God became man strikes at the very heart of an age in which the good and the wicked regard either scorn for man or the idolisation of man as the highest attainable wisdom.’⁵⁶² Bonhoeffer’s criticism is that structures and the progress of the world have been changed by the entry of Christ into history but humankind is endlessly unfaithful to this event.⁵⁶³ Christianity is also not immune from critique as becoming a refuge in comfortable social forms and safe conventions, which defeats faith rather than have it tested or purified.⁵⁶⁴ Equally, Merton was critical of the mindset of clericalism and an attitude within the church which puts routine, busyness and blind

⁵⁶⁰ Merton’s most significant notes on Bonhoeffer date from the time he became a hermit in August 1965. He read Bonhoeffer’s *Ethics* and through this was challenged to consider social responsibility as ‘worldliness’ in terms of the incarnation.

⁵⁶¹ Paul D. Janz, *God: The Mind’s Desire: Reference, Reason and Christian Thinking* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 219.

⁵⁶² Merton, *Conjectures*, 63.

⁵⁶³ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁵⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 70. Further on, Merton attacks the kind of spirituality which fosters ‘unworldliness,’ perhaps a criticism of the scholastic divisions of nature and supernature in spirituality. The result of this dualistic thinking means, ‘... we tend to think that nothing in man’s ordinary life is really supernatural except saying prayers and performing pious acts of one sort or another...but Christian social action ... conceives man’s work itself as a *spiritual* reality.’ (81).

obedience to rules above the Holy Spirit and interior discipline. For him it was a sign of when religion becomes desacralized, rather than a sign of sacramental presence.⁵⁶⁵

In a book aimed ostensibly at monks,⁵⁶⁶ Merton focuses on the need for all people to practise deep personal prayer as the basis of Christian life. Monks as men of prayer exist as marginal figures in modern society, so it falls to them to offer a prophetic voice, to speak a word from below, as Bonhoeffer stated. Like Bonhoeffer, Merton saw in prayer the basis of a strong community and liturgy but it is also as a personal act in which one is stripped bare before God to search for the true self, 'The secret of my identity is hidden in the love and mercy of God...Ultimately the only way I can be myself is to become identified with Him in Whom is hidden the reason and fulfilment of my existence.'⁵⁶⁷

Furthermore, for Bonhoeffer, social life becomes the acting area where Christians participate in Christ's redemptive work. Merton's affirmation of the worldliness of Bonhoeffer was not the free-wheeling version of religion-less religion of some of Bonhoeffer's followers⁵⁶⁸ but finding God's presence in humanity and history. Through reading Bonhoeffer, Merton sees the task of the Christian, not as turning away from a degenerate society but acceptance of 'guilt' with one's fellows and, '... complete, trusting and

⁵⁶⁵ Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, 154- 161. Merton is concerned with how modern Catholics are turning away from the idea that prayer and meditation are central realities and favouring 'getting things done,' or 'being useful' - hence the contemplative life and its institutions are 'useless.' Merton responds by disagreeing with this assumption and setting out an argument for the importance of monastic life and a view of God, not as a 'supreme engineer', getting things done but as Presence and Absence in our deepest being. The latter is a sense of an apparent inability to believe. Although monastic life needs 'rethinking' as it is still too identified with out-moded patterns of thought, contemplative life is needed more than ever before in America, due to its fetishisation of action. Merton states: 'It is precisely from this state of affairs that secularism arises: Clericalism is the father of secularism.' See Thomas Merton, 'Orthodoxy and the World' *Monastic Studies* 4 (1966): 110-111, quoted in George Kilcourse, *Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton's Christ*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), 115.

⁵⁶⁶ Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2005).

⁵⁶⁷ Merton, *New Seeds*, 37-38.

⁵⁶⁸ Merton, *Conjectures*, 317.

abandoned consent to the ‘yes’ of God in Christ.’⁵⁶⁹ It means that both Merton and Bonhoeffer are concerned with renewal based on prayer, worship and a commitment to spiritual life which was world-affirming not world-denying; and which was engaged with the self before God in the world. This climate of thought is reflected in Merton’s work on monastic renewal – where structures and systems do not any longer bring spiritual growth of individual persons, they require transformation.⁵⁷⁰ One of his tensions of his own monastic life was in his and his Abbot’s own inability to communicate except (as he saw it) in the realm of ‘perfectly acceptable clichés. Not cliché words but cliché *ideas*.’⁵⁷¹ His complaints of expectation of conformism to superiors and his conflicted desires for a hermitage feed into his thoughts about whether the monastery and his vocation are a refuge from the world⁵⁷² or a space for ‘renewed public speech.’⁵⁷³

Further analysis of the uselessness of systems and their destructiveness is found in *Raids on the Unspeakable* where Merton meditates on the Christmas mystery and its radical call to the hope of a genuine biblical eschatology centred on the incarnation. With another link to Ford’s notion of polyphony, Merton criticises Christians who do not take ethical responsibility seriously and who disconnect the realities of living from their worship and celebrations of the feast. A sharp description of a God made homeless⁵⁷⁴ is contrasted with those believers who depend on God as an object, a Cartesian fixed substance which Merton warns may alienate more than attract. God is made into a solid marble idol because the masses

⁵⁶⁹ Ibid, 254

⁵⁷⁰ Ibid, 1

⁵⁷¹ Merton, *Turning Towards the World*, 160.

⁵⁷² Ibid., 8-9.

⁵⁷³ Williams, *A Silent Action*, 64.

⁵⁷⁴ Thomas Merton, *Raids*, 50.

are too busy with their own lives to notice what is before them. Speech becomes quantified, assessed and surfeited with news and information.⁵⁷⁵

Into this world comes Christ uninvited, notes Merton, not at home in mass society but placed beside those others who are also made 'homeless.'⁵⁷⁶ The great eschatological sign – Christ's identity with the poor, the outsider and dispossessed, not the societies where time is neatly packaged and people held captive by despair. Even those who go through the routines of celebrating the feast are not beyond the captivity of obedience to rules, oblivious to joy. Yet the 'Great Joy' and 'great tribulation' of the Christmas feast is that Christ breaks through as the 'first fruits' of a new creation and this is right in front of everyone.

Hence, the flourishing Christian self is not one that can turn its back on the poor or become a slave to establishment thinking. If Christian identity is obscured by the thinking of mass society then indeed Christ becomes homeless and the joy of worship becomes dead social routine. If we are not careful we lose ourselves and:

...co-exist with a range of beliefs of another provenance with an entirely different trajectory...Our thinking may be problem-solving and essentially short-term, so that we are destined ...to play a 'walk-on' part in the cosmic drama of life. Being uncertain as to who we are, we are equally disorientated as to our destiny.⁵⁷⁷

For Merton, the 'great joy' meant learning the monastic lesson of acceptance of oneself, life in general and of everything as gift while clinging to none of it, a 'mystery inscaped with paradox and contradiction yet centred at its very heart on the divine mercy.'⁵⁷⁸ The search for God becomes centred on acceptance of the world as it is with all its

⁵⁷⁵ Ibid., 49.

⁵⁷⁶ Ibid., 51.

⁵⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁸ Ibid.

contradictions and an ever-expansive search for wholeness in the ordinary, direct and the simple.⁵⁷⁹ Like Bonhoeffer, Merton accepts his part in the world and the necessity for immersion in it but not conformity to systems and the herd mentality. Rather, the real freedom of Christian identity lies in the life of joyful and ethical responsibility before the face of Christ, practised daily and in open discernment of the signs of the times.

4:2. Conclusion – the strengths and limits of Ford’s polyphony

To re-state the research question: Although Merton’s method of writing in itself is suggestive of David F. Ford’s way of doing theology as a journey of intensification through many themes, does this style of Christian wisdom-seeking fit Merton’s approach to wisdom and does he fit Ford’s criteria for a polyphonic self?

In reprising Ford’s description of polyphony, the kind of theology for a religion-less world is one which has to be lived, practised before the face of Jesus, as well as improvised polyphonically in ordinary living and with an inner discipline.⁵⁸⁰ Ford’s form of polyphonic living is drawn from experience of the ordinary life and its expression in worship through his engagement with a variety of postmodern thinkers, while rooted in biblical testimony and the

⁵⁷⁹ Merton stresses the importance to him of the direct and simple way he has found both in monasticism and in Chuang Tzu as, ‘...characteristic of a taste for simplicity, for humility, for self-effacement, silence and in general a refusal to take seriously the aggressivity, the ambition, the push, and the self-importance one must display in order to get along in society. This other is a way that prefers not to get anywhere in the world, or even in the field of some supposedly spiritual attainment.’ Thomas Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (Tunbridge Wells: Burns and Oates, 1965), 11.

⁵⁸⁰ Ford, *Self and Salvation*, 263. ‘The secret is the hidden reality of the crucified and risen Jesus Christ and to know that this is of ultimate significance. When one participates in it one cannot live in a religious sphere separate from the world; but neither can one live without worship... becoming conformed to it...is intrinsic to knowing it truly... and that ...will involve prayer and righteous action together.’ This approach is very much in the trajectory of Bonhoeffer and Merton’s understanding of ‘worldliness’ for a Christian.

life of worship.⁵⁸¹ He engages with Dietrich Bonhoeffer who he regards as embodying the dynamics of desire in Christian life for the transformation of self, ‘the most illuminating interpretations of Christian identity are found in particular lives marked by joy and sacrificial responsibility.’⁵⁸²

In refusing a packaged answer, it suggests there is always more wisdom to be obtained, when one allows for searching and being searched. The always more of Ford’s open-ended theology is resonant of Balthasar’s God of the ever-more, whose glory is always greater than human understanding, ‘It is a drama about the ‘always more’ of a wisdom that is genuinely engaged with God in history and creation.’⁵⁸³ However, Ford’s catholicity owes more to Barth than Balthasar as, ‘the centrifugal force of his catholicity is precisely through the reach of God’s story as narrated in scripture.’⁵⁸⁴

The emphasis on multiple genres as a way of communicating theology suggests going beyond narrative to other artistic activities which encompass the whole self in relation to God. This comes across through Ford’s understanding of dramatic action in history. The notion of the transformed self before the face of Jesus Christ is an essential prerequisite to understanding, ‘Salvation is not one locus in Christian theology but it relates to every locus.’⁵⁸⁵ It is a dynamic of response, correspondence and desiring of more and more superabundance and discipline of mind and heart.⁵⁸⁶

⁵⁸¹ Ibid., 6.

⁵⁸² Ibid., 2.

⁵⁸³ David F. Ford, *Christian Wisdom: Desiring God – Learning in Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007; reprint, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 99.

⁵⁸⁴ C.C. Pecknold, ‘The Catholicity of David Ford,’ *The Journal of Scriptural Reasoning* 7, no.1 (2008): 2.

⁵⁸⁵ David F. Ford, ‘Salvation and the Nature of Theology: A Response to John Webster’s Review of Self and Salvation: Being Transformed,’ *Scottish Journal of Theology* 54, no.4 (2001): 564. Many themes can be brought in and discussed through the development of a central idea – that in true worship the self is transformed in relation with God and other people and embraces all spheres of life, orientating them to the ultimate: being faced by God.

⁵⁸⁶ David F. Ford, *Christian Wisdom*, 13.

However, others detect incoherence in the thread of the strategy: ‘But polyphony is not without its drawbacks. It means the absence... of those voices in the tradition which have not thought of theology as a set of variations but rather as a more modest gloss on a singular, given reality.’⁵⁸⁷ The suspicion is that at the heart of Ford’s theology is inattentiveness to the traditional ‘architecture’ of Christian dogmatics, whose arguments and criticisms, ‘Give us good reasons for quietly ignoring some of the voices within our own culture.’⁵⁸⁸ Webster asks, ‘... why is it necessary to inch towards Christian themes through such an elaborate set of conversations: why not cut to the chase?’⁵⁸⁹

Yet Ford’s aim is a particular treatment of the tradition or form of creative constructive theology. His thesis calls on Christians to look outwards to the world as well as inwards to the resources within their tradition. For example, the imagery of the face and facing in Ford’s theology, criticised as simply an image without substance,⁵⁹⁰ opens up traditional conceptions of Christ as the locus of salvation and being transformed by God; and which complements historical action and rich theological themes such as wisdom and being.⁵⁹¹

Therefore, it seems to me that Ford’s notion of the polyphonic self as an embodied form of wisdom fits Merton as well as it does Bonhoeffer. As was discussed in an earlier section, Merton used his writing as a means of writing his life and sharing his experience with others, with its vicissitudes and messiness. His constant need to revise and re-write is

⁵⁸⁷John Webster, ‘David F. Ford: Self and Salvation’ *Scottish Journal of Theology* 54, no.4 (2001): 558.

⁵⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 559.

⁵⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 551.

⁵⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 554.

⁵⁹¹Ford, ‘Salvation and the Nature of Theology,’ 569. Ford adds: As a scriptural image it is found in both parts of the Bible. Ford found the image is a way of expressing in Christian terms, the particularity and universality of the Jesus Christ which he believes strongly links the person and work of Jesus – consistent in the tradition: “Facing...is a fully personal action and is strongly linked to interpersonal communication and responsiveness...and is this not at the heart of the dramatic? I see one of the great achievements of Barth and Bonhoeffer in their refusal to separate the person from the work of Jesus Christ.’ (569).

reminiscent of Ford's stress on performance in the daily dramas of one's relationship with God but is also an intensification of the desire for God in everyday reality. In short, writing is Merton's personal act of 'attunement' to and encounter with God, 'being a son of this instant.'⁵⁹²

Both Merton and Bonhoeffer wrote in a variety of genres, including letter-writing, and kept personal diaries. The latter styles are able to reflect immediate insights into the two men's thinking, rather than the artistically shaped works of spiritual writing. They suggest that spiritual life is a 'work in progress' rather than a finished article, which continually invites further speech and further thought. The centre of life for both men is Christ and how faith in Christ is lived involves attention to personal prayer and silence as well as a commitment to action. Indeed, Merton moves from a world-denying to a world-affirming thinker, helped through his reading of Bonhoeffer, who clarifies how his life of contemplation can unite with 'worldly' action.

It is through embodied living and practice in wisdom that Merton suggests an inner ground of freedom is opened up, the 'liberty of the sons of God,' which preserves man from the surrender of his integrity to the 'servitude' of mass society. This compares well with Bonhoeffer's free responsibility before God – faith in Christ is rooted in prayer and practice as well as engaged 'from below'. There is also intensity in a life of responsibility centred on Christ, as was seen in Merton's exploration of his own personal experience of war and identifying with the horrors of racial violence in America.

⁵⁹² Williams, *A Silent Action*, 47.

Indeed, writing was an essential way in which Merton explored his life and in some ways, ‘became a monk by writing about becoming a monk,’⁵⁹³ it was the means to bind him over to God, as well as his monk’s ‘work of the cell’ and poet’s ‘heart work.’⁵⁹⁴ Unlike Bonhoeffer who was working to form a Christian community in the Nazi era, Merton lived within a well-defined monastic milieu. His struggle within the community against the vision of the Abbot, led him to consider what was meant by authentic monastic living, though some have questioned whether he practised it.⁵⁹⁵

It was shown in chapter three how Merton refines his understanding of monasticism as the ‘face’ of the world. He argues he must reconfigure the desert in himself and accepts himself as a nomad or as a marginal figure,⁵⁹⁶ which could be interpreted as the work of the individual monk, or the solitary rather than the work of an entire community.⁵⁹⁷ Similarly, Ford’s approach relies on the power of individuals to truly become themselves as a way of modelling or embodying wise theology in life. Ford’s method of immersion in biographical narratives is intended not to offer a set of moral principles but a suggestion of intensive re-re-

⁵⁹³ Patrick Hart and Jonathan Montaldo, ‘A Path Through Thomas Merton’s Journals’ in Patrick Hart and Jonathan Montaldo eds., *The Intimate Merton: Thomas Merton’s Life from His Journals* (Oxford: Lion 2006), 9.

⁵⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁵ Abbot Peter McCarthy suggests that although Merton was good at many things, he never fully grasped the concept of Christian community in the way Bonhoeffer did. Although he does not venture to give a reason for this, I would suggest it was because of Merton’s regular requests to transfer to another religious order such as the Carthusians or Camodelese, a request to live in a monastery in Central America – all requests were turned down by the Abbot. His on-going desire for solitude, rather than remain in the community could also be seen as a lack of appreciation of community living, although he returned daily to the monastery even while a hermit to eat a meal, and regularly to give a conference.. See William Apel, ‘Engaged Spirituality: Thomas Merton and Dietrich Bonhoeffer on Christian Renewal,’ *The Merton Journal* 17, no.2 (2010): 27.

⁵⁹⁶ Patrick Hart and Jonathan Montaldo, eds., *The Intimate Merton: Thomas Merton’s Life from his Journals* (Oxford: Lion, 2006), 10, Merton’s journal note, November 29, 1952: ‘Suspended entirely from God’s mercy, I am content for anything to happen.’(10).

⁵⁹⁷ Williams, *A Silent Action*, 59. Rowan Williams argues Merton did come to understand the importance of community in the work of holiness, despite decades- long requests for a more solitary life and a hermitage.

reading towards mature Christian selfhood before the face of Jesus Christ.⁵⁹⁸ Both Merton and Bonhoeffer do not see the move towards holiness as requiring detachment from the world. Indeed, Merton rejected the notion of gradual ‘ascent’ to God preferring the ‘ordinary ways’ of holiness and ‘creative consent’ to God’s will in the present.⁵⁹⁹

However, Ford’s approach raises a further question: should Merton’s theology simply be understood as a performance and a life of constant revising and refiguring? Certainly I have argued that Merton is a theologian in the patristic sense, i.e. someone who seeks experience of God, *theologia*, and articulates their experience for others. The priority for Merton is to discern knowledge ‘in Christ’ that is, to seek Christ, ‘...as centre in whom and by whom one is illuminated.’⁶⁰⁰ This discernment is not only rooted in biblical and patristic writings but inseparable from the contemplative tradition.⁶⁰¹ Also, there are indications that he did not lose the concept of *Aseity* learned from his reading of Etienne Gilson. It remained with Merton until the end.⁶⁰²

Although Ford acknowledges that tradition and communities are essential for the practice and performance of faith, his main interest is biblical wisdom as a source of super-abundant imagery. The contemplative/mystical tradition is a connected but secondary

⁵⁹⁸ Ford uses Bonhoeffer as his key model in three out of four recent books suggesting that Bonhoeffer is his key exemplar par excellence. But he would need to give more examples to show whether the model has wider application.

⁵⁹⁹ Merton, *Conjectures*, 184.

⁶⁰⁰ Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love*, 643.

⁶⁰¹ Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 285-286: ‘Christianity transformed the old world by absorbing it. Can St. Paul’s thought be imagined cut off from the numberless roots which bound it to Tarsus and Jerusalem, to Greek civilisation, Eastern mysticism and the Roman Empire? ...If indeed Christianity is divine, entirely divine, it is in one sense human, the more human for being the more divine and by penetrating the very fabric of human history....’

⁶⁰² Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, 172-173. See also Thomas Merton, ‘Blake and the New Theology,’ ed. Brother Patrick Hart, *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1984), 3-12. Here, Merton suggests that his central notion of God has not changed since his conversion, ‘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 as the act of Being.’ (9).

feature.⁶⁰³ In other words, Merton's Christ is the 'Christ of the Ikons' or the Christ of immediate experience, as handed down through the mystical tradition, detached from historical or cultural residues but illumined in the liturgical, monastic and mystical dimensions of faith.⁶⁰⁴

Like Ford's mediations between postmodern scholars and biblical and communal witness, mystical language is also not static as it moves between saying and unsaying towards a source beyond expression.⁶⁰⁵ Ford acknowledges contemplation as linked to rather than as central to his project of embracing the material, communal, scriptural and ecclesial dimensions of knowledge and practice, whereas contemplation is a priority for Merton, inseparable as it is from action.⁶⁰⁶ Therefore, I suggest that their projects are related attempts to explore the self's orientation to God, although with some clear differences of emphasis. I would suggest Merton's life is an example of a polyphonic self from the Catholic tradition that fits more clearly into Ford's approach than the example Ford himself gives of St. Therese of Lisieux.⁶⁰⁷ Merton was an intellectual, well-read and multi-lingual, though he had to strive hard against the danger of spiritual pride and elitism. At an existential level, Merton believed openness to others is possible – for at the deepest level, all are already one as

⁶⁰³ Ford does acknowledge the Christian mystical tradition and its link to wisdom in, Ford, *Christian Wisdom*, 264-272 and notes that there grew up a division between spiritual practice and theology.

⁶⁰⁴ Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love*, 643.

⁶⁰⁵ Ibid., 644f. The language used is Apophatic, although the Kataphatic is essential in the balancing of language about God. In describing 'his' Christ, Merton employs a balance between strongly Apophatic and Kataphatic language, always in need of revision and never static: '...light that is not light, and not confinable within any known category of light and not communicable in any light that is not-light: yet in all things, in their ground not by nature but by gift, grace, death and resurrection.'

⁶⁰⁶ Ford, *Christian Wisdom*, 272.

⁶⁰⁷ Ford's assessment of Therese of Lisieux in *Self and Salvation* is constructive but her limited life was not regarded by him as truly polyphonic as Bonhoeffer. She had a vocation of love but not wisdom he suggests. She was too world-denying and had a limited education despite her 'little way' of holiness. Ford, *Self and Salvation*, 242 (262). However, she is a recognised Doctor of the Catholic Church despite only living 24 years. Should lack of education be a bar to polyphony? Teresa's life lacked intellectual rigour but her life was centred on simplicity, forbearance and humility in ordinary living, which is a sign of innocence- a description that Merton uses to locate wisdom.

contemplatives.⁶⁰⁸ Merton's self-questioning and revising is another affinity with Ford's model of facing. After Maritain, it took the form of 'distinguishing in order to unite' apparently differing ideas in himself, in order to 'transcend them 'in Christ.'⁶⁰⁹ and the practice of ethical responsibility.

By engaging in the intensive, practical work of detachment from the 'false self' i.e. attachment to ego, one can recover the 'true self'⁶¹⁰ and live in the world as intended by God. Hence at the deepest point of experience one can speak a word 'from below' and practise a life of free-ethical responsibility before the face of Jesus Christ. Reading Bonhoeffer helps Merton to revise what this means in relation to his own monastic life and on-going search for God. In the wisdom-style conducive to Ford, Merton is not content to give the answer but to try to make out the answer by living.⁶¹¹

In the next chapter, there will be a further discussion of David Ford's theology. His 'wisdom hermeneutic of cries'⁶¹² is outlined and assessed as a way of engagement for the church with the world.

⁶⁰⁸ Merton, *New Seeds*, 1. Merton defines the Contemplative life, not as world-denying but world-affirming: 'Contemplation is the highest expression of man's intellectual and spiritual life. It is life itself, fully awake, fully active; fully aware that it is alive...It is a vivid realisation of the fact that life and being in us have an abundant Source...It is a more profound depth of faith, knowledge too deep to be grasped in images, in words or even in clear concepts.'

⁶⁰⁹ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures*, 21. Merton declares, 'If I can unite *in myself* the thought and devotion of Eastern and Western Christendom, the Greek and Latin Fathers, the Russians with the Spanish Mystics, I can prepare in myself the reunion of divided Christendom...We must contain all divided worlds in ourselves and transcend them in Christ.'

⁶¹⁰ Merton, *New Seeds*, 36. Merton defines the 'false self' as 'shadow' or an 'illusory person,' who feeds off desires, ego-centric pleasure and power. It believes itself to be an objective reality but Merton describes it as having 'no substance:' "My false and private self is the one who wants to exist outside the reach of God's will and God's love – outside of reality and outside of life." Conversely, the 'true self' is defined by Merton as the real identity of a person.

⁶¹¹ 'I am all the time trying to make out the answer as I go on living. I live out the answer to the two questions myself and the answer may not be complete, even when my life is ended: I may go on working out the answer for a long time after my death but at last it will be resolved and there will be no further question for with God's mercy I shall possess not only the answer but the reality that answer was about.' Merton, *My Argument*, 161.

⁶¹² Ford, *Christian Wisdom*, 43f.

CHAPTER FIVE

DAVID F. FORD'S WISDOM THEOLOGY

In this chapter, there will be a discussion of the approach of theologian David F. Ford to the theme of wisdom and he will be brought into engagement with Hans Urs von Balthasar in his treatment of the drama motif in his wisdom theology. In the previous chapter it was noted how Ford is engaged in a 'journey of intensification,' i.e., taking one path through a large number of topics. He suggests the subject-matter of theology involves radical transformation of selves, involving self-questioning at the heart of identity and includes mediations through a variety of areas of life and knowledge.

Ford's broad hermeneutical key could be stated as seeing theology, 'in relation to many forces and events helping to shape it through the centuries' and giving weight to 'the significance of the social and institutional context in which theology is produced.'⁶¹³ This has urgency for Ford as key truths cry out to be related to the whole of reality and to every human being, with intensive conversation as one important way of doing this⁶¹⁴ and to mediate the symbols of the tradition in and for the current context. This conversation is an experience of 'deep reasoning' and improvisation or 'travelling without maps',⁶¹⁵ drawing on multiple

⁶¹³ Ford, *The Modern Theologians*, 12.

⁶¹⁴ Ford, 'Salvation and the Nature of Theology,' 567.

⁶¹⁵ David F. Ford, 'Deep Reasonings, No Map: Inter-faith Engagement as a Core Dynamic of Theology and Religious Studies,' was the title of Ford's *Edward Cadbury Lecture, 2013*. Ford advanced a new paradigm for Theology and Religious Studies in the academy through the medium of a 'jazz session' poem by Micheal O'Siadhail. The jazz session generates new meanings from the base of deep learning, though the improvised session moves in hope and relies on the friendship and trust of the musicians – so too in conversation across religions, there is mutual trust in the 'shared space' of textual reasoning. Ford showed how through a new form, theological ideas can be conveyed, rather than through a repetition of a traditional lecture form. He also underlined two key points: first that poetry is a powerful and effective mediator of theological ideas and second that through the theme of a jazz session, theology must be brought into engagement with multiple contexts and 'publics' – for which there are no maps to plot the destination.

conversation partners within contemporary or near-contemporary traditions without being caught fast by one in particular.

Therefore, two key themes are considered in this chapter to clarify the kind of wisdom-seeking Ford is engaged in: wise expression in engagement with issues of social concern; and creative expression and communication with the modern world. After giving an account of Ford's approach, there is a brief engagement with Balthasar's theo-dramatic account of reality, which Ford draws on to develop his theme of wisdom. Finally, a summary and critical evaluation of Ford's theology is set out.

5:1. David F. Ford's approach to wisdom

Ford's notion of 'wise expression' as an operative concept connecting the canon of Scripture, doctrine and the practices of the Church, is one of the main preoccupations of Ford throughout his theological writing.⁶¹⁶ Ford describes his approach as both scriptural-expressivist and post-critical.⁶¹⁷ His manifesto takes for granted that theological thinking is needed in relation to every sphere of life⁶¹⁸ and concentrates on continual participation in the theo-drama of love with the minimum of epic prediction or speculation – one rooted in the

⁶¹⁶ Ford, *The Future of Christian Theology*, 40. The interests of that school being at once engaged in scripture and intra-textual readings, but explicitly tied in to the practice of the Churches. Ford cites Hans Frei as a theologian whose own "map of that complex field" has been most helpful to Ford's own thinking as the way in which he characterises Christian identity is "the gospel story understood as a realistic narrative testifying to Jesus Christ," and his typology is narrative/dramatic, also in accord with Ford's manifesto. The connection of theology with the Church worship is made in a review in *The Tablet* by Andrew Plant, 'In contrast with many twentieth century theologians, Ford embraces the principle, *Lex orandi, lex credendi*,' since, 'A fundamental discernment to be made about any theology is whether it rings true with the worship of one or more churches.' (31). Andrew Plant, 'A Theo-Drama to Look Forward To,' *The Tablet*, 23 April, 2011, 31.

⁶¹⁷ Ford defines his theology as Scriptural –Expressivist; Ford means that Scripture is read in the lively idiom of Christian wisdom today – in order to discern God's purposes; and Post-Critical means there is attentiveness to pre-modern, modern and post-modern critiques, while not allowing them finality of meaning over the texts. Ford, *Christian Wisdom*, 3.

⁶¹⁸ Ford, *The Future of Christian Theology*, 105.

realised eschatology of John's Gospel.⁶¹⁹ As such, attention to language is important as a creative theological task. This will be further outlined in this section.

Wisdom points to the biblical foundations of Ford's thought and his concern with 'contemporary existential realities'⁶²⁰ exemplified with the centrality of Proverbs 8:1-4, 10-11,⁶²¹ as the source of the underlying foundational cry for wisdom, '...the heart of wisdom as a hot, energetic passion for clear discernment, accurate knowledge, good judgement, right living and far-sighted decision-making.'⁶²² In *Christian Wisdom*, he develops his concern in more detail calling for a wisdom interpretation of scripture or re-reading of the texts to discern their archaeology (context, language, history).⁶²³ The surplus of meaning can be drawn on by theologians and churches for, 'a Wisdom that pivots around this cry and the death that follows it can never attain an overview or an integral systematic understanding. It is disruptive and interruptive of such claims, and tries to ban epistemic humility.'⁶²⁴

Ford's form of wisdom hermeneutics attempts to retrieve and practise 'primary theology' (scripture), to learn from tradition and develop from them a hermeneutical

⁶¹⁹ Ibid., 4.

⁶²⁰ Walter Moberly, 'Book Review: David F. Ford, *Christian Wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love*, *Studies in Christian Ethics* 22:4 (2009): 504.

⁶²¹ Ford references the Book of Job and Gospel of John as models for his theological method of concern for the creation and contemporary issues, as well as the authority of God.

⁶²² Ford, *Christian Wisdom*, 5. Ford unpacks the theme of Wisdom more fully in relation to theologising: "The theological wisdom of faith is grounded in being affirmed, being commanded, being questioned and searched, being surprised and opened to new possibilities, and being desired and loved." – All these moods are vital and interrelated to the building up of theological wisdom. They are part of the 'intensities' of life born of deep desire and search for wisdom.

⁶²³ Ibid., 52f.

⁶²⁴ David F. Ford, *Christian Wisdom*, 44. Ford's later, smaller book, *The Future of Christian Theology*, is clearly - from the themes and ideas unpacked within - a synopsis of the theological reasoning presented in *Christian Wisdom*. Ford explores biblical ideas of wise and creative living in his discussion of the ethics of feasting, where all senses are engaged, not just in hearing the cries of the world but in the savouring of food and drink in feasts, to enjoyment of the arts. This is 'embodied perception' and 'transformed sensing' involving a variety of media not just at the level of metaphor but through developed spiritual senses. This inclusive way of seeing has involved ethical and intellectual disciplines, counsels of detachment from idols, meditation on scripture and other texts, learning from Jesus Christ and from saints and above all the habit of prayer and worship.

engagement between religious faiths and the secular world. The emphasis is on personal formation based in the sociality and practice of the Christian community and also learning from the other in relationship and friendship. Ford suggests that from reading and re-reading scripture, the word is always unfolding in its intensities of reserve and ramification with the desire to be fully immersed in history, while open to future possibilities - the emphasis is on 'improvisation' while attending to particularities. His is a mediating and interrogative method of doing theology, less interested in coherent system-building than, '... Nuanced reflections on how Christ-centred practices of worship, service and celebration and the creation of humane and just social institutions can offer salvation by bringing us into more authentic community with others.' ⁶²⁵

This summary suggests that this is a theology which is reluctant to spell out a formula or a 'packaged wisdom' and is focussed on reading and re-reading the context that the Church finds itself in. What really matters is discerning God's purposes through biblical testimony and is not assimilable in any other framework. The aim is not so much to present a complete package of wisdom as to invite the reader to seek it in appropriate ways – through the primary interpretation of scripture based on a wisdom of reserve – taking the text on its own terms and a wisdom of ramification – where scripture's superabundant meaning is extended into many genres such as poetry, prayer and song. ⁶²⁶

⁶²⁵ Luther Zeigler, 'The Many Faces of the Worshipping Self,' 269.

⁶²⁶ In his typological or figural reading of John's gospel, Ford discerns the interrelationship between the three-fold pattern. It unfolds more fully and intensively in the dramatic key as there is more and more truth to be received. Figural reading shapes a form of two-fold Christian wisdom of: intensity and reserve and wisdom of extensity and ramification. He finds this in the patterning of words and testimonies, yet it is never foreclosed.

The Bible is at the centre of Ford's wisdom theology for an important reason. After Karl Barth and Hans Frei, a narrow systematic understanding of reality positioned by philosophical justifications is eschewed:⁶²⁷

...truth is a function of performance itself (putting the story or text into a play through continuous fresh action), rather than being measured in terms of the alleged correspondence between some 'text' and a state of affairs lying 'beyond' or 'outside' it. Closure is endlessly deferred.⁶²⁸

All these aspects lead inexorably to openness and engagement with the world, because of the Church's own self-understanding and practice as a 'theological community,' 'dialogical and collegial... understood as schools of desire and wisdom. Above all, the schooling is in loving God for God's sake.'⁶²⁹ There are no easy summaries of results if one maintains a close reading of scripture and the temptation is to formulate doctrine in theology while forgetting the reference back to scripture to avoid becoming fossilised.⁶³⁰

In addition, Ford develops the concept of the dramatic in theological reading towards the setting out of a '*double helix of cries*' - the cry being the dramatic utterance of scripture and the location of the theo-drama.⁶³¹ Dramatic theology offers an intensified wisdom, which Ford believes presents a balance between the two modes of epic and lyric, leading to the sense, '... that the dramatist is neither in authoritarian control...nor simply chronicling a set of diverse subjectivities.'⁶³² The cry is seen as a 'primary utterance' in scripture, one to be

⁶²⁷ Hans Frei, *Types of Christian Theology* (New Haven: Yale University, 1992), 1-19.

⁶²⁸ Frances Young, *The Art of Performance* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1990), 4.

⁶²⁹ Ford, *Christian Wisdom*, 4.

⁶³⁰ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁶³¹ Ford, *Future of Christian Theology*, 56-67. For example: "The Lord is God – Alleluia" (Deut. 6:45) is an example of 'epic' cries, which affirm the epic scope of God's glory; 'Beloved, let us love one another!' (1 John 4:7) is an example of the lyric style according to Ford. It denotes a quiet cry indicating how the health and the mission of the church depend upon love (60).

⁶³² *Ibid.*, 26.

both heard and uttered with the core cries focused on God, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, a ‘wisdom hermeneutic of cries,’ attentive to the world in five grammatical moods.⁶³³ ‘Human freedom is fulfilled in involvement with God and God’s purposes and this means constant discernment of vocation and responsibility within an unfolding drama whose central act is the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.’⁶³⁴

Ford argues that to answer the cries of scripture,⁶³⁵ involves seeking wisdom in all areas of knowledge beyond the boundaries of Christian faith and engaging in discernment with other faiths, particularly Islam and Judaism in the practice of ‘mutual theological hospitality.’⁶³⁶ This practice allows for deep differences to be faced without being resolved necessarily, avoids syncretism and serves as a space for an ‘exchange of blessings.’⁶³⁷

Therefore, in the retrieval of wisdom and creativity within theology, Ford suggests Christians can discern God’s purposes as unfolding in a public space inhabited by many actors, each of whom is to discern his or her vocation and responsibility within history.⁶³⁸ These conditions are comprehensively dramatic and indeed dialogical, as believers regularly encounter individuals whose worldviews are radically different to theirs.⁶³⁹ Of particular concern to Ford is an engagement with ‘fully immanent’ secularism in societies where faith is

⁶³³ Ibid., 43-49. The five moods enable faith to be ‘read’ through the dimension of cries in scripture: Indicative – affirming and affirmed (by God) through biblical narrative; Imperative – Obedience to the kingdom of God – as witnessed by Jesus; Interrogative – questioning and questioned; Subjunctive – where different readings of biblical stories/parables can evoke new possibilities of meaning; Optative – desire and desired – ‘may it be..’ Desires interwoven with the life of Jesus together with discerning the Father’s will.

⁶³⁴ Ibid.

⁶³⁵ Ibid., 64.

⁶³⁶ Ibid., 141.

⁶³⁷ Ibid, 143 This is pointed out by Ford’s exegesis of the word “*Menein*” (“dwelling”, “abiding”, “living in”) which he finds in various parts of John’s gospel (1:39,40; 6:27, 56; 8:31; 12:46; 14:10), which is suggestive that ordinary Christian life takes on a “quietly dramatic character” as it involves one’s whole self beyond simple assent to all aspects of life.

⁶³⁸ R. Kendall Soulen, ‘Review of David F. Ford, *The Future of Christian Theology*,’ 411.

⁶³⁹ Ford, *The Future of Christian Theology*, 65, (143).

considered as one option among others.⁶⁴⁰ Indeed, creative expression of the central truths of Christianity, ‘...cry out to be related to the whole of reality and to every human being, with intensive conversation as one important way of doing this,’⁶⁴¹ because, ‘The most intense form of address is the cry or the call of God and the wisdom of God and it is both heard and responded to amidst the many other cries from one’s community and from others.’⁶⁴²

5:2. Ford in engagement with von Balthasar (drama and performance)

The continual speech or performance of theology is exemplified in dramatic terms, assimilating the drama motif of Balthasar’s magnum opus, *Theo-drama* and his distinction between drama, epic and lyric, which represent theological tendencies. Ford views this as a good way of conceiving theology as, ‘...an integrator of many its (manifesto) concerns.’⁶⁴³

However, in this section, I assess Ford’s treatment of the themes he chooses from Balthasar’s opus focusing on the ability of the theme to describe the character of scripture and salvation history in figural terms – God as author, with the plot of the narratives culminating in the gospel and the event of Jesus Christ, the act of the birth of church and final acts in the eschaton and parousia – as descriptors rather than the drivers of content.

⁶⁴⁰ Ford, *The Future of Christian Theology*, 51. At this point Ford is referring to the work of Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* and is in agreement with Taylor’s analysis of the conditions for belief.

⁶⁴¹ Ford, ‘*Salvation and the Nature of Theology*,’ 567.

⁶⁴² This rather poetic way of describing the wisdom hermeneutic does not foreclose scholarly preoccupations such as language, history, the context of a text etc...which are all important parts of the engagement with the text.

⁶⁴³ Ibid., 23 Although theo-drama is the dominant motif, Ford is also engaging with Barth’s theme of knowing God through God’s self-revelation. Trying to know God apart from his revelation is impossible, because it ignores the fact that God’s self-revelation is the only condition for the possibility of knowing God. Christoph Schwobel, ‘Theology’, in John Webster ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 17-32.

The justification for this style of theologising is Ford's concern is to negotiate a space for theology in the twenty first century which 'signals a change in direction' from the theology and biblical studies of the academy.⁶⁴⁴ It addresses issues of concern about the kind of language expressed and the need for friendship, which are particularly but not exclusively pertinent to that community of faith. Ford's stress is on diversity and the methodology of conversation rather than closure, a refusal of packaged traditional answers, hospitality and welcome rather than defensiveness. In the following section, I set out to compare and contrast the two theo-dramas.

5:3:1. Hans Urs von Balthasar's understanding of drama

The theme of drama is made explicit by Balthasar in his discussion of *Theo-drama* and employed by Ford for his theological purposes. He justifies the employment of the dramatic motif to describe the divine-human encounter as nowhere else is the character of existence more clearly demonstrated than in stage drama,

As human beings we have a preliminary grasp of what drama is; we are acquainted with it from the complications, tensions, catastrophes and reconciliations which characterise our lives as individuals and in interactions with others and we also know it in a different way from the phenomenon of the stage...The task of the stage is to make the drama of existence explicit so that we may view it.⁶⁴⁵

In his concern to show that God from the beginning has provided a 'play' to which we can share, Balthasar attacks theologies which seem to converge on dramatics but don't quite attain

⁶⁴⁴ Iain Torrance, 'Friendship as a Mode of Theological Engagement: David Ford's Exploration of Christian Wisdom' *Modern Theology* 25, no.1 (2009): 125. Ford refers to a constant need to re-read and re-learn from the *Book of Job* as the site of how to embody wisdom in the face of tragedy and suffering.

⁶⁴⁵ Balthasar, *Theo-drama I: Prolegomena*, 17. In other words, Balthasar recognises that within the concrete reality of the messiness of existence, the theo-drama is played out. This is also the point Ford is making, following Balthasar.

it.⁶⁴⁶ The dramatic charts a middle way between an epic sensibility of God which is objective and aspires to finality and a lyric or subjective, inward expression. The tendencies are aiming ‘like arrows’ for a centre where dramatics ought to be found where true integration can flourish - in rather the manner of a harmonious symphony.⁶⁴⁷

Balthasar’s concern in *Theo-drama*, is to elaborate a ‘dramatic instrumentation’ of the literary and lived theatre of life itself – to help clarify discussion of existence as actors, author producer and of public performance.⁶⁴⁸ However, it is only when God appears on the stage (and at the same time remains behind the scenes) that, ‘...one can work out what the persons of the drama stand for,’⁶⁴⁹ what laws the dramatic action follows and how it is brought to completion. Balthasar is emphatic – God has definitively pronounced his Word in time and Theo-logy certainly has something to do with *Logos*.⁶⁵⁰

Therefore, one question arising from the outset is whether Ford’s extensive use of Balthasar’s theme does justice to the underlying thrust of Balthasar’s own argument: that the dramatic encounter of God and man in the person of Jesus Christ is the foundation for a human freedom which is, he contends, ineluctably social and dialogical. Ford tends to locate the drama in how the story of God is ‘narrated’ by the Church, how it is ‘received,’ practised and made intense. This, arguably, drains the concept of dramatic encounter with the *Logos* of

⁶⁴⁶ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *My Work: In Retrospect* (San Francisco: Ignatius press, 1993), 97.

⁶⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 98 (103f.).

⁶⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵⁰ *My Work*, 99.

its power to disclose, while taking the motif in the direction of Christian practice, performance and models of self-transformation.⁶⁵¹

However, as far as Ford as member of the academy is concerned, Balthasar's dramatic reading of existence appears too tied to particular ecclesial structures and typologies which 'freeze' the drama and lacks real attentiveness to history and social engagement.⁶⁵² Furthermore, the Marian dimension in his theology is presented as the human counter-part to the divine kenosis and therefore a pure form or representation of the Church; so the worry is this presentation, although always analogically provisional, is 'too uncritical' and 'too unreserved a mediation.'⁶⁵³ The criticism is that Balthasar's analogical reading of the relationship between God and man is an epic reading of salvation history and he imposes it onto the institution of the church and anthropology.

However, Balthasar sees his role as writing a creative and imaginative expression of Christian truth which is attractive and persuasive because of its own compelling power

⁶⁵¹ Trevor A. Hart suggests that the arts, particularly literature, drama and music offer fresh perspectives for 'constructive theological work'. In drama for instance, the works proper to them do not exist at all apart from performance in which the text is brought to completion through embodied action. See Trevor A. Hart and Steven R. Guthrie eds., *Faithful Performances: Enacting Christian Tradition* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 2.

⁶⁵² This is Ben Quash's contention with Balthasar and one which appears to be shared implicitly by Ford. In his *Future of Christian Theology*, Ford writes that he is following Quash's account although he does not explicitly criticise Balthasar. (25). Quash indicts Balthasar on several charges: that he gives too tidy a frame or 'grid' to the divine-human relationship. He argues that Balthasar reifies time in relation to Balthasar's Christological constellation and described as a form of 'crystallised love' which freezes time like ice. Quash believes that for Balthasar, the real drama of history is one between the 'true' church and a godless world as Catholicism 'preserves the sense of choric ground in relation to which church and the world and the individuals within them, find their place.' Quash, *Theology and the Drama of History*, 196-7, (93).

⁶⁵³ Balthasar's rendering in *Theo-drama* of the relations between the genders and the church has come in for considerable criticism from scholars who believe his typological reading of Mary, Peter and John at the foot of the Cross, as an analogy of roles in the Church, reinforce gender roles and freeze power relations between the genders within defined ecclesial structures, with woman as second or 'answer' to man. See Kilby, *Balthasar: a (very critical) introduction*, 126-138. As an Origenist, it is not surprising that Balthasar uses typological and allegorical imagery (139), as Kilby points out. Kilby is also incisive in noting that Balthasar is bringing the mystical theology of the Church as the bride of Christ (including the male/female relation) into the centre of his ecclesiology (134). It seems to me though, that his willingness to extend this typology to every area of the human male/female relationship appears too idealised a reading and downplays the active dynamism of the Marian fiat.

and beauty, not rationalist force of argument.⁶⁵⁴ The importance of music in the construction of Balthasar's theology cannot be underestimated. Oakes suggests this presentation is resistant to 'systematising' or epic readings and nothing characterises Balthasar's thought more than polemic against potential idolatry of systematising Christian revelation – as it implies some control over it.⁶⁵⁵ Equally, is not Ford engaged in persuasion towards a form of scripture-centred life and practice, even if his approach embraces multiple conversations and dialogues without being caught fast in any one?

Ford's style could be accused of lending itself to an extended description of the gospel, as some worry, a reduction to a moralistic or experiential text rather than the divine encounter with humanity.⁶⁵⁶ This is the point where Ford is differentiated from Balthasar, who places in the foreground the event of the incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection, which requires a distinctively inter-personal and ecclesial response and form of action.⁶⁵⁷ However, Ford is clear that his method of doing contemporary theology complements rather than surpasses traditional theological forms and indeed speaks to the need to call for, 'wide-ranging conversations in the service of an intelligible and hospitable account of Christian faith.'⁶⁵⁸ It is certainly not found in an epic monologue or in lyric subjectivity and inwardness, nor passive adherence to offices of the Church. Indeed, the locus of church authority is

⁶⁵⁴ Quash, 'Hans Urs von Balthasar,' 121.

⁶⁵⁵ Oakes, *Pattern of Redemption*, 133. 'The phraseology or patterning of his sentences... the subtle interpenetration of later motifs at the outset of his work... all of these traits show the influence of his musical background.' (133).

⁶⁵⁶ David F. Ford, 'Salvation and the Nature of Theology: A response to John Webster's review of *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed*' and, in the *Scottish Journal of Theology* 54, no. 4 (2001): 573.

⁶⁵⁷ As noted earlier, Ford endorses Quash's reading of Balthasar (see footnote 579.). Catholic theologian Tracey Rowland makes the point bluntly saying Balthasar is read as 'too Catholic' by Quash and she questions Quash's reading of Balthasar. Tracy Rowland, 'Book Review: Ben Quash, *Theology and the Drama of History*, *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 8, no.3 (2006): 324.

⁶⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 563.

downplayed, as Ford is careful to emphasise the provisional quality of judgements which are always open to new situations.

However, the way theologians balance the dramatic elements of epic and lyric is the key to Ford's justification in understanding the 'dynamic polarity' of the grand epic and the fragmented plurality of lyric narratives. Ford's narrative theo-drama has an author who is also the leading character. There is an unfolding plot and story from 'creation to the culmination in history'⁶⁵⁹ which has been the framework for Christian understanding and identity for two thousand years. He argues this is 'embedded' in liturgy and worship as well as in many other forms.

5:4. Summary

In summary, Ford has developed an engaged theology which attempts to retrieve and preserve the deep resources of scripture (primary theology) and draw from it a hermeneutical engagement between faiths and society. It requires a 'letting go' of control and certainties and an embrace of epistemic humility – there are no maps. Scripture must be re-read for the context and times and this leads to attentiveness to the cries of injustice, radical testing and tragedy, which summon a response.⁶⁶⁰ Theology is not wise when it is merely assent to a set of propositions or abstractions – it has to be involved in history and not content with epic or closed interpretations. There are no neat answers and each tradition is brought up against its

⁶⁵⁹ Ford, *The Future of Christian Theology*, 24.

⁶⁶⁰ The close reading of the book of Job suggests a way of living wisely before God in the face of extreme testing, according to Ford, and Christian tradition today is radically tested by the trauma of the Shoah.

limitations. The emphasis is on formation – of the self (polyphonically) and of the faith community, on the sociality of practice and hospitable relations.

5:5. Evaluation

Firstly, there are a number of reasons that make Ford's approach attractive. He is attempting a new and exploratory approach to systematic theology in keeping with the dictum of faith seeking understanding.⁶⁶¹ For Ford, all theology starts with God as revealed in scripture and with the constant need to re-read and re-perform the wisdom found through conversation and dialogue. Ford is right in my view to draw attention to the fact that, 'More commentary on Aquinas or Barth or other figures will not be sufficient to renew (systematic theology). We need theologies as fresh, wise and richly responsible as theirs, including analogues of their developments in conceptual architecture.'⁶⁶²

Secondly, Ford's theology offers a methodology for dialogue and conversation which suggests a new way for Christians to explore across boundaries of denominations and faiths though rooted in its own 'scripture-centred catholicity.' The strength of his theology is that it provides a dramatic-narrative reading of scripture, whose superabundance of meaning generates a meaningful resource for the receiving community to draw on in relation to their time and context in the world. In worship, the Bible aids the believing community in their

⁶⁶¹ Anselm of Canterbury, *The Major Works* ed. Brian Davies and G.R. Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 87. Anselm prays, 'I do not try, Lord, to attain your lofty heights, because my understanding is in no way equal to it. But I do desire to understand so that I may believe; but I believe so I may understand. For I believe this also, that 'unless I believe, I shall not understand' (Is.vii.9).'

⁶⁶² Ford, 'Salvation and the Nature of Theology,' 574.

unfolding understanding and interpretation of the person of Jesus Christ, as the key ‘character’ in the drama.⁶⁶³

However, concerns are raised about the location of knowledge and whether Ford’s treatment of texts is really little more than performance.⁶⁶⁴ The contention is that Ford avoids locating the centre of faith or ontology, in favour of the play of language and expression. It is not an entirely fair criticism of Ford, bearing in mind that throughout his writing, his starting point has been to regard scripture as fundamental to any discussion of wisdom as authentically Christian, and how his theology continually reminds readers of the God-centred nature of the exploration. Also, attention must be paid to pre-modern, modern and post-modern interpretations and critiques, as well as a wisdom pedagogy which allows for the ways God opens up the texts via the Holy Spirit.

Moreover, David Hart raises a related issue and sheds light on the question of performance over location in Ford. In his general critique of the Yale school, and narrative theology, Hart comments that putting ‘narrative’ or text’ at the centre point of one’s theology is an ‘anti-foundationalist shelter against critique and against ontological and epistemological questions that theology must address (in as much as it is a discourse concerning *Logos*).’⁶⁶⁵

⁶⁶³ In a rich description of a cry found within the liturgical text of the community, Ford adds, “Above all, focus is on the person of Jesus Christ as the central character in the drama. All roles are played in his presence, before his face, and Christian subjectivity consists in living with this face shining and this voice sounding in the heart. His cries are to be attended to constantly” 57. Although the language and expression is super-abundant with ideas and motifs, the question remains whether Ford’s narrative description of Jesus Christ as a ‘character’ prioritising context and biblical theory over ontological definitions – and does this drain the text of its significance outside of ‘current trends’?

⁶⁶⁴ Walter Moberly, ‘Book Review: David F. Ford, *Christian Wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love*,’ *Studies in Christian Ethics*, 22, vol.4 (2009): 5. Walter Moberly although generally supportive of Ford’s style of theologising, wonders whether those schooled in traditional methods and within “older paradigms” may be puzzled or unsure what to make of his approach.

⁶⁶⁵ David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 31.

Hart is seized on what he regards as the deficiencies he sees in theologies such as scriptural –expressivism – a singular lack of talk about being as such. If Christianity is the true story of being, then surely, argues Hart, ‘It must speak out of its story,’ not simply in a narrative form but one that tends toward a vision or wisdom that cannot be reached without language, and is as much *theoria*, as discourse. At the same time, it is able to ‘see’ where and how other narratives fail the theme of being because it has a vision, which is particular but also universal.

Certainly Ford’s theology is inclusive not just of the narrative but a plurality of genres which does not ground the discourse in a singular way of speaking about God. As Ford points out to his critics, the basic biblical reality is that God is concerned with every sphere of life and as the Bible is hospitable to multiple wisdoms as well as being critical, so, ‘To say that no tradition has a monopoly of wisdom is not to be a relativist: in theological terms it is simply to believe in the providence and generosity of God.’⁶⁶⁶

Yet the question remains. Should a discourse speak out of a particular tradition, in order to understand it and others or persuade others of its inherent beauty? From Hart’s perspective, following Balthasar, it could only be the latter. Instead, the Christianity’s story is ‘performed’ by pursuing its own dogmatics and by re-telling itself out of its own, grammar, logic and ‘inner rationality’⁶⁶⁷ as a form of rhetorical persuasion. However, as Hart appeals to pre-modern metaphysics to found his theology ‘in the infinite’ he could be accused of an epic style or possessing a particular taste which frames divine creativity.⁶⁶⁸ Indeed, Loughlin

⁶⁶⁶ David F. Ford, ‘God and Our Public Life: A Scriptural Wisdom’ in *International Journal of Public Theology* 1 (2007):63-81, (3).

⁶⁶⁷ Hart, *Beauty of the Infinite*, 30.

⁶⁶⁸ The so-called cultural - linguistic turn term coined by George Lindbeck, who argued that the contamination of experience and reason by language resulted in the loss of criteria for knowledge and truth outside language.

describes Hart's theology as simply, '...a series of songs on mythic and dogmatic themes which are so ordered and repeated as to essay an epic poem on the Christian doctrine of creation...it is the "proper diction" for telling the story of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.'⁶⁶⁹

However, Hart points towards a certain 'evangelical' emphasis in theologies such as Ford's, which although catholic and inclusive of multiple genres and topics, grounds theology primarily in scripture and scriptural reasoning. Less attention and importance is given to an older paradigm of the interplay of truth, beauty and goodness which may well lead men and women into undertaking vocations, (missions), at the margins and demand great sacrifice. This is often, as Rowland comments, '... at odds with what seems either humanly possible or wise. This however, is not obedience to an ethereal abstraction or phantasm – but a gritty listening and seeing beyond the distractions of the immediate and obvious.'⁶⁷⁰

In addition, Ford's reading and explication of texts includes some degree of selection and omission in order to unfold the drama of God's involvement and locate multiple wisdoms. What is not clear is what a bad interpretation is nor how this is worked out across religious traditions:

... it is one thing to celebrate the 'sheer abundance of meaning of scripture... and that all people interpreting all scriptures in the Spirit is a recipe for 'ramifying interpretations' and to appreciate Ford's own suggestive readings of the biblical text. But what are bad interpretations and by what criteria does one decide they are bad? ... Especially when one is working with texts like Deuteronomy which explicitly opposes the kind of friendship and hospitality that Ford advocates (Deut.23:3-6).⁶⁷¹

Hence authority returns to the text of scripture its practice/culture in the church. This is assumed by Hart in his own attempt at out-narration of other theologies and philosophies – the post-modern has 'made space' for the return of the meta-narrative - therefore could his critique of narrative theology "not conforming to the form of Christ in Scripture," arguably be a matter of taste or style over substance?

⁶⁶⁹ Gerard Loughlin, 'Rhetoric and Rhapsody – A Response to David Bentley Hart's *The Beauty of the Infinite*,' 600.

⁶⁷⁰ Tracey Rowland, 'Book Review: Ben Quash, *Theology and the Drama of History*,' *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 8, no. 3 (2006): 324.

⁶⁷¹ Moberly, 'Book Review,' 506.

It seems that in the hospitable mood of exchange and depth of friendship and conversation, there appears to be a distinct absence of polemic.⁶⁷² However, Ford is alert to this and critical of interpretations of scripture advocating slavery or sexism for example.⁶⁷³

In short, Ford offers a generous and inclusive understanding of theology as wisdom-seeking, at times disorientating in its scope. Ford's broad hermeneutical key sees theology in relation to many forces and events shaping it over time and giving weight to the context in which churches and other institutions find themselves. The ethical urgency for Ford is that key truths cry out to be related to the whole of reality and to every human being, with intensive conversation as an experience of 'deep reasoning' with no maps, super-abundant in the variety of its mediations.

⁶⁷² Ibid.

⁶⁷³ Ford, "God and Our PublicLife," 63-81, (10). Interpretation of scripture has to be wise i.e. open to correction, challenge and critique and 'seek God for God's sake.' In other words, it should shun the 'intensities' of idolatry which take people away from their core identities and build friendships with each faith community and across communities.

CHAPTER SIX

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

6:1. Summary

We can recall from the beginning that this thesis was seeking to answer the following questions:

- 1) In what way can Merton be understood as a ‘wise theologian’?
- 2) What resonances can be discerned between Merton’s thought and that of Balthasar and in relation to David Ford?
- 3) Does Merton turn to the motif of wisdom/*sophia* to ground his theology or is it part of an ongoing synthesis and intensification of different influences in his monastic life?
- 4) In what ways might Merton link with David Ford’s criteria for a polyphonic self and is Merton’s method of writing suggestive of a Christian wisdom-seeking as practised and performed in ordinary life?

After providing an outline of Merton’s biography and influences, chapter one was concerned with answering the first and third research questions. I gave a summary of what is meant in general terms by wisdom and whether Merton can be regarded as a theologian in his own right. It was suggested that Merton could be regarded as a theologian in the ancient Evagrius sense of one who unites their spiritual and theological life, rather than as a scholar of the academy.

Following that, there was an extensive discussion and evaluation of the contribution of American Merton scholar Christopher Pramuk to Merton's use of the motif *Sophia*, which he claimed could serve as a hermeneutical method for Christians to deal with the modern world. While Pramuk's study breaks new ground in terms of seeing Merton as a theologian, his method does not do sufficient justice to Merton's way of seeing, relying too heavily on lyrical performance over substance and a selective treatment of texts. I argued that the way Pramuk centres this method on one poem in the Merton corpus is selective as is his treatment of influential writers on Merton, as I tried to show in my own exposition of the poem *Hagia Sophia* and in exposition of other texts. I suggested that Pramuk has not done enough justice to Merton's understanding of wisdom as a factor in integrating his whole identity, life and practice as a monk which led to the development of an outward look. Nor has sufficient justice been done to Merton's understanding of wisdom as a critique of enlightenment thinking, alongside the Russian Orthodox writers and Catholic theologians of *Ressourcement*. This is an essential move in order to argue how Merton saw reality as a unity and wisdom as an integrator of his vision.

Excavating the latter point presented a number of complex problems. Firstly, the perspective of Pramuk goes along with the general trend of American Merton scholarship to locate Merton as a theologian in the orbit of Karl Rahner. This is because Merton is often assumed to have taken the subjective turn in his mature years as a social critic and as a supporter of Vatican II. However, the perspective I take is to situate Merton alongside Balthasar, whose project seeks to recover a unified pre-Kantian consciousness for the west.

I argued for the link between key ideas such as the concrete reality of history, the importance of participation of creatures in created freedom, the inseparability of language from the knowing subject. These ideas are embedded in Merton, the Sophiologists and

Balthasar. I pointed out reasons why Rahner did not fit with the critique of enlightenment thinking these scholars provided. Furthermore, it was necessary to explicate the link between Merton, Balthasar and the Sophiologists, as well as other Orthodox thinkers, crucially the thought of Maximus the Confessor. This source situates both Merton and Balthasar as bridges from western to eastern thought.

From this analysis, I argued that Merton emerges as a wise theologian with a unified vision of reality and who is able to seek wisdom wherever it is found, recovering and representing a way of wisdom which is pre-modern for new audiences. I concluded against Pramuk, that Merton's vocation may have involved a separate way of living but his growing realisation of interests in matters in the world develops precisely from his patristic understanding of man as a cosmic mediator or 'microcosm' – not from the subjective turn – and that his integrated life of prayer, worship and contemplation is lived in a cosmic sense – in solidarity with creation and in real attention to the discipline of personal prayer and meditation.

In chapter two, I argued that the theologian in the west who particularly resonates with Merton's way of seeing is Balthasar. This is controversial in the sense that Balthasar is regarded as a conservative thinker due to his reluctance to engage in social praxis, whereas Merton has been regarded in Merton studies and within the Catholic Church as a liberal and radical figure. I argued that both have in common their role as 'outsiders' going against the grain of the time and in pointing to a unified view of the cosmos. I argued it was necessary to explain why these labels are unhelpful because they hinder the full reception of their thought within the church.

I argued in some detail how Merton saw theology as a work in progress but within the distinctive trajectory of patristic and monastic thought. Hence theology is the realisation of God as 'pure act' such that his presence is revealed in the radiance and glory of all created things. It also involves the use of all the senses in relation to God in prayer, worship, and scripture in the formation of the person. Both men agree that enlightenment thinking is damaging to the integral view of the human person and needs to be rethought. I discuss Balthasar's aesthetics to provide theological background on this way of seeing. After noting the correspondence between them and outlining problems with Balthasar's theology, I suggested Merton is revealed as a useful corrective to Balthasar - one whose theology is contemplative and who attempts to see the whole - to push beyond particular constraints imposed by Balthasar's ecclesial framework and the analogy of proportion - to a universal perspective, in encounter with social issues like war and mass consumerism.

In the light of chapter two, chapter three provides a survey to show how Merton no longer saw any contradiction between his spiritual life and involvement in social concerns. I noted the abiding influence of Jacques Maritain on Merton's understanding of the person and artist. I suggested that Merton's contemplative understanding of wisdom is reflected in the discernment of the role of the monk in the modern world - as someone in between incarnation and eschatology. The monk lives 'in the middle' of the cosmos and cannot turn his back upon it, recreating the world anew in himself. This insight gives rise to a flowering of his engagements with social concerns outside the cloister. In this context, the motif of the 'guilty bystander' represents Merton's sense of responsibility to re-make the world through art, poetry and essays on social and literary concerns. This is the mark of a wise theologian I argued, because of his holistic integration of concerns, not only in himself as a monk and solitary but outwardly as a writer and poet.

In chapter four, Merton is brought into engagement with the radical and exploratory theology of David F. Ford. The focus of the research was to consider ways Thomas Merton's life and writing fits Ford's imaginative re-working of Christian selfhood and model of Christian identity. The theme of polyphony integrates all aspects of the healthy or flourishing human self and is worked out by Ford in relation to embodied exemplars such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer. I considered whether this integrated theme could be applied to Thomas Merton as a model of 'embodied wisdom.' I argued that the theme could exemplify the way that Merton lived and gave a number of examples where Merton's writing and concerns accord with Ford's concerns for the Christian life of ethical responsibility, the practice of worship and in enjoyment in ordinary living. In the evaluation, I argued that much of Ford's integrated notion of polyphony accords with Merton's own life of revising and interrogating his place in the monastery and the world. However, I argued that Ford's treatment of contemplation and mysticism displays a tentative touch. Yet even with this proviso, Merton is a figure from Catholic tradition that fits more readily into Ford's scheme than Teresa of Lisieux. As such Ford's model provides a new way of looking at the Cistercian monk as an embodiment of wisdom and in Evagrian terms, a theologian.

In Chapter five, I explored the hermeneutic of wisdom-seeking in Ford and argued that he attempts a form of wisdom theology which mediates between the extremes of epic and lyric narratives. Although he argues his method of doing theology complements rather than surpasses traditional theological forms, I compared Balthasar's approach to drama as a motif with Ford's, as two very different styles of theologising. I suggested that Ford's treatment of the drama motif highlighted the cautious treatment of social praxis by Balthasar but that Ford's approach could be regarded as an extended description of the Gospel. In the evaluation I looked at more arguments made by critics of Ford which suggest doing constructive

theology in a mediating framework has the danger of becoming a set of selective variations. The problem is that ever-expanding generosity and super-abundance of meaning, could lead to an absence of polemic in wisdom-seeking. However, I concluded that Ford's theology is highly creative, generative and engaged in realities in contemporary society.

6:2. Where we are now?

This thesis is submitted during the exact month and year marking one hundred years since Thomas Merton's birth.⁶⁷⁴ Therefore, it is particularly worth now taking stock of Merton and how he is continuing to make a contribution to theology.

In the research overview, I suggested that Merton is still regarded with suspicion by elements in the Catholic Church for being a syncretist and a radical liberal. This view continues to hinder his reception. My aim in the first three chapters was to show how Merton understood wisdom from an orthodox perspective, derived particularly from the Fathers of the Church, who understood theology and spirituality as a unity. Merton became a wise theologian because he sought wisdom as a formation - of the whole person in relation to God. From this perspective, Merton moves out towards the world showing that engagement with it is not a turning back on his vocation but a development of it. Such characteristics concur with Ford's generous specifications for a wise theologian and healthy Christian self. Merton's engagement with Balthasar was in part to show how someone considered a major conservative theologian, shares many distinctive features in common with the Cistercian

⁶⁷⁴ This year a major film about Merton is being released in the United States, *The Divine Comedy of Thomas Merton*, which charts his 'affair' with a student nurse. It is likely this film will contribute to the public's perception of Merton for many years to come.

monk. It seems to me that Merton is the wiser theologian in that he corrects over-caution on social theology by embodying, practising and translating ancient wisdom into a modern idiom.⁶⁷⁵ Merton shows how it is within orthodoxy to see the *catholica* beyond the temporal boundaries of the Church and to pursue wisdom, not only as part of one's own formation but for the common good.

From the pages of the thesis I suggest that Thomas Merton emerges as a creative and generative thinker and a significant Christian exemplar of lived-wisdom. From his Kentucky hermitage he seemed able to read the signs of times without having access to the kind of media others take for granted. I suggest this is because of his deep learning of the ancient sources, his cosmopolitan background, particularly his English and French education, which he took with him into the monastery and which gave him the kind of broad, outward-looking intellectual foundation needed for his writing. In my view, Merton's genius as a theologian lies first in his own formation but second in his remarkable ability to bring ancient wisdom into the modern world and present it as something new.

Further research could go in three possible directions. Firstly, further engagements on the theme of wisdom raised in the thesis could be pursued in relation to Balthasar, Thomas Merton and Eastern Orthodox theologians such as Bulgakov. In addition, Radical Orthodox scholar John Milbank's work on Sophiology⁶⁷⁶ provides a post-modern angle on the theme of sophia/wisdom. Secondly, Thomas Merton could serve as a model of the Contemplative

⁶⁷⁵ Balthasar concurs with Merton that all theology must be sourced from prayer and living spiritual life. Therefore, theology does not have to be written systematically but can be done in a variety of idioms. This suggests that Merton's writing of theology in multiple genres is nothing new e.g. Augustine's *Confessions*. (See footnote 134).

⁶⁷⁶ See Adrian Pabst and Christoph Schneider eds., *Encounter between Eastern Orthodoxy and Radical Orthodoxy: Transfiguring the World Through the Word* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009). Milbank's growing interest in Sophiology and the concept of 'metaxu' in the Godhead, is evident in his essay, 'Sophiology and Theurgy: The New Theological Horizon,' 86-93.

approach to interreligious dialogue based on themes sourced in the thesis. Thirdly, Merton could be brought into engagement once more with David Ford, specifically on themes such as interreligious dialogue or more broadly as a post-modern exemplar of Christian wisdom.

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