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# CONTEMPLATION AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION: THE EXAMPLE OF THOMAS MERTON<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

This essay examines the relationship between the Christian tradition of contemplation and social action. It takes as its paradigm the life and writings of Thomas Merton (Fr Louis), an American Cistercian monk at the Abbey of Gethsemani, Kentucky, who became one of the most widely-read and influential spiritual writers as well as Christian social commentators of the mid-twentieth century. Merton, who often wrote through an autobiographical medium, gradually moved away from an early emphasis on contemplative withdrawal to a belief that the monastic life is a form of counter-cultural solidarity with those who struggle for social transformation and justice. The essay more broadly explores the theological basis for a coherence of mysticism and action in contrast to some misinterpretations of the Christian language of interiority. It concludes with an exploration of the relationship between contemplation and politics in a number of twentieth and twenty-first century theologians, both Catholic and Protestant.

The American Cistercian monk and social activist Thomas Merton (1915-1968) has been described as one of the greatest spiritual writers of the twentieth century. He merited this description partly because, while a Roman Catholic, he embraced a generous “catholicity” beyond the boundaries of a single institution (cf. Mursell 2001:340).

## 1. MERTON AS SPIRITUAL CLASSIC

In the sense defined by the contemporary American Roman Catholic theologian David Tracy, Thomas Merton can be described as a “spiritual classic”. Classics are generally thought of in terms of a written text. So, how can Merton be a classic? For Tracy, “a classic” is not limited to documents, but is extended to include, among other things, key people who across time achieve a kind of paradigmatic status in relation to the Christian tradition (Tracy 1994:115). Thus,

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is adapted from The Shults Lectures given at St Bernard's School of Theology, Rochester, New York State, in 2004.

Thomas Merton may be thought to be as much of a “classic spiritual text” as the *Revelations* of the English mystic Julian of Norwich or the prison letters of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. “Classics”, then, have the capacity to cross the boundaries of time or place and retain, or even increase, their popularity and importance in contexts very different from their origins. They disclose something that remains compelling, continue to challenge us and bring us into transforming contact with what is enduring and vital in the Christian tradition.

Why do I consider Merton to be a twentieth century classic? I fully admit that the points that I wish to focus on are only part of the story. For me, as for the great monastic scholar Dom Jean Leclercq (1973:12), Merton’s importance and continued popularity is especially linked to the fact that he symbolised *and* addressed a time of critical transition in the West — religious, cultural and political — that began with the Second World War. In Merton, several worlds meet: a Western Church in process of renewal (reaching a particular peak in the Second Vatican Council), the rediscovery by the West of Eastern Christianity, the discovery by Christianity of other world religions, particularly Buddhism, and the impact of a range of political and social movements of change and critique.

Thomas Merton is, in so many ways, typical of the late twentieth century spiritual pilgrim. In particular, he stands for a movement outwards: from a spirituality of excessive interiority — narrowly church-focused and world-rejecting — to one that embraces the external world of daily life and engages with “otherness” in all its forms. There is a thus clear development from the traditional pre-Vatican II spirituality of withdrawal in *The seven storey mountain* (1948) to the sympathetic and committed observations on the public world in *Conjectures of a guilty bystander* (1966).

## 2. MERTON’S SPIRITUALITY OF “THE SELF”

To a greater or lesser extent (explicit in *The seven storey mountain*, *The sign of Jonas* and in Merton’s diaries, and implicit in many other works), autobiography was Thomas Merton’s chosen medium for writing — even when the focus was not really himself but monasticism or contemplation or a spirituality of social engagement. This means that the reader of Merton is always a companion on his inner or outer life journey. Lawrence Cunningham (1999: Chapter 7 *passim*) suggests that Merton’s personal narrative style was an anti-rationalist (one might almost say post-modern) strategy. That is, Merton was concerned to point out, through the use of narrative, that the post-Enlightenment, Cartesian, rationalist construction of the autonomous human ego was fatally flawed. In contrast, Merton outlined the quest for a more authentic, healthy sense of the self. For this, the “fluidity” of personal narrative was an effective medium.

Whatever the validity or otherwise of this judgment, it is evident that it was Merton's preoccupation with the self that was in many respects his greatest attraction to the late twentieth century reader. He epitomised his contemporary Western world, preoccupied with a process of becoming, namely: becoming our true selves. One of Merton's most striking counter-intuitive moves was to suggest, by his choice of a monastic lifestyle as much as by his writings, that people needed to step aside from the pressures and expectations of others, of society and of surrounding culture, in order to seek the mysterious depths of the heart within. Having said this, I believe that it is important to be cautious here. The self is not a prepackaged, predetermined "given" that merely has to be uncovered or discovered ready-made. Even if we believe, as the early monastics did, that human identity is the one given by God, not by social convention or through self-creation, there is also a sense in which that God-given self is always in process of becoming. It is, if you like, a self shaped from the very start by people's outward relationships. God-given identity is not incarnated directly in some kind of self-contained private interiority, but rather comes to be within the complexity of human relationships, both interpersonal and social.

If we continue to follow the thoughts of Lawrence Cunningham, Merton can be seen as opposed to a false, empirical, solipsistic self which is the centre of its own world. Like the Cartesian ego, such a self always fears uncertainty and the abyss. On the other hand, Thomas Merton positively sought another kind of self — the interior, hidden, real self — a self which is at the same time capable of true dialogue and genuine encounter, because it is not preoccupied with survival or self-importance.

### 3. THE SELF IN COMMUNION

Thomas Merton's quest for "the self" involved a growing conviction in the face of a prevailing individualistic culture that people only truly exist *in communion*, in solidarity with others. One might say, too, that this self is also a *vulnerable* self, no longer protected behind walls of separation and spiritual superiority. When Merton published *The seven storey mountain* in 1948, his presuppositions were set out as dichotomies or polar opposites, especially inside versus outside, monastery versus world. Although Merton acknowledged that humans are created in the image of God, he believed that he (and implicitly, everyone) was a prisoner of sinfulness, self-centredness and violence. At the opposite pole was "interiority", the mystical-contemplative life. This is what drew him to the monastic Order of the Cistercians. For Merton, the monastery was an "enclosed freedom" where people are able to learn how to be happy away from the flux and unreliability of the everyday world.

By the time of *Life and holiness* (1964), Merton was writing in very different language (Merton 1964:9-10):

The spiritual life is not a life of quiet withdrawal, a hothouse growth of artificial ascetic practices beyond the reach of people living ordinary lives. It is in the ordinary duties and labours of life that the Christian can and should develop his spiritual union with God ... Christian holiness in our age means more than ever the awareness of our common responsibility to cooperate with the mysterious designs of God for the human race.

When Merton wrote *Conjectures of a guilty bystander* in 1966, he described a kind of second conversion experience during an earlier trip to Louisville (as he so precisely places it: “at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the centre of the shopping district”). He was overwhelmed by a realisation of his unity with and love for all the people on the sidewalks. This led him to a quite different, more vulnerable, sense of relationship to “the world” (Merton 1966:140-41):

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.

Obviously, being counter-cultural could no longer stand for the simple polarisations of his original decision to enter the Abbey of Gethsemani and to embrace Cistercian monastic life. Merton gradually came to understand that the monk was not a person who withdrew from “the world”, but was someone whose contemplative solitude was to be understood as a radically “other” way of being *in* the world with a responsibility in and for that world.

#### 4. CONTEMPLATION AND ACTION

This brings me naturally to the theme of connections between contemplation and social transformation. According to the Merton scholar William Shannon (1993), the conflict between contemplation and action is merely “supposed” and is thus a pseudo-problem. The difficulty is that the contrast between the two has a long pedigree and has frequently been incarnated in certain versions of Christian spiritual writing. For David Tracy, Thomas Merton is one of the key figures who marks the transition within the Roman Catholic spiritual tradition towards what he calls “a new paradigm for Catholic spirituality: a mystico-prophetic model” (Tracy 1989:164). A major part of the (pseudo-) problem has been a historical tendency to adopt an unbalanced rhetoric of interiority and to misunderstand what is implied by the “journey inwards”.

How we approach a relationship between the Christian life and social engagement obviously depends on particular theological evaluations of the outer, social, “public” world. Unfortunately, Western culture remains deeply polarised.

The private sphere (inwardness, family and close friends, an idealisation of home and domesticity) tends to be privileged as the backstage where the individual is truly him/herself, relaxing unobserved before putting on various *personae*, which the “self” needs to play out different roles on the stage of social life (on public and private spheres, cf. Casanova 1994:42). However, living in public is not really a matter of a *role* that it is possible to shed. If there were a pre-existent self prior to all roles, then social life would be detached from identity. However, the Christian theological tradition, along with psychology and the social sciences, underline the fact that there is no *absolutely* private self. Human existence, and Christian discipleship, inherently embodies a social task. “The social realm” is better thought of as a dimension of identity, an aspect of who a person is, rather than something people enter or choose to ignore.

Although it is not possible to develop the point here, it is important to note the intimate link between Christian discipleship, including the association between social life and human identity, and a Trinitarian theology of God. The core of the Christian life is to be united with God in Jesus Christ through a Spirit-led communion with one another. God’s own relational nature is fundamental to this life. God *is* “persons-in-communion”, a mutuality of self-giving love. Communion underpins existence. Nothing is without communion, including human life.<sup>2</sup> The mission of God, *missio Dei*, is the divine activity of self-disclosure in creation, salvation history and Incarnation, drawing all things into the limitless embrace of God’s unifying love. The life of discipleship is to participate ever more deeply in this *missio Dei* through a faithful following of the way of Jesus, the bearer and expression of God’s mission.

## 5. THE QUESTION OF INTERIORITY

Now I wish to outline very briefly another theological theme that affects the approach to a relationship between Christian life and social engagement. This is the vexed question of interiority. As far back as the 1930s, the idiosyncratic book on prayer by Friedrich Heiler ([1932]/1997) distinguished sharply between mystical-interior forms of Christian religion (which he disliked) and active-prophetic forms (which he approved of). According to Heiler, the mystical-interior forms arose from a denial of the impulse of life, whereas the active-prophetic manifested the energetic will to live. More recently, in an overly polarised discussion in *The Journal of Religion*, the American Anglican theologian Owen Thomas (2000:41-60) argued that Christian spirituality has been marred by an emphasis on privatised interiority, and ought to be radically reformulated in terms of outer life.

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2 Cf., e.g., the work of the Orthodox theologian John Zizioulas (1985) and a more detailed discussion of the relationship between God-as-Trinity and human identity in Sheldrake (1998: especially 75-83).

There has been a tendency to blame St Augustine for initiating the prioritising of interiority. For example, in one of his studies of the nature of human cities, sociologist Richard Sennett blames Christian theology for the fact that a deep division between interiority and exteriority pollutes Western culture: “It is a divide between subjective experience and worldly experience, self and city” (Sennett 1993:xii). St Augustine’s *City of God* is, for Sennett (1993:6-10), the classic expression of the triumph of an inner spiritual world over a human, outer, one. St Augustine’s legacy, Sennett claims, drove Christian culture to view social, public life with suspicion. Sennett further suggests that modern urbanism is infected with this legacy that sees the public world as a sterile wilderness.

Yet for St Augustine and other classic spiritual teachers, the concept of interiority did not imply the same thing as it does in the modern era. In his contribution to *A history of private life*, religious historian Peter Brown (1996: Chapter 2 *passim*) reminds us that the earliest approaches to the Christian life inherited from late classical Judaism an intense sense of a vital solidarity between the individual and the community. Individual human existence was intrinsically related to the common good. The perceived danger was that people would retreat into privacy rather than give themselves wholeheartedly to the task of serving their neighbour. Hence, Jewish writers turned their attention to the thoughts of the heart — the supposed core of motivation and intention. It was important to emphasise that human destiny was a state of solidarity with others, expressed in the image of the undivided heart.

Following this tradition, St Augustine among others adopted the symbol of the heart as a way of expressing the self. In Book 10, Chapter 3, Section 4 of his *Confessions*, Augustine refers to “my heart, where I am whatever it is that I am”. The heart suggests that the Christian journey takes us towards the interior self, the true self, where God dwells. This journey is away from what St. Paul refers to as the outer person: “Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day” (2 Cor. 4:16). Here, the notion of “outer” refers to the human temptation to live on the surface, mistaking what is transitory for what is fundamental.

To put things another way, for St Augustine the outer world is not the problem. The problem is when people live exteriorly — that is, out of their skins. The language of the heart is not evidence of a privatised spirituality. What is interior to a person is, for St Augustine, where a person is also united with the whole human family. St Augustine’s notion of the “image of God” imprinted on the heart must be read alongside his doctrine of creation. In St Augustine’s *Commentary on Genesis*, Adam’s sin was to please himself and to live for himself (*secundum se vivere, sibi placere*). In other words, sin is a withdrawal into privacy, which is quite different from what is implied by Augustine’s notion of interiority. Self-seeking pride is the archetypal sin (*De Gen ad litt* XI.15.19-20). The original Garden of Eden, the monastic life, the ideal City of God are all

based on “the love that promotes the common good for the sake of the heavenly society” (*De Gen ad litt* XI.15.20). In fact, the most insidious sin was privacy or self-enclosure. The private is seen as the opposite of common or public. For St Augustine, the Heavenly City was the community in which there would be the fullness of sharing (see Markus 1998:78).

The dangerous *rhetoric* of interiority, creating a dichotomy between inner contemplation and outer life, affected approaches to spirituality most acutely over the last two hundred years or so. This resulted from the influence of aspects of Enlightenment thinking (the priority of Descartes’ autonomous thinking self, *Cogito ergo sum*) and the impact of late nineteenth-century psychology (for example *Varieties of religious experience* by William James). These in combination lead to a fascination with personal subjective “religious experience”. Merton (1976:65) eloquently expressed the state of this post-Enlightenment isolated ego:

For us, our “self” tends to be “realized” in a much more shadowy, abstract mental world [than “archaic” people’s sense of identity], or indeed in a very abstract and spiritualised world of “soul”. We are disembodied minds seeking to bridge the gap between mind and body and return to ourselves through the mediation of things, commodities, products and implements.

If we survey the Western spiritual tradition as a whole, the concept of “interiority” does not necessarily imply something inherently private, individualistic and detached. Indeed, the heart of Christian spirituality may be expressed in terms of a tension between “interiority” and “exteriority” — between the mystical-contemplative and transformative practice (the prophetic).<sup>3</sup> It was a desire to reinstate this dialectic that so strongly influenced the later Merton.

## 6. MERTON AND MONASTIC MARGINALITY

Merton’s later approach to the marginality of monasticism was as a vulnerable act of solidarity with other marginal people. The contemplative monk was a kind of social and political critic. The later writings of Merton, while offering no clearly worked-out agenda for renewal, highlight a number of questions that can be asked about the future of monasticism. Merton asks whether, in the face of the possibility of simply absorbing or reflecting the prevailing cultural values, monasticism will be able to maintain a spirit of resistance, to be creatively subversive, reflecting the disruptive presence of God in history. Will monasticism refuse to be bound by current convention and retain its prophetic freedom? Will monasticism be capable of standing for human solidarity against the privatisation of life and the individualisation of spirituality? Will monasticism be

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3 On the dialectic of interiority and exteriority in Christian spirituality, see Sheldrake (2003:19-37).

able to reinterpret its long tradition of “spiritual warfare” in terms of a struggle against the powers of darkness in the world? Finally, and vitally, will monasticism retain its visionary quality where the monk has a discerning, perceptive role? From “having a vision” the monk is called to learn how to discern; in other words: to “see truly”, and by this to become an agent for the unmasking of illusion.

In one sense, such a view of the monk is deeply traditional. An important aspect of early Christian monasticism was a desire to be freed from an identity provided by normal socio-economic ties. From its very beginnings, monastic disengagement was a social and political statement as well as a theological one (Brown 1994: Chapter 4 *passim*). The lives of St Anthony of Egypt and St Simeon Stylites, representative figures respectively of Egyptian and Syrian-Palestinian asceticism, remind us that the holy men and women of the early Christian centuries did not leave social or public roles behind entirely. Especially in Syria, ascetics continued to live close to human habitation and remained visible challenges to surrounding people. Their often wildly eccentric lifestyles (for example, Simeon Stylites and others living on pillars) seemed deliberately to challenge convention (Brown 1989:110-114). In general, by standing both socially and geographically on the margins, the early ascetics were frequently accepted as spiritual guides and even at times took on the roles of local leadership or of social arbitrator (Brown 1989:103-52). In a sense, Thomas Merton appears to be offering a reinterpretation of this ancient role.

The contemplative, therefore, has a strange and paradoxical power to confront a world infected by false consciousness. For Merton, the unmasking of illusion came to be the special mark of the contemplative monk and those who, more broadly, followed the contemplative way. Through solitude and inner struggle, the monk listens more deeply to the hidden voices of the world (Merton 1973:25). Merton was particularly struck by the meditations of Fr Alfred Delp, the German Jesuit who was tortured and imprisoned by the Nazis. His comments on Delp show how Merton shared Delp’s sense that solitude, silence and contemplation were the contexts where the great issues facing humankind are to be worked through. Authentic contemplation confronts people with reality, and Merton was clear that this bore no relation to the narcissism of a bogus interiority which evades conflict and struggle.<sup>4</sup>

The monastic way of speaking that arises from this contemplative listening bears a close resemblance to the sentiments expressed in the later writings of Merton’s younger contemporary, the French cultural theorist and maverick Jesuit priest Michel de Certeau. In his essay “The weakness of believing” (*La faiblesse de croire*), de Certeau suggests that in a world where the church no

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4 Cf. Merton’s commentary on Delp in *Faith and violence* (1968:52). On bogus interiority, cf. *Contemplative prayer* (1973:135).



longer dominates Western culture and where “strong” dogmatic statements are no longer heeded by wider society, the Christian is left to bear witness by faithfully following the way of Jesus as a prophetic “presence-in-the-world”. Yet this “weakness” has a paradoxical power. The Christian (and, one might say, the monk) journeys with no security apart from the story of Christ, which is enacted, rather than dogmatically stated. Yet, this story in its “performance” is profoundly disruptive (De Certeau 2000:214-43).

Finally, Thomas Merton perhaps most clearly and succinctly expresses the intimate and necessary connection between contemplation and social engagement in his introduction to the Latin American edition of his writings (prematurely entitled “complete works”, *Obras Completas*) as early as 1958. Just three quotations will suffice.

Contemplation cannot construct a new world by itself.....

*But*

Without contemplation we cannot understand the significance of the world in which we must act....

*And finally*

Without contemplation, without the intimate silent, secret pursuit of truth through love, our action loses itself in the world and becomes dangerous ....

## 7. MYSTICISM AND THE OUTER LIFE

Although Merton’s ways of expressing a reconnection of the contemplative-monastic way with social transformation are uniquely his, yet he is far from isolated in the long tradition of Western mysticism. Contemplative mysticism has often been interpreted as the most radically interior form of Christian spirituality, yet the classic contemplative-mystical texts, properly understood, do not support this viewpoint. Evelyn Underhill suggested in *Mysticism* ([1911]/1993:172-174) that one defining characteristic of Christian mysticism is that union with God impels a person towards an active, outward, rather than purely passive, inward life. The most substantial representatives of Western mysticism were opposed to merely private experience. Underhill cites, among others, the great twelfth-century Cistercian monk Bernard of Clairvaux. However, Underhill’s favourite, the fourteenth-century Flemish writer John Ruusbroec, conceived the contemplative life as the life common to all. This common life joined created beings to each other in mutual service and harmonised the initially distinct moments of action and contemplation. Thus the spiritually elevated person is also the common person (Ruusbroec 1985:84):

A person who has been sent down by God from these heights is full of truth and rich in all the virtues ... He will therefore always flow forth to all who need him, for the living spring of the Holy Spirit is so rich that it

can never be drained dry ... He therefore leads a common life, for he is equally ready for contemplation or for action and is perfect in both.

Ruusbroec was quite clear that people who practised the attainment of peaceful inwardness as the goal of prayer yet disregarded charity or ethics were guilty of spiritual wickedness (Ruusbroec 1985:136-143). This chimes with Thomas Merton's sentiments, for example in his *Conjectures of a guilty bystander*, which so powerfully affirmed that solitude and solidarity are deeply interconnected. In the language of John Ruusbroec (incidentally, a monastic founder as well as mystical theologian), a monastery is not an escape from the "common life" but a way of sharing in the "life common to all".

## 8. CONTEMPLATION AND POLITICS IN RECENT THEOLOGY

Other Roman Catholic thinkers after Merton would take the link between the contemplative-mystical life and social transformation a great deal further. For example, a number of recent theological writers suggest that the mystical-contemplative way is closely related to the public world or to politics. The Spanish theologian Gaspar Martinez has recently suggested that what he calls "worldly theologies", those modern Roman Catholic theologies engaged with the public dimensions of life, are simultaneously the ones that focus most sharply on the mystery of God, with a greater rather than a lesser emphasis on spirituality and mysticism. He notes in particular the German Johannes Metz, the Peruvian Gustavo Gutierrez and the American David Tracy — significantly, all of them inspired in different ways by the German theologian Karl Rahner (Martinez 2001). Both the late Michel de Certeau and David Tracy write that mystics, like the mad, represent a kind of otherness on the social and religious margins. This otherness (or marginality in Merton's terms) has the capacity to challenge traditional centres of power and privilege. In this sense, mystics are socially, theologically and politically subversive (De Certeau 1992; Tracy 1994:3-6).

Because the so-called political and liberation theologies are overtly concerned with social engagement — indeed, with the prophetic role of Christianity in relation to social *transformation* — it is particularly instructive to see the degree to which the connections between prayer and social action are integral to such theologies. The Chilean theologian Segundo Galilea has written more than anyone else concerning the mystical or contemplative dimensions of political and social responses to injustice. Galilea suggests that there ought to be a movement away from the notion that an effective response to social injustice is purely ethical or structural (this, he suggests, may become merely a new form of oppression) towards a truly spiritual experience of discovering the compassion of God incarnate in the poor. Humans are not able to find true

compassion or solidarity, or to create structures of deep transformation, without entering contemplatively into Jesus' own compassion. Only contemplative-mystical practice, allied to social action, is capable of bringing about the change of heart necessary for social transformation and a lasting solidarity between people – particularly a solidarity capable of embracing the oppressor as well as the oppressed. Thus, according to Galilea, social engagement must be accompanied by a process of interior transformation and liberation from self-seeking. This is the heart of what he terms “integral liberation” (Galilea 1985: 186-194). Galilea's position reminds us that if we are to reflect on how social-public life informs and forms our spiritualities and prayer, we should cultivate a *critical* attentiveness to social and political realities, rather than risk an uncritical absorption of spirituality into social forms.

Galilea calls for a reformulation of the understanding of both contemplation and the mystical. At the heart of the Christian tradition, he suggests, there has always been the notion of contemplation as a supreme act of self-forgetfulness, rather than a preoccupation with personal interiority. In the teachings of the great mystics, contemplation has always been related to the classic Christian themes of the cross and death (Galilea 1985:535-536):

This implies the crucifixion of egoism and the purification of the self as a condition of contemplation. This crucifixion of egoism in forgetfulness of self in the dialectic prayer-commitment will be brought to fulfilment both in the mystical dimension of communication with Jesus in the luminous night of faith, and also in the sacrifice which is assumed by commitment to the liberation of others. The “death” of mysticism and the “death” of the militant are the two dimensions of the call to accept the cross, as the condition of being a disciple .... The desert as a political experience liberates [the Christian] from egoism and from the “system”, and is a source of freedom and of an ability to liberate.

The Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff has sharply criticised the traditional spiritual and monastic formula of *ora et labora* (prayer and work) on the grounds that it espouses a kind of parallelism. At best the *et* (and) has stood for an alternation of the activities of interior prayer and of external engagement. Classically, contemplation was thought to be the source of all value. Social engagement was not a direct mediation of God but was only of value to the extent that it was supported by contemplation and thus “redeemed” from its essentially secular, profane associations (Boff 1980-81:371). Boff notes that in some contemporary Christian approaches to engagement, where social and political theory dominate, a similar parallelism exists but is reversed. Thus, social engagement predominates over contemplation so that contemplation is instrumentalised as another, subsidiary, form of social practice. Boff argues for an equal, dialectical relationship by “treating them [contemplation and social engagement] as two spaces that are open to one another and imply each other” (Boff 1980-81:373).

This dialectic produces a unity in what Boff calls the “mysticism-politics relationship”. Boff coins a new phrase to describe being contemplative while engaged fully in the public spaces of political transformation: *contemplativus in liberatione*. This unity of prayer-liberation is based on a living faith that “defines the ‘from where’ and the ‘towards where’ of our existence, which is God and his design of love, that is communicated through, and materialised, in all things” (Boff 1980-81:372). Thus neither the contemplative nor the mystical is

carried out only in the sacred space of prayer, nor in the sacred precinct of the church; purified, sustained and nurtured by living faith, it also finds its place in political and social practice (Boff 1980-81:374).

The Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez’s book, *On Job: God-talk and the suffering of the innocent*, has been described as a breakthrough in his theology (Martinez 201:148; cf. also Gutiérrez 1998). Gutiérrez’s interpretation of the book of Job underlines clearly that prayer and contemplation are paramount in his approach to theology, and to the connections between theology and social engagement. In Gutiérrez’s interpretation of Job, the difference between Job and his friends is that the latter base their reflections on abstract principles rather than on an encounter with the limitless love and compassion of God. In contrast, Job seeks his “answer” face to face with God — in fact one might say “head to head”! This moves Job beyond purely social or ethical reasoning to spiritual reasoning — a realisation that God acts out of gratuitous love. Such an insight can only come from a kind of *confrontation* with God. This reminds us of the German theologian Johannes Metz’s point that prayer is a special kind of limitless language that takes people beyond the reasonable. “In this sense, everything can be said to God in prayer, from rage, frustration and accusation, to downright denial of God’s existence” (cited in Martinez 2001:87). Contemplation and confrontation are closely linked. One thinks of the intense and startling power of the imprecatory psalms. Job does not receive an answer to his precise questions addressed to God, but what he does receive is much deeper than what he sought. Contemplation widens perspectives. Silence, prayer and listening to what God has to say, are central to Gutiérrez’s approach to social engagement. But contemplation does more. In Gutiérrez’s commentary, Job’s encounter with God enables him to abandon himself into God’s unfathomable love, beyond an abstract notion of ethics or justice. This abandonment is not the same as *fatalistic acceptance*. It is an abandonment that results from a deeper realisation of truth. In the terms of social engagement, to speak of abandonment into God’s unfathomable love *beyond* justice does not imply a suspension or rejection of the ethical. Rather it situates the ethical within the broader and deeper scope of God’s gratuitous love. “Prayer and contemplation are not separate moments from practice, but an inner element of that practice” (Martinez 2001:148). Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury and one of the most original English-speaking

theologians of present times, makes a related point in his essay “Sacraments of the new society”, where he argues that the solidarity in God expressed by, and facilitated by the sacramental order (especially Baptism and Eucharist) outpaces the concepts associated with human rights in that “we are caught up in solidarities we have not chosen”. In a sacramental perspective, “we confront something we cannot plead with”. So, “fundamental equality is established by the indiscriminate regard of God” (Williams 2001:213).

## 9. CONCLUSION: TRANSFORMATION AND INTEGRITY

If I were to draw a single overall conclusion about the relationship of contemplation and social engagement from what has been discussed in this essay, it would be on *purification* or the *transformation of practice*. Two contemporary theologians, influenced to some degree by Thomas Merton, Dorothee Sölle and Rowan Williams, bring together contemplation, social transformation and theological method. Sölle, the German Protestant theologian and political activist deeply inspired by the mystical tradition, in her essay “To be amazed, to let go, to resist: Outline for a mystical journey today”, asserts that resistance and the process of changing the world *must* have mystical roots (Sölle 2001a:45-51). For Sölle there are three dimensions or levels to what might be called “mystical consciousness”. She speaks first of “amazement”, which is not only wonder or praise of God, but something that “tears the veil of triviality” because it is to be touched by the spirit of life. “Without reinspiration, nothing new begins”. At this first level, “we do not embark upon the path of our journey [the spiritual journey] as seekers, but as people who have been found; we are preceded always by the goodness we have experienced” (Sölle 2001a:46). Then, on the second level, there is leaving oneself, letting go or as she puts it, “missing God” — a purification born of realising “how distant we are from a true life in God” (Sölle 2001a:47). This is a process of “dis-education” [her term], freedom from “the addictive and compulsive mechanisms of consuming” — I have/I choose, therefore I am! In another book *The silent cry: Mysticism and resistance*, Sölle specifically refers to Thomas Merton in terms of the importance of an unattached ego to the validity of Christian action. This is the contemplative-mystical foundation of the freedom from constraint that enables us to be open to the divine power that can work through us without our knowing it (Sölle 2001b:232). Finally, the third level is “a living in God” — a *via unitiva* (Sölle 2001b:48). This level involves healing — a healing which is also the birth of true resistance. For people become capable of healing others only insofar as they are also healed.

Finally, the Anglican theologian Rowan Williams has written powerfully and sympathetically about both contemplative-mysticism and about monasticism. In a brief but pregnant essay on “Theological integrity”, he speaks about the

power of contemplation — admittedly in the context of theological speech. What he has to say sums up something critical about Christian praxis or the processes of social engagement; it is “integrity”. For Williams, contemplation is about honesty and integrity in what we say *about* God and what we seek to do *in the name of God*. If our engagement with the social world involves speech — speaking out — our words must have integrity (Williams 2001:5):

Having integrity then, is being able to speak in a way which allows of answers. Honest discourse permits response and continuation; it invites collaboration by showing that it does not claim to be, in and of itself, final.

This notion is a difficult lesson for people who, in speaking the language of religion, make claims about the right way to lead a human life. However, the point is that religious speech in the public arena does not just expound some political or social theory. It speaks ultimately of what God seeks, desires and *wills*. Thus, such religious speaking must be rooted as much in encounters with God, praise of God, as in analysis.

Rowan Williams suggests that this kind of speech involves “dispossession”

... of the human mind conceived as central to the order of the world, and a dispossession of the entire identity that exists prior to the paschal drama, the identity that has not seen and named its self-deception and self-destructiveness (Williams 2001:10-11).

At the heart of this necessary dispossession is contemplation — a waiting on God, an *apophysis* as the process of giving place to the prior actualities of God. “The fruition of the process [of contemplation] is the discovery that one’s selfhood and value simply lie in the abiding faithful presence of God, not in any moral or conceptual performance” (Williams 2001:11). Contemplative union is a state in which “the self acts out of an habitual diffused awareness that its centre is God”. In addition:

To act from its centre is to give God freedom in the world, to do the works of God. The self, we could say, has attained integrity: the inner and outer are no longer in tension; I act what I am, a creature called to freedom, and leave behind those attempts at self-creation which in fact destroy my freedom. As Teresa [of Avila] puts it, Martha and Mary unite: truthful, active and constructive love issues from and leads into patience and silence, or, better, is constantly *contemporary* with patience and silence (Williams 2001:12).

These sentiments of Williams resonate well with Merton, for whom Williams has great admiration. For Merton, the monastic contemplative has a prophetic duty to “speak out” to the world. However, the key to such prophetic speaking out is the purification wrought by an attitude of silence. The monastic way teaches the importance of solitude as a prelude to engagement and of silence as the preparation for meaningful, effective speech.

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