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## Prometheus and Promethean Theology in the Thought of Thomas Merton

Patrick Cousins  
*Syracuse University*

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## Abstract

The Trappist monk Thomas Merton is best remembered for his spiritual autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain* and many other books on prayer and contemplation. His later writings, however, reveal a deep concern about the relationship between God and human freedom. Merton was particularly worried that obedience to God, traditionally understood as a central virtue, not constitute a form of authoritarianism that stripped humanity of the capacity for authenticity. Hence, he used the figure of Prometheus, long a symbol of rebellion against God, to challenge authoritarian theism and iconoclastic anti-theistic humanism. In the process, he deconstructed his own God-image away from a heteronomous authority towards something akin to the non-sovereign and “weak” theology of the contemporary religious turn in Continental philosophy.

PROMETHEUS AND PROMETHEAN THEOLOGY IN THE THOUGHT OF  
THOMAS MERTON

Patrick Cousins

Thesis Submitted in  
Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts  
in Religion  
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## Acknowledgements

This thesis, however inadequate, is the culmination of fifteen years of interest in the life and thought of Thomas Merton. Dr. John Clark first introduced me to Merton through “Rain and the Rhinoceros”, and all these years later it remains the piece of Merton’s work that delights and challenges me the most. Dr. Larry Cunningham took my fascination with Merton and grounded it in Merton’s vast knowledge of the literary, philosophical, and theological currents of his day. The students in several courses I have taught over the years have forced me to think more clearly about the discrepancies in Merton’s thought, as well as in my thoughts about him.

Despite being a close reader of Merton’s immense corpus for so many years, I was on several occasions a hair’s breadth away from never completing this project. It would absolutely never have happened without the endless patience of Dr. Marcia Robinson, to whom I am more grateful than I can adequately express. Dr. Jack Caputo and Dr. Ed Mooney allowed a space in their classrooms and their offices for a kind of theological conversation to emerge that was both informative and formative. Dr. Vincent Lloyd and Dr. Susan Edmunds graciously agreed to serve on my committee. My long-suffering wife Cristina has known when to ask about the writing process and when to leave well enough alone, and in both ways she has been an invaluable support.

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## Introduction

The Trappist monk Thomas Merton (1915-1968) was one of the most popular Catholic writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His *Seven Storey Mountain* touched a chord in readers able to identify with his restlessness, his doubt, and his longing for authenticity in a troubled world, even at war. At the heart of Merton's mature writings, however, was not the original *contemptus mundi* that characterized his early conversion to Catholicism, the culmination of his bestseller. Rather, it was a sustained pursuit of authenticity, driven by a more expansive view that included a critique of the Catholic Church. Merton's recognition of the potential in other religious traditions and the insights in the various dimensions of human culture allowed him to bring a broader perspective to bear on the conflict between orthodox Christian theism and anti-theist humanism. On his view, truth was not to be found in either a divine power that stripped human beings of their integrity as free beings, or in a humanity that co-opted the powers of God, but rather in a "holy rebellion" that exposed and overturned the desire for domination in both positions. Merton pursued this "holy rebellion" by focusing on the way in which Christian theists and their anti-theist opponents respectively represented Hesiod's and Aeschylus' interpretations of the mythic figure of Prometheus. By setting out these opposing positions on God as different responses to the Prometheus myth, Merton championed a rejection of classical theism, an "a-theism" that might today be called a "weak" or "radical theology."

It is widely accepted in Merton scholarship that the center of Merton's theological "system," *sil y en a*, is his theological anthropology, in particular as articulated in the language of the "true self" and the "false self." Those concepts have been explored in too many books and articles to count, but the two that most clearly articulate them are James Finley's

classic *Merton's Palace of Nowhere* and Anne Carr's *A Search for Wisdom and Spirit*.<sup>1</sup>

Explorations of Merton's emphasis on kenosis as the centerpiece of the character of God, and more particularly in his Christology, are also not new. George Kilcourse's *Ace of Freedoms* uses the title image from Merton's late book of poetry *Cables to the Ace* to represent the kenotic Christ: like the ace in a deck of cards, which can play as the highest or the lowest card in a suit, Kilcourse sees Merton's Christ defined by kenosis, "going high" (being exalted as Christ) because he "goes low" (refusing the ego-gratifications of the false self). Chris Pramuk's brilliant book *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton* meditatively explores Merton's relationship with the sophiological tradition in Russian Orthodoxy, among other literary and theological influences, to trace the underlying metaphors that guided Merton's Christology.<sup>2</sup>

Less has been written about Merton's concept of God, perhaps because more or less orthodox Christian writers might reasonably presume that someone who had spent decades as a Catholic monk might accept the standard Christian God-image without too much compromise. I suspect that it is also more acceptable for most theological audiences to tinker with conceptions of the human person than with conceptions of God. Despite Merton's significant writings on the "death of God" theology of the 1960s, there is little in the Merton scholarship that suggests that he had much theological kinship with them beyond a rather pedestrian liberal critique of tendencies to self-importance in institutional Christianity. Numerous commentators in the secondary literature on Merton have noted his lengthy correspondence with the Protestant theologian Paul Tillich, but few have explored Tillich's influence on Merton's existential

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<sup>1</sup> See James Finley, *Merton's Palace of Nowhere: A Search for God Through Awareness of the True Self*. Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1978 and Anne Carr, *A Search for Wisdom and Spirit: Thomas Merton's Theology of the Self*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988.

<sup>2</sup> See George Kilcourse, *Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton's Christ*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1993 and Chris Pramuk, *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009.



instincts or the potential kinship of Tillich's radical theology to Merton's sapiential/sophianic view of God as a weak force in the world. Frederick Parrella highlights the importance for Merton of the confrontation with the abyss as well as his nascent use of Tillich in exploring Zen through his encounters with D.T. Suzuki.<sup>3</sup>

The few commentators that hint that Merton might have been moving away from his Christian commitments generally argue that he was on the verge of becoming a Buddhist,<sup>4</sup> but the discussion of Merton as a postmodern figure, and more specifically as one making a move toward a kind of radical theology, remains a contentious and underexplored area of Merton studies. In his exploration of Merton's development into a "radical humanist,"<sup>5</sup> David Cooper explores Merton's sympathy towards the death of God theologians but argues that Merton maintained a respectful distance from their conclusions. Robert Inchausti has said more about Merton's connection to postmodernity than most Merton scholars; in *Thomas Merton's American Prophecy*, he argues forcefully against what he sees as a mistaken temptation "to draw analogies between Merton's call for a postontological monasticism and the radical critique of classical metaphysics offered by postmodern and poststructuralist theorists" (Inchausti, *American Prophecy* 131). I hope in this paper to explore what seems to me an underappreciated thread of Merton's thought, not merely away from God as a (heteronomous) being to God as "ground of being," which still inserts God at the base of the metaphysical system, but as the ground of the *person*, the deepest reality of the self in confrontation with the abyss of meaninglessness and

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<sup>3</sup> See Frederick Parrella, *Paul Tillich's Theological Legacy: Spirit and Community*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1995.

<sup>4</sup> Merton's college friend Ed Rice pushes most strongly that Merton may well have been on his way out of the monastery and into Buddhism in his now classic biography *The Man in the Sycamore Tree: The Good Times and Hard Life of Thomas Merton*. Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1972.

<sup>5</sup> See David Cooper, *Thomas Merton's Art of Denial: The Evolution of a Radical Humanist*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989.

despair. At a social level, Merton's God shifts from the guarantor of moral absolutes to the lonely voice of dissent from the herd, the one who, though present in all people, is hidden like a "shy wild deer" beneath the falsities of the mass mind, the herd mentality that comes from the need for ratification of the exterior self.

## Chapter 1: Thomas Merton and Prometheus: The Problem of God in Postmodernity

While numerous ancient sources mention the Prometheus myth, Merton focused on two, contrasting their portrayals of Prometheus and Zeus: Hesiod's version from his *Theogony* and his *Works and Days*, and Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, the first (and only remaining extant) story in what was originally a trilogy which included *Prometheus Unbound* and *Prometheus the Fire-Bringer*. Writing in the 9<sup>th</sup> century BCE, Hesiod presented Prometheus as the villain, a minor trickster who, even before his theft of fire, enraged Zeus with the "trick at Mecone": Prometheus gave Zeus a choice between the desirable meat and fat of an ox (which were hidden in its unappealing stomach) and the bones and organs (which were hidden under a layer of fat so as to appear appetizing). Zeus recognized the deception but chose the inferior portion so as to have a reason to punish Prometheus, which he did by chaining him to Caucasus and driving a stake through his heart. Additionally, Zeus punished humankind by sending Pandora ("all gifts"), despite Prometheus' warning to his brother Epimetheus: "*never accept any gift from the gods*" (Merton, *Raids* 81).

The fifth-century dramatist Aeschylus, in his *Prometheus Bound*, drew on but significantly altered Hesiod's depiction of the Prometheus myth. Whereas for Hesiod Prometheus' theft of fire followed his attempt to deceive Zeus, for Aeschylus Zeus' punishment followed the *Titanomachy*, the war between the Olympians and the Titans; Prometheus sided with the Olympians against his fellow Titans and proved instrumental in Zeus' victory, thus making Zeus' betrayal all the more unjust. Aeschylus suggested as well that Prometheus was being punished for foiling Zeus' plan to destroy the human race as well as for stealing fire, and

that Prometheus not only gave fire to the humans but taught them the whole range of human arts: metallurgy, animal husbandry, architecture, and more.

John Bellamy Foster notes that Prometheus “was the predominant cultural hero of the entire Romantic period, and...stands in Western culture not only for technology but even more for creativity, revolution, and rebellion against the gods (against religion). Rubens, Titian, Dante, Milton, Blake, Goethe, Beethoven, Byron, Shelley, and numerous others incorporated Prometheus as a central motif in their work” (Foster 230). Standard theistic arguments present Prometheus as a thief and a rebel, a symbol of hubris and the folly of humanism cut off from God; the Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar, with whom Merton maintained a correspondence for years, saw Prometheus as “the symbol of man's attempt to raise himself by his own bootstraps to the level of the gods. The human ‘I’ exalts itself in self-affirmation, seizing fire from heaven - not only emancipating itself from inherited constraints, whether biological or historical, but aiming at the total mastery of existence” (Nichols xi). Conversely, atheistic arguments typically position Aeschylus’ Prometheus against the unjust order of the gods who are opposed to the well-being of humanity. As but one example, Marx concluded the foreword of his doctoral dissertation praising Aeschylus’ Firebringer as a symbol of rejection of religious impositions on the philosophical and rational autonomy of humanity:

The proclamation of Prometheus – ‘in a word, I detest all the gods’ is [philosophy’s] own profession, her own slogan against all the gods of heaven and earth who do not recognize man’s self-consciousness as the highest divinity. There shall be none other beside it...[Prometheus says to Hermes:] ‘Understand this well, I would not change my evil plight for your servility.’ Prometheus is the foremost saint and martyr in the philosopher’s calendar (McClellan 17).

In his magisterial work *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, French theologian Henri DeLubac notes that “The negation that underlies positivist humanism, Marxist humanism and Nietzschean humanism is not so much *atheism*, in the strict sense of the word, as *antitheism*, or,

more precisely, anti-Christianism” (DeLubac 11). Why anti-theism? Because this version of humanism saw God withholding human freedom, acting as an obstacle to the fulfillment of the human condition, demanding an obedience that denies the rational faculties of humanity. “Prometheus becomes a central symbol in western culture of the humanist rejection of an inhuman, distant, and oppressive God. If God is like Zeus, will not everyone want to imitate Prometheus?” (Gallagher 52); that is, if human freedom could only come at the cost of rebellion against God, impiety would be the pious option.

It is perhaps no accident that Merton’s first writings on Prometheus appeared in 1958, at almost exactly the same time as his famous and much-analyzed “Fourth and Walnut” experience in which he came to reimagine the relationship of God to the world, marking a major departure from the dualistic worldview that had characterized his monastic life to that point. “In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people...it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God’s eyes” (*Conjectures* 156-7). In light of this insight into the hidden reality of all persons, Merton began to see his own vocation anew, not in terms of superiority over those who had not learned to escape the world, but in a recognition of his own solidarity with the world and a renewed focus on how he as a monk might offer the world the benefits of his own monastic solitude. He recalled the experience as one of seeing through the paradoxical illusion of his own monastic life as free from illusion: “It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness” (*Conjectures* 156). This

experience dramatically reshaped Merton's understanding of his monastic life and, I suggest, religion in general.

Merton's writings on Prometheus emerged from a desire to short-circuit the condemnatory "over-againstness" of God which he had come to critique in the wake of his experience in Louisville. "Prometheus: A Meditation," his first essay on the Titan, centered on the image of alienated humanity attempting to steal the fire of selfhood, spiritual freedom, and maturity from the "small gods," those forces that keep humanity submissive, guilty, and obedient to authority. Merton continued his reflections on Hesiod's Promethean mysticism in "Promethean Theology," a chapter in his book *The New Man*, which was published in 1961 but written, like his "Meditation," in 1958, expanding on the same broad themes that emerged in that essay. Pointing to the psychological situation of modern humanity, "guilty, rebellious, frustrated, unsure of himself, of his gifts and of his own strength, alienated, yet seeking to assert himself" (Merton, *New Man* 23), Merton reflected on the economy of Christian salvation, in particular the presupposition that human alienation signified condemnation by God. At the heart of this false mysticism was a distorted God-image, that of God as Zeus, the jealous father who is "more or less resentful of man's natural powers, and above all of his freedom," leaving humanity with the choice of rebellion or submission: "man must either save his soul by a Promethean *tour de force*, without God's help, or else that man must turn his freedom inside out, stew up all his natural gifts into a beautiful guilt-complex, and crawl towards God on his stomach to offer Him the results in propitiation" (*New Man* 41). In the former case, which Merton linked with Pelagianism, God leaves humanity to work out their own salvation in history in a kind of "natural mysticism" of psychological adjustment, technological advancement, and utopian fantasies of the ultimate perfection of humanity. In the latter case, that of blind submission to

God, “it seems as if man saves himself and arrives at divine union by bartering his freedom for God’s grace” (*New Man* 38). At its extreme, Merton noted, human freedom is so mangled that “God simply makes an arbitrary decision to grant grace to this one and that one. The grace works infallibly... They are bound hand and foot and thrown into the wedding banquet, no doubt to be fed through a tube” (*New Man* 39). Even the benevolent symbol of the wedding feast becomes tyrannical when it comes at the expense of human freedom, signifying the underlying concern, not that God is somehow a monster who happens to be all-powerful, but that the monologue of divine sovereignty, no matter how benevolent in its message, is still malevolent in its medium. Discussing Jacques Derrida’s late writings on sovereignty and democracy, Jack Caputo notes, “‘The abuse of power is constitutive of the idea of sovereignty’. It is built right into it. For the sovereign asserts the right to act on his own, unilaterally, regardless of the will of the majority” (Caputo, “Without Sovereignty” 14). This view of sovereignty as formally oriented toward abuse of power correlates with what Merton’s longtime friend and correspondent Erich Fromm called “authoritarian ethics” and which “denies man’s capacity to know what is good or bad... Such a system is based not on reason and knowledge but on awe of the authority and on the subject’s feeling of weakness and dependence” (Fromm 20).

“Theology becomes Promethean,” Merton argued, “whenever it assumes that man’s supreme perfection is something God wants to prevent him from attaining” (*New Man* 33). Borrowing from psychoanalytic theory, which he read extensively in the 1950s and 1960s, Merton discussed the psychological bind which the heteronomous God-image places on the believer: “The father fights his son in order that the son may not grow up and condemn the father. The mother shall be jealous of the daughter and shall spite her, for fear of being in her own turn, rejected” (*New Man* 26). This obvious allusion to Oedipus and Elektra suggests that

Promethean models of God-as-Zeus must keep humanity small, must keep the fire away from humans who, possessing it, would threaten His absolute sovereignty. This is not simply a rejection of heterodox theologies of divine tyranny; to be in conflict with the omniscient God of classical theism, no matter how benevolent, is *de facto* to be in error. Thus Merton feared that God-talk functions to keep people from growing in maturity, since thinking for oneself means thinking against the all-powerful and all-knowing God. “So from the very beginning their lives are a constant apology: ‘I am sorry, father, mother, but in growing up I must steal your fire. You are weak gods, and I love you, but you are right to fear me as I know you do. For you must decrease and I must increase, and I must grow and live on your decline’” (*New Man* 25). Merton noted that this tragic heroism only makes sense in light of an image of God as small and fearful, threatened by the maturation of His children whom he wants to remain children, dependent, submissive, and obliged to God in all things.

In “Promethean Theology” Merton introduced the antithesis to the Promethean mystic, which he calls the “right-thinking” man, “the religious man who lives, in practice, without a god...who pretends to believe, who acts as if he believes, who seems to be moral because he has a set of rigid principles...He will rob you and enslave you and murder you and give you a plausible reason for doing so” (*New Man* 31). Although Merton identified the right-thinking as religious, at least externally, the emphasis on autonomous reason and the legitimation of violence suggests that Merton already intuited the fundamental similarity between the alienation of the person who sees God as a tyrant and that of those who are alienated by their own autonomy. Where the Promethean lives without false gods for the sake of wanting better gods, that is, for refusing to worship the status quo, or brute power, or the divine sadist of much popular theology,



the “right thinking” man treats God like a social convention, a piece of political capital to be used shrewdly but without any impact on the self.

Compared to the right thinking, who protect themselves from their own alienation and from the challenge of a God who unseats their autonomous reason with layers of certitudes, theological formulas, and self-justifications, Merton took a positive view of the struggles of Prometheus insofar as the Titan does stand for something, even if his struggle is both futile and unnecessary. “In relation to the rest of men, he is indeed a giant. For he who has the courage to scale a mountain, even though the scaling be utterly useless, has at least a certain advantage over those who remain in the plain” (*New Man* 28). Ironically, “scaling a mountain” is not simply an image of overcoming the obstacle of divine tyranny, but the futile and unnecessary punishment on Caucasus that follows. Prometheus “marches off to Caucasus of his own accord, and chains himself to the rock, and calls for his pain and his vulture. Nor is it the vulture that is inexorable, but Prometheus, who insists that the bird be there...he, who wants to be his own god, realizes that he can only be so by being punished” (*New Man* 29). For Merton the guilt and punishment of rebelling against this God is entirely self-imposed, since the “living God” whom Merton presented is the antithesis of Zeus and not only desires human freedom but gives away everything in the Incarnation for its sake. Hence, Merton noted, the Promethean mysticism that does battle against one’s small gods requires “both heroism and despair” (*New Man* 29): heroism for the risky willingness to forge ahead without the comfort of gods, despair for the realization that destroying one’s gods leaves only the impossible option of becoming a god oneself.

Even at this fairly early point in his theological maturation, Merton already understood the danger of seeing the relationship between God and humanity as predicated on conflict, particularly given the near-inevitability of humanity being on the “losing” side: guilty of

disobedience, under the threat of condemnation, unable to conjure its own forgiveness. This “atmosphere of theological litigation,” which makes it seem “as if *God did not want us to be free*, as if freedom were something He envied and begrudged us” (*New Man* 38), points to a question at the heart of Merton’s critical use of Prometheus: does God negate human freedom? In particular, despite Jack Caputo’s lively suggestion that the name of God harbors a “shock to the system” of the reigning order, Merton was well aware that invocation of the absolute and unchanging will of God too often functions to stop conversation and to label critical thinking as disobedience. To paraphrase Romans 8:31, if God is for something, who can be against? Are human deliberations, reasoning, and autonomy casually swatted aside in the face of the absolute divine *fiat*?

Merton recognized the problem of God as “other” in relation to humanity, which classical humanisms from Feuerbach and Marx to the later existentialists rejected as alienation: when God is imagined as being in competition with humanity, freedom itself becomes sinful. At this level, Merton suggested, both classical theists and a(nti)theists from Marx to Nietzsche to Camus orbited the same absolute God; where the former submitted to a God whom they interpreted as omnibenevolent, or at least so far above humanity as to be beyond questioning, the latter rebelled against the image of a tyrannical God who imposed the (arbitrary) divine will from above in a spectacle of power and control.

## Chapter 2: Hesiod's Prometheus: Merton on God and Human Freedom in Christianity

In a recent interview with “60 Minutes,” Catholic Cardinal Sean O’Malley notoriously said, “If I were founding a church, I’d love to have women priests. But Christ founded it, and what he has given us is something different” (Kandra). That is, the will of Jesus (as understood in a Catholic magisterial context) is absolute, beyond questioning; believers must presume that “Christ would never ask us to do something immoral” (Kandra), even if there is no rational explanation for why Christ might issue a command that, even the cardinal admitted, looks unreasonable. Liberal rebuttals that Jesus did not imagine ordinations of men OR women still orbit the same underlying assumption: Jesus’ will, whatever it is, is the real linchpin of truth. Paul Lakeland noted the dangers in the absolutist tendencies of an ecclesiology for which the true society of the church “implies absolute consensus, agreement in desire, and entire harmony among its members, and this is exactly (as Augustine reiterates again and again) what the Church provides, and that in which salvation, the restoration of being, consists” (Milbank 402). However benign the totalizing impulse might (or might not) be here, it remains totalizing; the unchanging will of God leaves little room for dissent, critique, or even dialogue. At most what might change is human understanding, but the goal “that they may be one” (JN 17:21) remains univocity, bringing all people to obedience to God. In this section I will examine Merton’s experience of the relationship of God to human freedom as mediated by the monastic community in which he spent his adult life, the Order of the Cistercians of the Strict Observance, also known as the Trappists.

The theology which was at the heart of Merton’s formative years in the monastery dovetailed well with his early desire to find an authority to whom he could give his obedience.

His initial, pious impulse to enter his monastic community was at least partly based on a sense that he had badly botched his young life and could not trust himself to lead his own life in ways that were not self-destructive. Projecting his distrust of himself onto the world, he came to the monastery with a highly dualistic conception of the relationship between the sacred monastic life and the secular world; on his first visit to Gethsemani in April of 1941, he wrote in his journal, “This is the center of America. I had wondered what was holding the country together, what has been keeping the universe from cracking to pieces and falling apart” (Inchausti, *American Prophecy* 21). This model of monasticism which was in vogue during Merton’s early years at Gethsemani understood the monastery as a “spiritual dynamo” generating energy by the perfect observance of its horarium. Writing years later and with a more critical lens, Merton explained the worldview within which his early monastic life took root: “Faith assures us that the monastic machine is exerting an irresistible influence on God who, it is assumed, takes a mysterious pleasure in the operation of this ingenious toy. The legal clockwork of monasticism has been specially devised by the Church to enchant the Almighty to cunningly manipulate His power” (Merton, *World of Action* 39). The worldview in which God needed to be manipulated by monastic rituals to produce effects for the Church and the world created a situation within which monasticism could understand its intensely legalistic structure as “relevant,” literally keeping God from venting His wrath upon the world. However, doing so fed upon a fetishistic view of God that played to a monastic “superiority complex” that paradoxically saved by its prayers a world that it rejected and saw in a fundamentally negative light.

In the early years of his monastic life Merton enjoyed the “escape from freedom” of not being subject to his own unpredictable whims, since he was bound by the heavy discipline of the monastic horarium, but by the late 1940s he found himself chafing against the unnecessary

hardships, the limited opportunities for solitude, travel and study, and the imposition of the orders of his monastic superiors as the unquestionable will of God. By the early 1950s Merton petitioned to leave the Trappist order to transfer to the Carthusians, an order of hermits that would afford him more silence and solitude than the highly community-minded Trappists, but his request was denied. In his 1953 book *The Sign of Jonas*, he discussed his desire for greater solitude and the community's refusal to give it to him (at that point), struggling to reconcile his faith in the "will of God" that he remain in a monastery which had become so antithetical to his desires. He reflected, "Like the prophet Jonas, whom God ordered to go to Nineveh, I found myself with an almost uncontrollable desire to go in the opposite direction. God pointed one way and all my 'ideals' pointed in the other...like Jonas himself I find myself traveling toward my destiny in the belly of a paradox" (Merton, *Sign of Jonas* 10-11). At this early point in his theological maturation, he could only see this as an indication of the basic wrongness of his desires and the lessons to be learned from obedience to authority.

As he grew in confidence of his own maturity, Merton simultaneously grew into a more realistic acknowledgement of the potential of religion to be as a force for organized narcissism. His attitude toward his monastic leadership grew increasingly critical as he saw them clinging doggedly to external practices that were rooted in beliefs that were fundamentally Promethean, built on a negative view of the world and preferring the production of pseudo-holiness to a critical stance rooted in love of the world. Writing to Herbert Mason, he lamented,

"I tell you frankly that my present struggle with the institutional aspect of religion is enormous and almost overwhelming. It is tempting to ruin the whole thing by dramatizing it as something Promethean, as if truth were something I had to conquer and bring back into the ruins. That would be the most disastrous thing of all. Yet the ruins are really ruins. They are cold and without fire, really. The fire that is there has nothing to do with the external forms which people so carefully preserve" (*Witness* 262).

Merton tellingly distinguished the true “fire” of religion from the institutional manifestations which had lost sight of the depth dimension of transformation of consciousness in favor of performance of exterior patterns of behavior. Further, he critiqued the easy conflation of divine and ecclesial authority into a force of finality: “What a shame that all through the Church the ‘will of God’ can so easily resolve itself into the will of an Italian undersecretary in the Holy Office” (*Vow of Conversation* 59).

Additionally, Merton dealt for years with the fickle censors of his Trappist religious community, who had refused publication of sections of his writings that they deemed too scandalous and even forbade him to write about topics such as nuclear war as not being fitting for a monk. In a letter to peace activist Jim Forest, Merton complained not only about the silencing but about the entire spirit of authoritarianism that he saw in his monastic community and in the Catholic hierarchy more broadly. He noted his abbot’s praise of unthinking obedience and fury at autonomy in the monastic context: “Dom James in Chapter today voiced the highest praise for those who simply ‘run with the herd.’ These are his own words. He extolled those who do not think for themselves but conform. He regrets that ‘conformism’ is regarded as a bad trait by those who seek ‘only liberty to do their own will’” (Merton, *Vow of Conversation* 78). After being ordered not to write on nuclear warfare and peace because it “falsifies the monastic message,” Merton reflected, “Imagine that: the thought that a monk might be deeply enough concerned with the issue of nuclear war to voice a protest against the arms race, is supposed to bring the monastic life into *disrepute*. Man, I think that it might just possibly salvage a last shred of repute for an institution that many consider to be dead on its feet” (*Hidden Ground of Love* 267). Writing to Forest several years later on the same subject, after the publication of Pope John

XXIII's encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, Merton slyly noted, "I think I told you I wrote to the Abbot General and said it was a good thing Pope John didn't have to get his encyclical through our censors: and could I now start up again?" (*Hidden Ground of Love* 274).

In a brief but intense correspondence during the last two years of his life, Merton debated with the feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether the viability of monastic life in the woods of Kentucky as a genuine form of protest: she urged him to "get with it" and leave a monastic tradition which had confused rejection of the "powers and principalities" of the world with rejection of God's good creation. He agreed that "monasticism had 'lost its soul' insofar as it had become committed to an ironbound institutionalism built on a perverse doctrine of authority-humility-obedience" (*Hidden Ground of Love* 502). Even more, the monastic structure made it "worse than anywhere else in the Church, insofar as the emphasis on perfect obedience as 'the' monastic virtue (which of course it is not) puts the monk bound hand and foot in the power of his 'prelate' (now no longer charismatic and chosen spiritual Father but his boss and feudal lord and maybe general in chief)" (*Hidden Ground of Love* 504). Here Merton underscored that his problem was not with the authority of spiritual maturity which should be the hallmark of the abbot, but with the authoritarianism of exercising control over the monks' lives. Merton concluded his correspondence with Ruether by expressing his hope that living as a hermit on the monastery property (1965-8) afforded him a critical vantage point from which to get out from under both monastic and secular authoritarianisms.

While in his more mature years he was less willing to equate the will of his superiors with the voice of God and raged at what he saw as backwards decision making, he continued to believe that the challenge of listening to other voices than his own was a key to gaining wisdom. Merton knew that it would be disastrous to simply assert his own will in ego-gratification against

his monastic superiors, both because it would not succeed and because it would simply reinforce the willfulness that the conflict promoted in him. Despite his struggles with his monastic authorities, however, he believed that being challenged to question his own will, his own ego and his own way of thinking was transformative, opening a third way beyond simple submission and the “Promethean” conquest of truth by a show of rebellion. After one of many denied requests to participate in the monastic conversation beyond Gethsemani, Merton wrote in his journal, “So that is the vow of obedience. You submit yourself also to somebody else’s prejudice and to his myths and to the worship of *his* fetishes. Well, I have made the vow and will keep it, and will see why I keep it, and will try at the same time not to let myself be involved in the real harm that can come from a wrong kind of submission” (*Spiritual Master* 187). While he knew that simple obedience, the “first naïveté” of simply accepting his superiors’ will as unquestionably correct, was itself harmful to human freedom, he knew better than to give in to seeing no higher authority than his own will. This tension would endure throughout Merton’s writings on obedience and freedom as he matured: understanding monastic obedience as a means of training himself away from too quickly relying on his own ego, but without simply handing himself over to the will of the superior. He noted in his journal that

the will of God is not a ‘fate’ to which we submit but a creative act in our life producing something absolutely new (or failing to do so)...Our cooperation (seeking first the Kingdom of God) consists not solely in conforming to laws but in opening our wills out to this creative act, which must be retrieved in and by us - by the will of God...I must lead a new life, and a new world must come into being. But not by *my* plans and *my* agitation (Merton, *The Intimate Merton* 158).

Beyond mere petulance about being hemmed in by the small-mindedness of his abbot, Merton saw unthinking religious obedience as a training ground for participation in atrocity, for



“doing one’s duty” without considering what that duty might be.<sup>6</sup> In the wake of horrors from the Holocaust and the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki to the atrocities in Vietnam and the racist slogans and actions that opposed the civil rights movement, Merton saw that labeling critical thinking as disobedience encouraged idealization of superiors, misplacement of loyalty, and irresponsibility for one’s actions. Such theology legitimated evil by praising the Christian who “gave heroic witness to his God and his faith by a meek, unquestioning obedience even unto death in submission to a Church authority that ordered him to submit to a civil authority that was not necessarily Christian - perhaps even anti-Christian” (Merton, *Nonviolent Alternative* 195). Discussing the case of Franz Jaegerstaetter, an Austrian Catholic who was executed in 1943 for refusing to join the German army, Merton noted that he

was treated as a rebel, disobedient to lawful authority, a traitor to his country. He was accused of being selfish, self-willed, not considering his family, neglecting his duty to his children...that he was not sufficiently informed to judge whether or not the war was just... Thousands of Catholics, including many priests, were serving in the armies, and therefore he should not try to be ‘more Catholic than the Church’ (*Nonviolent Alternative* 134).

Merton concluded by noting the irony of the statement issued by the Catholic bishop of Linz, that while Jaegerstaetter may have acted from an “innocently erroneous conscience,” the real heroes were “the Catholic young men, the priests and the seminarians who died in Hitler’s armies...acting in the light of ‘a clear and correct conscience’” (*Nonviolent Alternative* 138). That there was no connection between a theology of submission to the will of a heteronomous God and to that of Hitler was simply unthinkable for Merton.

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<sup>6</sup> Erich Fromm, with whom Merton carried on a fifteen-year correspondence, noted the thematic similarity of the “disobedience” in GN 2-3 and the Prometheus myth and the importance in our time of saying no to unjust authority: “human history began with an act of disobedience, and it is not unlikely that it will be terminated by an act of obedience” (*Disobedience* 1).

It is perhaps inevitable that Merton's exploration of the roots of human alienation brought him to the symbol of original sin, particularly given the "Promethean" disobedience and theft at the heart of GN 2-3. In his earliest writings on Prometheus, Merton read against the conventional interpretation of GN 2-3 to justify God's seemingly heteronomous prohibition on gaining the knowledge of good and evil: already possessing the knowledge of good (since he was a "natural contemplative" who lived unashamedly and in union with God), Adam ate the fruit to gain an experiential knowledge of evil. Recognizing how deeply heteronomous this text seemed, Merton even included a footnote to cut off objections to God's actions in this text: "It should be noted that this was objectively a 'bad tree' and not simply a good one which Adam was arbitrarily forbidden to touch in order that God's supremacy might be recognized" (*New Man* 107)<sup>7</sup>. In his later writings, Merton shifted away from the sinfulness of disobedience to the "sin"/alienation of losing the original nakedness in the garden, which he interpreted as a symbol of being unashamed of the fundamentally humble, vulnerable character of human life. This vulnerable self, which lived in original harmony with self and God, gave way in the formation of a self-aware self to shame and the production of false selves to cover over that shame. In the monastic worldview in which Merton was educated, the goal of the monastic life was retrieval of this original unity with God, not by un-knowing, but by a "second naïveté" of growing into trust enough to be without a self-constructed self. The salvific task, then, shifted for Merton from

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<sup>7</sup> Of course, the problems with such a reading are legion: among others, they include failing to ask what is so objectively bad about the knowledge of good and evil, why this non-heteronomous God would punish the man and woman for not obeying, why the tree would be called the tree of the knowledge of good and evil if they already knew good, and why God would put an "objectively bad tree" in the garden in the first place! Erich Fromm reads this story as a prototype of authoritarian ethics: "The sin of Adam and Eve is not explained in terms of the act itself; eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil was not bad *per se*; in fact, both the Jewish and the Christian religions agree that the ability to differentiate between good and evil is a basic virtue. The sin was disobedience, the challenge to the authority of God, who was afraid that man, having already 'become as one of Us, to know good and evil,' could 'put forth his hand and take also of the tree of life and live forever.'" See *Man for Himself*, 22.

healing a separation from God to healing one's separation from oneself, in particular retrieving a vulnerable, "naked" selfhood in all of its contingent human reality. Drawing on Fromm's definition of neurosis as "an individual's successful adaptation to a neurotic society" (Cooper 236), Merton reinterpreted the universality of original sin in the language of alienation, not from a punishing God, but from the simplicity of the human reality in favor of the construction of a "false self". This included not only more "superficial" realities like possessions, physical beauty, popularity, but even more subtly, ostensibly "good" realities like education, morality, religiosity: anything that might serve as "fig leaves" to cover the fundamental nakedness of the self:

I use up my life in the desire for pleasures and the thirst for experiences, for power, honor, knowledge and love to clothe this false self and construct its nothingness into something objectively real. And I wind experiences around myself and cover myself with pleasures and glory like bandages in order to make myself perceptible to myself and to the world, as if I were an invisible body that could only become visible when something visible covered its surface (*New Seeds* 35).

Thus Merton suggested that religion is "made profoundly ambiguous by religious people themselves": "Man 'wishes himself' (magically) to become godly, holy, gentle, pure, etc... This is no more than the religion of those who wish themselves to be in a certain state in which they can live with themselves, approve of themselves: for they feel that, when they can approve of themselves, God is at peace with them" (*Conjectures* 154).

Similarly, Merton rejected theories of salvation which were rooted in a legal transaction between Christ and God, as in classical post-Anselmian substitutionary atonement theories<sup>8</sup>, as

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<sup>8</sup> Critiques of the atonement paradigm, though less ambitious in Merton's day, have become commonplace: Lisa Sowle Cahill notes the "chorus" of scholars who object that "the atonement paradigm sanctifies violence (Denny Weaver, Stephen Finlan); worships a divine sadist (Dorothee Soelle); turns God into an omnipotent child abuser (Rita Nakashima Brock); speaks no word of salvation to African American women and others resisting oppression (Delores Williams); and provides murderous fanatics, fascists, and torturers with validating symbols (Jurgen Moltmann, Mark Taylor)." See Lisa Sowle Cahill, "Quaestio Disputata: The Atonement Paradigm: Does it Still Have Explanatory Value?" *Theological Studies* 68 (2007), 418-432, at 419.

the very notion of a need to be reconciled to a punishing God produced the very alienation they claimed to overcome. This received paradigm amounted, for Merton, to a theological justification not only of heteronomy but of tyranny, in which the myth of the fall became the very exemplification of the sinfulness of autonomy, so that right relationship with God conceived as Other came from convincing God, by one's submission to church authority and the performance of ecclesial practices, not to condemn. The fundamental assumption of this soteriological framework was that God's "neutral" position toward humanity was condemnation, so that one could arguably see the goal of the Christian life as "salvation FROM God." Small wonder, for Merton, that the modern atheists would find it not only laughable but despicable that Christians could love such a God and propose that this God is the very definition of love.

In place of the standard Christian conception of salvation as healing of an original brokenness or breach in the relationship with God, Merton saw the challenge of retrieving the human condition for a humanity which saw it as part of the problem. In an April 1959 letter to D.T. Suzuki, Merton wrote that while humanity "had never really been separated from [God] in the first place," the thought that we were separated "was a conviction so great and so strong that it amounted to separation...Each one of us began to slave and struggle to make himself a god, which he imagined he was supposed to be...This is Original Sin...In this sense there is exclusion from paradise. But yet we are in paradise, and once we break free from the false image, we find ourselves what we are: and we are 'in Christ'" (*Hidden Ground of Love* 564). The idea of a noble but futile "struggle to make oneself a god" echoes the language of Merton's early essays on Prometheus: what is alienating is not God, but a vision of the divine-human relationship that makes humanity essentially inferior, essentially in the wrong before God.

This deconstruction of the relationship between divine and human freedom pointed out the other side of standard visions of soteriology, namely the violent and exclusionary consequences of failure or refusal to conform to the heteronomous divine will. Writing to the Jewish scholar Zalman Schachter in 1962, Merton discussed the possibility of unity among Jews and Christians and the political effects in history of imagining Jesus as a rejection of Judaism: “When the Christians began to look at Christ as Prometheus... Then they justified war, then they justified crusades, then they justified pogroms, then they justified Auschwitz, then they justified the bomb, then they justified the Last Judgment: the Christ of Michelangelo is Prometheus, I mean the Christ in the Sistine Chapel. He is whipping sinners with his great Greek muscles” (*Hidden Ground of Love* 535). Without castigating him too much for writing a personal letter that was not symbolically impeccable, one may note that Merton distorts his own symbolism, missing the distinction between Prometheus himself and Promethean theology: this is indeed a Promethean image, but the Sistine Christ is not Prometheus but Zeus, torturing any Prometheans who dare to rebel. Despite any quibbling one might do about the consistency of Merton’s symbols, it is of absolute significance that Merton placed at the end of the list of escalating outpourings of violence the doctrine of the Last Judgment. The Christ he rejected is not an anti-Semite or a Nazi or a soldier ready to launch a nuclear strike, but the presumably orthodox Christian image of Christ “who will come to judge the living and the dead”. This Promethean soteriology, avoiding the tortures this Christ has in store for the sinner by falling in line with His eternal dictates, has been so thoroughly taken for granted as the backbone of so much of the Christian enterprise that the radicality of including it in a list of atrocities like concentration camps and nuclear war may not be entirely clear from the outset. In the wake of that kind of absolute claim on reality, Merton noted, the legitimization of violence is never far away:

‘All right, if we can’t make it to the wedding feast [a Biblical image of the eschaton which Merton imagines Jews and Christians sharing] (and we are the ones who refused), we can blow up the joint and say it is the Last Judgment.’ Well, that’s the way it is the Judgment, and that’s the way men judge themselves, and that’s the way the poor and the helpless and the maimed and the blind enter into the Kingdom: when the Prometheus types blow the door wide open for them (*Hidden Ground of Love* 535).

Again, the judgment comes because the violent judge themselves and others and blame it on God, inflict violence and attribute it to the will of God; the image of the “great Greek” Christ sits absolute in his power like Zeus, dispensing a heteronomous punishment upon those who have failed to propitiate him. The sharp contrast between the image of the Judgment on the wall of the Sistine Chapel and the eschatological image of the wedding feast as a symbol of hospitality and welcome exemplifies that Merton’s essays on Prometheus are not merely idle musings. Rather, it demonstrates that when religious authority “performs” heteronomy by claiming to speak on behalf of God, demanding absolute obedience, and punishing efforts at reasoned dissent, it forces people to choose submission or rebellion; rebellion in such a schema is not simply against a given religious or political power structure, but against the monarchial God who endorses that structure. By constructing a God after their own image and likeness, full of violence and punishment, those who worship power thereby inscribe heteronomy into the divine order itself.

In response to the massive legitimation of violence that he saw at the heart of Christian theology, Merton took up the response of the modern humanist atheists that religion evacuates humanity’s selfhood by creating a futile and self-destructive relationship with a God who destroys human freedom. In the abstraction of religion as an alienating force, “man accepts estrangement from himself, projects his own reality outside himself, impoverishes himself, and dehumanizes himself, in order to lead what is essentially a fantasy life centered on the abstract idea of God” (*Love and Living* 126). Insofar as humanity is caught up in the formalism of such

an ideology, Merton agreed that such a “pseudo-Christianity” can only be anti-humanistic. However, he argued (too quickly, perhaps) that this alienating version of religion which Feuerbach and Marx rejected is just as surely rejected by the New Testament:<sup>9</sup> “where there is a choice between the good of a suffering person and the claims of formal and established legalism, Jesus decides for the person and against the claims of legalistic religion” (Merton, *Love and Living* 128). In so doing, he dismissed the entire systematization of taboos, hierarchies, and truth-effects that Marx and others saw shielding people from the real work of ameliorating history. Merton noted that while such religious practices tend to be associated with narcissistic thinking, modern technological culture abounds in its own manifestations of narcissism which function analogously to formal religion. To paraphrase Michel Foucault, it is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous: the narcissism of the false self finds endless means of alleviating the anxiety of one’s existential situation.

“This fascination with the self as a central and sole reality to be satisfied and catered to in everything is at the root of all idolatrous forms of religion” (*Love and Living* 131), but the same impulse manifests in technocracy, which, despite its impressive capacity to produce, build, organize and systematize, runs a grave risk of closing the person in upon the satiation of desires. Merton was not only suspicious of religious systematization; he also worried that placing absolute faith in scientific truth claims produced a new idolatry which paved the way to legitimations of violence. In particular, he noted that even the Jesuit priest and paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, for all of the positivity of his overcoming of the body-soul dualism

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<sup>9</sup> Merold Westphal similarly notes that in its continual critiques of external religiosity, the Bible is as irreligious a religious text as one will ever find. Further, he notes the similarity of the “Promethean” critique in the Bible to that of the “masters of suspicion”: “Perhaps we need to see Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, along with Luther and Barth, as expressing a Promethean protest against all the Zeuses of *instrumental reason, the piety that reduces God to a means or instrument for achieving our own human purposes with professedly divine power and sanction.*” See his *Suspicion and Faith: The Religious Uses of Modern Atheism*. New York: Fordham University Press, 1998, 6.

that had plagued much of Christian history, was far too quick to affirm science at the cost of ignoring or legitimating human suffering. Merton critiqued the evolutionary character of Teilhard's theology, calling it "an optimism which tends to look at existential evil and suffering through the small end of the telescope" and noting that he "regarded the dead and wounded of Hiroshima with a certain equanimity as inevitable by-products of scientific and evolutionary progress" (*Literary Essays* 216). Such a worldview was its own kind of dualism: instead of sacrificing the material realm to the spiritual, Merton saw Teilhard sacrificing people to the "omega point" of history, such that his "scientific mystique and long-range view, extending over millenia, naturally did not delay overlong to worry about the death of a few thousands here and there" (*Literary Essays* 217). Again, the willingness to bypass the human person for the sake of the human nature, for humanity in the abstract, brought out a trend of legitimation of atrocity, this time by way of science linked with religion. "Narcissism alienates man and his society in a slavery to *things* - money, machines, commodities, luxuries, fashions, and pseudoculture. The idolatrous mentality of narcissism produces a fake humanism which cynically defies man in order to cheat him of his human fulfillment and enslave him to the 'rat race' for riches, pleasure, and power" (Merton, *Love and Living* 131).<sup>10</sup> But Merton saw this collective narcissism creating levels of alienation and destruction far beyond that of individual psychological pathology, leading to what he called "mass man," a state in which the person is willing to hand over moral responsibility to technological and political power structures, accepting conformity as the price of meeting their needs.

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<sup>10</sup> In line with his previous comments about "pseudo-Christianity," one can only imagine that one outcome of a narcissistic worldview is an enslavement to religion, or more precisely to alienating religion as one more manifestation of pseudo-culture.



Addressing what Joseph McLelland calls “the irony of atheism,” Merton noted the risk that atheistic humanisms, cut off from a transcendent source, risk producing a scientific or reductionistic view of the human person that could be even more alienating and powerful structure than the alienating religions they rightly reject. “Thus,” noted Merton, “it is not difficult for the abstract and scientific doctrines of modern humanism to become means by which the individual person is reduced to subjection to man in the abstract...this vast and awful abstractness hovers over the abyss of mass society to bring forth from it the antihumanist and irresponsible monstrosity that is mass-man” (*Love and Living* 133). Even the seemingly optimistic worldview of theorists like Marx takes on an ominous tone to the degree that their theories deal with humanity in the abstract and reduce the human *person* to human *nature*; rejecting religion for imposing a superstructure of estrangement on humanity, they risk doing the same thing through so categorizing the person that the “truth” of that person’s life becomes an externally imposed force that deforms the person who does not fit that abstraction. Without endorsing a return to a facile heteronomy, Merton argued, “ultimately there is no humanism without God. Marx thought that humanism had to be atheistic, and this was because he did not understand God any better than the self-complacent formalists whom he criticized. He thought, as they did, that God was an idea, an abstract essence, forming part of an intellectual superstructure built to justify economic alienation” (Merton, *Collected Poems* 390). Dealing in abstraction, in Merton’s estimation, lent itself to a self-contained logic that culminated in racism, doublespeak, and legitimations of violence: “To *shut out* the person and to refuse to consider him as a person, as an other self, we resort to the impersonal ‘law’ and ‘nature.’...In effect, we are considering *our nature in the concrete* and *his nature in the abstract*” (*Seeds of Destruction* 254-5). This false abstraction of the individual, the social order, the political or economic or military

regime, paradoxically undertaken in the name of a humanistic rejection of the gods, could only lead further into alienation.

Chapter 3: Aeschylus's Prometheus: Merton on "Death of God" and Literary-Existentialist Views of the God-Human Relation

In a journal entry dated January 17, 1960, over a year after writing his original meditations on Prometheus and Promethean theology, Merton wrote,

"After dinner – read the *Prometheus Bound* of Aeschylus. Shattered by it. I do not know when I have read anything so stupendous and so completely contemporary...A great religious experience. Prometheus, archetypal representation of the suffering Christ. But we must go deep into this. Prometheus startles us by being more fully Christ than the Lord of our own clichés – I mean, he is free from all the falsifications and limitations of our hackneyed vision which has slowly emptied itself of reality" (*Search for Solitude* 370).

Merton's original essay had been informed only by Hesiod's version of the Prometheus myth, and gaining the perspective of Aeschylus' version of the myth prompted him to revise his "Meditation" and add a preface titled "A Note: Two Faces of Prometheus" in which he clarified the distinction between Hesiod's and Aeschylus' versions of the Prometheus myth. This revised essay appeared in 1960 in Merton's book *The Behavior of Titans* and again, in slightly edited form, in his 1965 book *Raids on the Unspeakable*. In a December 17, 1960 letter to his friend James Laughlin, the founder of New Directions publishing house, Merton wrote, "Of course my commentary on Prometheus is a little confusing. It is certainly not a critique of the Prometheus of Aeschylus (rather of his Zeus). I tried to say that in a little note which will only leave the reader confused, I am afraid" (*Merton/Laughlin* 160). As Patrick O'Connell noted, "The confusion comes only if the reader expects the Prometheus of Aeschylus to make an appearance in the 'Meditation' proper, which had been written before Merton's close association with the drama of Aeschylus" (*Merton Encyclopedia* 371).

In hindsight (since he wrote his original meditation before he had read Aeschylus' version of the myth), he reinterpreted his original meditation as a retrieval of the Aeschylean Prometheus from a worldview that he argued had been infected since the time of the Renaissance with the spirit of Hesiod's Prometheus. This spirit came to symbolize not only modernity in a secular, technocratic sense, but more fundamentally, a view of "man and the universe as static and definitively given realities which do not change in any important sense: realities which simply have to be understood and accepted in their unchanging natures" (*Love and Living* 125). This negative model of the Prometheus myth presented a view that "life and love are somehow a punishment. That nothing can ever be really good in it. That life is slavery and sorrow because of Zeus, and because Prometheus resisted Zeus. That therefore life is nothing but a wheel upon which man is broken like a slave..." (Merton, *Titans* 13). In the light of the newfound depth of the Aeschylean myth, Merton framed his meditation on Hesiod's Prometheus as "a rejection of the negative, *modern* myth of Prometheus. It is a return to the archaic, Aeschylean and positive aspect of Prometheus, which is, at the same time, to my mind, deeply and implicitly Christian" (*Titans* 14). In highlighting the static character that he saw in Hesiod's worldview, Merton aligned abstracting religion and abstracting technocracy, shifting the divide from atheism/theism to alienation/freedom. This unusual interpretation broke the standard association of secular humanism with the Aeschylean Prometheus and religious orthodoxy with Hesiod's Zeus; Merton thereby came to associate the "living God" predominantly with human freedom rather than with religion, opening the possibility of poisoning God and Christ against religion as itself subject to becoming an alienating and abstracting force. Where atheist humanisms claimed to follow Aeschylus' Prometheus in their rejection of religious antihumanism, Merton argued that they in fact orbited the same worldview, namely, that of Hesiod, and that the same seeds of

antihumanism lie in atheist humanisms insofar as the real enemy of humanity is not God but sovereignty, the real division not between theism and atheism but between abstraction and the contradictions and freedom of the concrete person.

Searching for glimmers of hope on a theological landscape that was too often concerned with in-house conversations and ecclesial trivia, Merton noted in particular the rise of the “death of God” theologies in the 1960s as efforts to take seriously the “secular city” in a way that did not simply repeat traditional answers and to reflect on the apparent lack of access to and interest in questions about God in the secular arena. While recognizing the diversity of their methods and outcomes and not signing on completely to their results, Merton understood and approved the “effort to reshape the language of religion in a last-minute attempt to save it from a plague of abstractness and formalism” (*Nonviolent Alternative* 236) which, as noted above, distinguished true religion from mere narcissism. Caught up in that reappraisal was, inevitably, a critique of sedimented institutional beliefs and practices:

‘the Churches’ have created a separate world within the world, a world claiming to be ‘sacred,’ while surreptitiously gaining and retaining for themselves every possible worldly advantage and privilege. This ecclesiastical world identifies itself as ‘holier’ and ‘better’ than any other society by virtue of external rites and signs, and presumes to condemn and vilify all that is real, valid, alive, creative, forwardlooking in order to maintain its own traditional advantage (Merton, *Faith and Violence* 245).

Thus, the seeming blasphemy of the “Death of God” rhetoric was itself paradoxically religious, “a necessary iconoclastic protest against every form of popular religion which has blasphemed God by trying to sell him on the same terms as next year’s Chevrolet” (Merton, *Faith and Violence* 193). Questions of “belief in” God, whether theistic or atheistic, paradoxically entrenched this problem by making God an object “out there,” focusing on God’s existence or nonexistence but taking for granted the *kind* of God that was being affirmed or denied. In this

context, Merton approvingly cited Gabriel Vahanian, the “death of God” theologian who most resonated with his thought: “Biblical religion shows us once for all that man’s basic obligation to God is iconoclasm. That sounds wild, but it is only a reformulation of the first two commandments” (*Faith and Violence* 197). Rather than breaking with the existence of God per se, Merton saw Vahanian breaking with the classical God-images that had been taken with enough finality to harden into absolutes. Thus, the rebellious character of Aeschylus’ Prometheus was not rebellion against God, but legitimate rebellion against every idol (and idolator) which stands in the way of God: not only was this justified for Merton, its opposite was blasphemous.

For all of his appreciation of their insight into the secular problem of imagining God, the various Death of God theologies did not go far enough for Merton, insofar as he believed that their lampoon of religion, despite its effort to be prophetic, ended up focusing only on the exterior manifestations of narcissistic religion, without sufficiently critiquing the hostility to life in the depths of both heteronomous religion and technocratic secularity. This focus on the superficial failed to recover a genuine depth, leaving no significant alternative to “acquiescence to political totalism, the police state - whether capitalist or Communist makes little difference. Either way, by conventional Christianity or by the Death of God, we seem to end up rendering everything to Caesar” (*Faith and Violence* 197). The shared endpoint of totalism pointed to the real problem for Merton: while a large percentage of Americans continued believe in God in his time, or at least the idea of God, the real problem was not simply making metaphysical assertions about the existence or non-existence of a Supreme Being, but the underlying legitimation of bourgeois secularity and the violence that supported it. He noted:

The enthusiasm for the secular city coincides with fervent praise of American affluence, which is in fact rooted in the enormous military-industrial complex and therefore in the Vietnam war [sic]...its substitution of ‘history’ and ‘politics’ for metaphysics and religion may run the risk of ending in conformism, acquiescence,

and passive approval of the American managerial society, affluent economy and war-making power politics (*Faith and Violence* 248).

Conventional Christianity on the one hand had failed, in Merton's opinion, by so focusing on its formal identity markers and on its claims of superiority to the secular world that it had missed the *kairos* of confronting "the world" on behalf of the world. On the other hand, the Death of God theologians, appropriately rejecting the formal split of the natural world and the supernatural order, had failed by losing the distinction between the world as good and the world as fallen. Their strategic avoidance of "fallenness" was an understandable rejection of exclusivist and world-denying models of "original sin," but they failed to reckon with the depth of evil in the world and with the shortcomings of modernity: "The fervent proselytizer who wants to make converts share his own experience of being saved is replaced by the Christian who is completely 'hip' to the modern world and will not listen for a moment to anyone who he suspects does not experience the modern world exactly as he does" (*Faith and Violence* 243).

Against the failure of the death of God theologians to critique the violence of the modern age, Merton admired Albert Camus as an exemplar of both the quest for meaningfulness and the struggle for liberation in the face of overbearing powers and a seemingly absurd universe. Merton read his work with great seriousness, going so far as to write seven essays on various aspects of his thought and working on a book on Camus that his 1968 death left unfinished (*Hidden Ground of Love* 430). Prometheus was a significant figure for Camus as well, perhaps more significant than for Merton: he staged *Prometheus Bound* in 1937, wrote an essay on rebellion in 1946 entitled "Prometheus in Hell," and used Prometheus as the symbol of the second cycle of his work, with *The Rebel* as a centerpiece. Jeffrey Isaac noted the multifaceted character of Camus' consideration of Prometheus, particularly his critique of a dehumanizing impulse at the heart of much modern humanism:

What is the meaning of the myth of Prometheus, Camus asks, in a world that worships technology and human mastery? ‘If Prometheus were to reappear,’ he suggests, ‘modern man would treat him as the gods did long ago; they would nail him to the rock in the name of the very humanism he was the first to symbolize.’ Today’s executioners, as Camus put it, are humanists, and today’s humanists are likely to be executioners. In the name of their humanism they incarcerate and annihilate human freedom and intelligence (118).

Sharing Camus’ concern that humanist systems contained within themselves the seeds of abstraction that fed antihumanism, Merton repeatedly commented that, despite the antireligious tenor of much of his writings, Camus nevertheless “can be called a ‘religious’ thinker insofar as he appeals to an obscure and ultimate faith. No doubt it is not a theological faith, but a faith in man, a faith in revolt itself, a faith in the value of an existential witness which says ‘No’ to the absurd” (*Literary Essays* 221). The “religious” quality of literature that Camus admired was, Merton believed, fundamentally about a tragic exploration of suffering and a reproach to Christianity for sublimating the innocent to violence under the aegis of the benevolence of God.

Camus’ Promethean rebellion against the absurd character of life manifested as an anti-nihilist rebellion against a world that needed fixing but had no one at the wheel to make it right, but he also rejected the Christian impulse to believe in a deity who could have aided the suffering but chose not to do so. In *The Plague*, when Rieux protested against the injustice of the death of an innocent child, Camus had the Jesuit Father Paneloux respond, “Ah, now I understand what grace is.” Merton explained this statement in the voice of Paneloux:

Now I know what it is that distinguishes me from this unbeliever here. He cannot see that God is to be loved even when he arbitrarily destroys the innocent. He does not have the grace to believe; consequently he sees only cruelty, and thinks God is wrong. But I have the grace to see that even when he is arbitrary and cruel, God is always right. Grace, then, is that which gives one the ability to submit to a God who acts like an arbitrary tyrant. It gives the power to submit to a will we do not understand and even to adore and love what appears horrible (*Literary Essays* 212).



The fundamentally Promethean character of Camus' rejection of what he saw as the Christian response to evil was clear: to prefer an unjust divine order to acknowledging the absurd is to cooperate with the absurd. Merton noted, "This is an idea that Camus finds revolting. And he is right. It is also an idea which Camus believes to be essential to Christianity, and he is wrong: the idea that God is essentially unjust, and to be loved as such!" (*Literary Essays* 213). Merton praised Camus (as he did Prometheus) insofar as Camus was more serious in his response to injustice than those Christians who simply submitted to naked power and injustice as "fate" because they attributed it to God. However, he suggested that Christians could share in the confrontation with evil without blaming God, since God need not, must not be imagined as the all-powerful being who nevertheless allowed evil to have its way - such a God would be "in fact a monstrous and arbitrary theological idol" (*Literary Essays* 213). On the contrary, where Camus clung to divine omnipotence while forfeiting the goodness of God, Merton clung to the goodness of God and reimagined power in terms of revolt rather than sovereignty — paradoxically, the very position that Camus himself upheld as a pinnacle of true morality. Irony abounded that Camus' assumption of a more or less "orthodox" God-image led him to reject Christianity, where Merton's emerging theology would be somewhat less orthodox but was, for him, the key to seeing any kind of future for Christianity. Merton approvingly quoted Camus' famous statement, "I do not believe in God, but I am not therefore an atheist" (*Literary Essays* 95), indicating the basically religious (in Merton's existential sense) character of Camus' work as an ethical rejection of a sick God-image which he associated with classical Christian conceptions of God. I suggest, however, that Merton would reverse it for himself: "I do believe in God, but I am not therefore a theist": by freeing himself from the constraints of accepting classical theism, Merton was able to reinterpret the problem of God and human freedom away from the

bifurcation of alienated heteronomy or alienated autonomy which both shared the same God-image.

Merton was certainly aware of the double-edged sword of “playing with fire” in the scientific era, which he saw in the potential for technology cut off from wisdom and love to become a tool of atrocity, and the particular challenge of a religious response to technology and the secularity which drove its development. While this was not Merton’s primary use of Prometheus, in his later works he again repurposed Prometheus to symbolize the muscular, aggressive approach to life that he associated in particular with the West. In his late work *Faith and Violence* Merton referred to “the Angel of the West - the Power or principality which is the ‘Guiding Spirit’ of European-American civilization” (193). In the April 1968 preface to the Japanese edition of *The New Man*, which appeared as “Rebirth and the New Man in Christianity” in his posthumously published book *Love and Living*, Merton explicitly named that spirit as Prometheus. He noted, “The West has lived for thousands of years under the sign of the Titan, Prometheus, the fire stealer, the man of power who defies heaven in order to get what he himself desires. The West has lived under the sign of will, the love of power, action, and domination. Hence, Western Christianity has often been associated with a spiritual will-to-power and an instinct for organization and authority” (*Love and Living* 181). Similarly, Merton remained skeptical about the risks of scientific advancement without further developing wisdom, concerned that the scientific mode of inquiry was based in a system of treating things and people as external objects to be understood by accumulating knowledge, an ultimately dualistic and alienating paradigm of knowing. He saw this paradigm as endemic to Cartesian thought in particular, noting that it “began with an attempt to reach God as object by starting from the thinking self. But when God becomes object, he sooner or later ‘dies,’ because God as object is

ultimately unthinkable” (Merton, *Birds of Appetite* 23). In particular, Merton saw great spiritual difficulty caught up in the rise of the Cartesian ego, which he interpreted as a mode of consciousness in which “self-awareness as a thinking, observing, measuring and estimating ‘self’ is absolutely primary” (*Zen* 22). Such a worldview leads to the inevitable “death of God” insofar as God becomes another object, “because God as object is ultimately unthinkable” and “contains so many internal contradictions that it becomes entirely nonnegotiable except when it is hardened into an idol that is maintained in existence by a sheer act of will” (Merton, *Zen* 23).

#### Chapter 4: Merton's Tragic Religiosity: Sophia as Theopoetics of Human Freedom

Merton argued that while the Cartesian spirit had infiltrated the Christian West to the point that the “death of God” had become an inevitability, there remained an alternative in a return to the primacy and immediacy of the experience of Being. Existentialism and Zen in particular came to function for Merton as correctives to the overly intellectualizing and abstracting tendencies he saw in much Cartesian/Christian thinking in the West. Coming to existentialism through the thought of Etienne Gilson and Jacques Maritain, both Catholic Thomists, Merton eventually came to draw on Martin Heidegger's work as the philosophical basis of his thinking, largely because of Heidegger's sense of a direct, intuitive apprehension of being and the overcoming of the rigid division of subject and object. “What appealed to him about existentialism was its avoidance of abstraction, its molding of thought to concrete existential realities, and its focus on the present as the matrix of life and experience” (Labrie, *Inclusive Imagination* 50). The subject-object distinction which reified both self and other into discrete players in a status hierarchy of beings gave way for Merton to a unifying ground of being; in effect, the self-aware subject emerges from and is united with other subjects in this ground, rather than beginning with the rational and absolute self of the *cogito* as ground of experience.

Merton saw in Zen a similar existentialist character insofar as it sought to bring its adherents into direct contact with reality, dismantling the abstract codes block access to the person in his/her/hir concrete situatedness. This is not to deny the role of language in shaping experience, but as Merton put it, “The taste for Zen in the West is in part a healthy reaction of people exasperated with the heritage of four centuries of Cartesianism: the reification of

concepts, idolization of the reflexive consciousness, flight from being into verbalism, mathematics, and rationalization. Descartes made a fetish out of the mirror in which the self finds itself. Zen shatters it” (*Conjectures* 285). Labrie noted that Merton’s late writings about God tended toward more ontological and impersonal imagery (*Inclusive Imagination* 52), which bolstered his efforts to find points of contact between Zen and Christian contemplation precisely at the level of direct encounter with reality and avoidance of abstraction. In the Christian context, this alienating reification manifests in the demand of total self-surrender to Christ, in particular as mediated through the authority of the scriptures or ecclesial authorities. The Zen impulse, on the other hand, is to “rely on nothing but ‘the truth’ as they experience it directly. Hence, they must not even prefer an authoritative statement by the Buddha to the direct insight into truth in their own lives” (*Mystics* 219). The search for this directness of insight did not guarantee absolute clarity, but it demonstrated Merton’s frustration with metaphysical, speculative and ecclesial apparatuses that cut people off from their own lives and added insult to injury by giving divine legitimation to that alienation.

Merton argued that something of this interior solitude and freedom from the exterior production of selfhood is present in every deep spiritual experience, whether religious, moral, or artistic, but he also noted that the archetypal symbols and rituals of the ancient cultures of both East and West favor the cultivation of the interior life more readily than the objectifying consciousness that he associates with the modern West. While Merton strained theologically against the limits of his Christology to understand the relationship of Christ to the other religions of the world, he referenced numerous parallels in other religions to the reconfiguration of consciousness which he called the retrieval of the true self, such as the Buddha-mind and the “original face before you were born” from the Zen tradition and the *fana* (annihilation) and *baqa*

(reintegration) of the Sufi tradition. While he did not ascribe explicitly to the notion that all religions “meet at the top” in their mystical manifestations, he did hold that in all traditions there are a minority group who pursue the religious quest more intensely in search of “a transcendent dimension of life beyond that of the ordinary empirical self and of ethical and pious observance” (Merton, *Spiritual Master* 230). However, he also noted that religions held no monopoly on that more broadly religious quest; in particular, he agreed with the Death of God theologians that the notion of “the religious” had become so deeply ambiguous that it no longer communicated the basic meaningfulness of the depth dimension of human experience. More directly, and more radically for Merton the monk, “the religious” had been co-opted by “religion” by being “mixed up with confessionalism, with belonging to this or that religious institution, with making and advertising a particular kind of religious commitment, with a special style in devotion or piety, or even with a certain exclusiveness in the quest for an experience which has to be sacred and not secular” (*Literary Essays* 98). One might suggest that by separating the external “boundary markers” of religious affiliation from “religion” as a pursuit of the existential depths of human existence, Merton hinted at what the Continental tradition might call “religion without religion.”

While he continued to function and identify as a Catholic monk and priest to the end of his life, the reality that “religion” had been so co-opted by violence and a lack of a critical spirit that Merton turned to wisdom, *sapientia*, understood as deep synthesis of systematic knowledge and intuition, to point beyond both to the creation of a space of transformed selfhood. Merton opened his 1961 book *The Behavior of Titans* with “Prometheus: A Meditation” and concluded with two essays on the other great pre-Socratic firebringer, the philosopher Herakleitos the Obscure (c 535 – c 475 BCE), a contemporary of Aeschylus and a philosopher of ceaseless change. Merton positioned Herakleitos as an ally to Prometheus in opposing the “Olympian

formalism” of Hesiod and Homer, a worldview characterized by “static and changeless order” and “the laws of mechanical necessity..., the ritualism and the rigidity of the conventional exterior cult, the static condition of a society that feared all that was not ‘ordinary’” (*Titans* 75). Linking this image with the worldview of Hesiod to open a reflection on the modern era, Merton used the Prometheus of Aeschylus as a counter to this objectifying alienation of humanity: “In Prometheus, the Firebearer, we see a similar revolt against Olympian formalism. We notice that the Titan, Prometheus, represents the older, more primitive, more ‘Dionysian’ earth gods of archaic Greece, in rebellion against the newly constructed tyranny of Zeus” (*Titans* 86).

Aeschylus’ Prometheus thus pointed away from conventional associations of the Firebringer with the dangers of “playing God” with unfettered technological advancement (a common but odd connection for a figure whose very name means “Foresight”) back to a synthesis of *scientia* (systematic knowledge) and *intellectus* (intuitive understanding) in the highest form of cognition, *sapientia* (wisdom), which “embraces the entire scope of man’s life and all its meaning” and “grasps the ultimate truths to which science and intuition only point” (Merton, *Literary Essays* 99). Therefore, Merton noted, it is important to consider whether Prometheus’ fire “symbolizes science or wisdom. One might argue the point at length but in the end the only satisfactory solution is that it symbolizes both. For Prometheus, fire is science perfected by wisdom and integrally united with wisdom in a ‘hidden harmony.’ For the Olympians it is perhaps true to say that wisdom is not important, and that what they begrudge men is science, because science means power” (*Titans* 86). From Merton’s perspective, the Prometheans who invoked Aeschylus as rationalist and rebel against God were paradoxically acting out of the Olympian formalism which he associated with Hesiod. Where they saw only the liberation of the human person from God and the exaltation of the scientific worldview, Merton

saw in Aeschylus' Prometheus a symbol of the unity of science and wisdom rather than the uncritical affirmation of science alone. Nevertheless, he was not simply advocating a romanticized "back to nature" rejection of the benefits of technology, in particular because "Wisdom without science is unable to penetrate the full sapiential meaning of the created and material cosmos" (*Gandhi* 4).

Like several of the "death of God" theologians, Merton saw the potential of literature to fund the religious imagination and speak to an audience that found theological language meaningless. Since no formula or dogma could suffice to prosaically elaborate the deep meaning of the human condition, Merton suggested that "sapiential thought resorts to poetic myth and to religious or archetypal symbol" (*Literary Essays* 100) to provide not merely an intellectual understanding and control of external objects so much as a deepening understanding of self. Because of its capacity to evoke this awareness of the human's true place in the universe, he saw literature as a privileged arena for the elucidation of wisdom in the modern world, even more than much philosophy and theology which, insofar as they attempted to "prose" the world, closed down rather than opened up this elusive, experiential, "sapiential" vision of the world. Merton took issue with those thinkers who straightforwardly identified "religious" literature with explicit faith, orthodoxy, having God "in the cast of characters" (*Literary Essays* 94) and other matters pertaining to organized religion. He instead turned to the Greek myths to illustrate that a story need not presuppose the existence of the gods, let alone devotion to their service, to be fundamentally religious in character. He noted that the reader could respond to Greek tragedy "without being converted to a belief in Zeus. As a matter of fact, Greek tragedy could imply a very definite ambiguity toward the gods...Aeschylus was not at all convinced that Zeus' rule was



beneficial or even fully justified. And the Zeus of *Prometheus* is regarded as a usurper against whom Prometheus has a very plausible case” (*Literary Essays* 95).

What made literature of this character religious was specifically its capacity to evoke an enactment of the conflict which he believed is at the heart of the human predicament: the question not of “a coherent intellectual view of life but a creative effort to penetrate the meaning of man’s suffering and aspirations in symbols that are imaginatively authentic” (*Literary Essays* 115). Following Aristotle’s theory of tragedy provoking a “catharsis of pity and terror,” Merton argued that tragic literature promotes liberation of self “by a return to a more real evaluation of ourselves, a change of heart analogous to Christian ‘repentance’” (*Literary Essays* 96) which, although distinct from theological “faith” springs from the same roots in its assertion of the meaningfulness of human experience. This self-evaluation was “something much more dynamic and modern than the classical hierarchical pyramid with God at the top, man halfway down, and prime matter at the bottom - an order in which each one has a fixed place determined for him eternally before he was born. In such a context, the call to repent is simply a call to assume one’s proper place in the cosmic order,” (*Life and Living* 126) which inevitably entails heteronomy and submission. This abstraction of a divine hierarchy to which “puny humanity” must submit gave way for Merton to something more akin to deconstruction of both the external divine ego and the grasping human ego. “Salvation” came to take on a radical new form for Merton, not the reward of the individual soul after death, but the attainment of freedom through a sapiential inhabiting of a more realistic vision of the place of the human in the cosmos: small but not irrelevant, intelligent but not all-knowing, technologically powerful but hardly the masters of our own fates.

Wisdom/sapientia and tragedy tellingly came together in Merton’s broader sense of the destiny of the human person. Merton invoked Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy*, noting, “The true

spiritual life is a life neither of dionysian orgy nor or apollonian clarity: it transcends both. It is a life of wisdom, a life of sophianic love” (*New Seeds* 141). Notably, Nietzsche saw Aeschylus’ Prometheus as the highest representation of tragedy, the synthesis of the Dionysian and the Apollonian that brings the spectator into the tension of boundedness and freedom that he saw defining the sapiential/sophianic religious perspective. That Merton indirectly linked tragedy and wisdom as the key to spiritual life signifies how much the decentering of the false self assumed a soteriological place in Merton’s thought.

This tragic soteriology, or perhaps tragedy AS soteriology, was not simply the discharge of pity and terror to “get it out of our systems” or leave it in the theater, scapegoat-like (in line with tragedy as *tragoidia*, “goat-song”) but mourning one’s way to a broader sense of self, rooted in the cosmos. Merton’s sense of “the religious” had evolved dramatically from his early idealization of the Catholic Church, and the monastic life in particular, coming to understand religion as framed not in opposition to secular life, but as a particular way of living one’s ordinary life. This mode of transformed religiosity involved not producing not peak moments of heightened religious “experience,” but a more stable “transformation of lost objects of belief into a more internalized and diffuse sense of the divine” (Jones 114), leaving a modality of religion which is “an alternative to the skeptical rejection of religion, or naive superstition, or a lifeless abstraction” (Jones 115). Such a mature religiosity destabilized the narcissistic search for certitude in any form, including ecclesial authority, the invocation of the “will of God,” one’s own conscience, and reason. This alternative “religion” was, for Merton, explicitly oriented to transformation of consciousness; rather than shoring up the narcissistic ego through the myriad productions of cultural and religious life, he came to imagine a tragic form of religion “which is born in us from God and which perhaps ought not to be called religion, born from the devastation

of our trivial ‘self’ and all our plans for ‘our self,’ even though they be plans for a holy self, a pure self, a loving, sacrificial self” (*Conjectures* 154). This model of religion, which looked so different from conventional religion as to merit another name, was rooted in moving away from identification with the small view of self in favor of a more realistic appropriation of one’s place in the world,. This de-idealization of religion involved a process of moving from immature narcissism toward what Heinz Kohut calls “cosmic narcissism,” facing the human condition with neither illusion nor resignation but empathic identification with the world construed as a larger self.

Merton’s resolution was no more atheism than it was “a-self-ism,” but a reconfiguration of both self and God, seeing through the “provisional self-construction which exists, for practical purposes, only in a sphere of relativity” (*Zen* 24). This “seeing through” of the falsities of the external self recentered the self, not on the individual subjectivity, but on God; however, this recentering “does not consider God either as Immanent or as Transcendent but as grace and presence, hence neither as a ‘Center’ imagined somewhere ‘out there’ nor ‘within ourselves’” (Merton, *Zen* 25). Metaphors of God as immanent and as transcendent continued to reify certitude either in God as Big Other or as enthroned in human reason, making alienated use of reason or faith the true lure on both sides of the same coin.

I suggest that Merton’s primary response to the problem of God in relationship to human freedom that occasioned his use of the symbol of Prometheus was his deconstruction, one might even say feminization, of the hypermasculinity of the self and God seen as self-contained subjects to be understood by contrast with others seen as objects. In “Two Faces of Prometheus” Merton highlighted competing visions of the feminine in Hesiod and Aeschylus’ myths, suggesting that he saw femininity, or more properly the hypermasculinity of Zeus, as the key to

understanding the opposed worldviews they presented. He noted the misogynistic and more broadly misanthropic tenor of Hesiod's story, noting that Zeus was the destroyer of the older matriarchal system of divinity, the "subversive and dethroned gods of archaic Greece..., the society of the Earth mother, of Demeter, of Hera and Athene"; discussing Zeus' "gift" of Pandora in the wake of Prometheus' theft of fire, he commented, "Strange, ponderous fantasy of an aggressively male society! Woman comes from Zeus as a *punishment*, for in her 'everything is good but her heart.' Woman, the culminating penance in a life of labor and sorrow!" (*Raids* 80). Zeus, the antithesis of matriarchy and maternal power, instituted an order of absolute control "in which no bird may chirp and no flower may look at the sun without the permission of the jealous Father" (*Raids* 80). Of the more generally oppressive view of the relationship between the gods and humanity, he added, "In the world picture of Hesiod, though it is beautiful, primitive, full of Hellenic clarity, we find this darkness, this oppressive and guilty view that life and love are somehow a punishment" (*Raids* 81).

Aeschylus' tragedy, on the other hand, presented Zeus rather than Prometheus as the usurper who rose "between Prometheus and the Earth Mother and Ocean" (*Raids* 81); Merton highlighted again the promise of final victory: Prometheus "calls upon the feminine, the wordless, the timelessly moving elements to witness to his sufferings. Earth hears him" (*Behavior of Titans* 14). For Hesiod, Pandora as symbol of the feminine denoted that with which humanity was punished, the irascibility of the gods and the impossibility of basic trust in the world governed by the gods. For Aeschylus, however, the feminine became the locus of salvation, the witness to trust that Prometheus sought and failed to find in Zeus. The promise of Prometheus' eventual freedom brought with it "the victory of Earth, that is to say of mercy, of

humanity, of innocence, of trust” (*Behavior of Titans* 14) which Merton explicitly connected with the feminine.

Merton moved from these pre-Socratic frames of reference to an explicitly Scriptural and Christian context in his response to the atomizing and “sovereign” Christian conception of God through the Biblical figured of Sophia. In a 1958 letter to Boris Pasternak, Merton recounted a dream of meeting a young Jewish girl named Proverb and retold his “Fourth and Walnut” experience which happened only a few days after that dream: “I was walking alone in the crowded street and suddenly saw that everybody was Proverb and that in all of them shone her extraordinary beauty and purity and shyness, even though they did not know who they were...And they did not know their real identity as the Child so dear to God who, from before the beginning, was playing in His sight all days, playing in the world” (*I Have Seen* 56-7). That Merton saw all people as Proverb, an allusion to the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament and the Biblical image of Sophia (Wisdom) playing before God (Proverbs 8: 30-31) suggest the relationship of Sophia to God and to his theological anthropology: God as simplicity and “nothing-ness” is the truest reality of the person for Merton, and just as people create narcissistic “false selves,” so has humanity created a “false self” for God, rooted in power fantasies and the reversal of everything that humanity cannot abide in itself.

In 1963 Merton published in limited edition a prose poem entitled “Hagia Sophia,” presenting his vision of Sophia, a metaphorically rich and complex meditation on God imagined in a feminine key, characterized by subtlety and hiddenness rather than muscular control. Highlighting the simplicity and humility of the God he labored to imagine, he wrote, “Hagia Sophia in all things is the Divine Life reflected in them, considered as a spontaneous participation, as their invitation to the Wedding Feast..The feminine principle in the world is the

inexhaustible source of creative realizations of the Father's glory...But she remains unseen, glimpsed only by a few. Sometimes there are none who know her at all" (*Spiritual Master* 262).

Merton's focus on the opposed views of masculinity and femininity in the two Prometheus myths, as well as his writings on Sophia as a counterweight to hypermasculine God-talk, together suggest that Merton's solution to the problem of God that drove so much of his early focus on the promethean character of theology is his re-imagination of God away from the abstraction of much Christian orthodoxy. In view of this vulnerable, simple, humble Sophia as the deepest reality of the person, the "small god" of Merton's early essays became clearer: the god of power, self-exaltation, and authority over human freedom gave way to the God who enacted freedom from the external self as much as from tyrannical images of deity. He went so far as to argue straightforwardly that "The center of Christian humanism is the idea that God is love, not infinite power" (*Love and Living* 134). This was not simply the evacuation of power, so that God, or Christ, or Prometheus was to be understood as powerless *tout court*. For all of Merton's early discussion of the "weak gods" who hoard the freedom that humanity covets, the Living God, Sophia, represented strength in an ironic key of weakness: "Through her wise answer, through her obedient understanding, through the sweet yielding consent of Sophia, God enters without publicity into the city of rapacious men. She crowns Him not with what is glorious, but with what is greater than glory: the one thing greater than glory is weakness, nothingness, poverty" (*Spiritual Master* 263). It may be argued that Merton reified gender stereotypes by writing "rapacity" into masculinity and "weakness, nothingness, poverty" into femininity, but his attempt to rethink divine power away from sovereignty and towards power as patience, as presence, as witness, stands within the lineage of later and more nuanced feminist and postcolonial theologies. "Hagia Sophia" concluded with an image of a God was henceforth to be found, not

above human fallibility, but there and only there: “A vagrant, a destitute wanderer with dusty feet, finds his way down a new road. A homeless God, lost in the night, without papers, without identification, without even a number, a frail expendable exile lies down in desolation under the sweet stars of the world and entrusts Himself to sleep” (*Spiritual Master* 264). Such a reversal of imagination of God as destitute, homeless, expendable entails not only seeing God as hospitable (i.e., in the dominant position in a power hierarchy), but as asking for hospitality. Caputo notes Derrida’s similar conception of hospitality “as an example of unconditionality without sovereignty, where he means the appeal made by the wayfarer, the stranger, the immigrant, e.g. – who has not the wherewithal to lay down his head, who lacks the power to defend him or herself, whose only defense is defenselessness, the power of powerlessness, the appeal to the good” (“Without Sovereignty” 17).

While Merton never fully absorbed the subtleties of feminist thought, and his work predated the rise of feminist theological scholarship as a significant movement in the academy, his use of the image of Sophia anticipated the later scholarship of feminist thinkers including Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Elizabeth Johnson, and Melissa Raphael.<sup>11</sup> On its own, Merton’s sophianic theology offered a significant challenge and corrective to Christian worldviews built on the metaphor of divine omnipotence, and a number of Merton scholars have concluded studies of Merton’s Christology there, replacing the God of heteronomy and the “great Greek” Christ with the embodiment of mercy and simplicity in the

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<sup>11</sup> See Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam’s Child, Sophia’s Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* (New York: Continuum, 1994), Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Goddesses and the Divine Feminine: A Western Religious History* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), and Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992). Writing from the Jewish tradition, Melissa Raphael uses the symbol of Shekinah in similar ways to Christian uses of Sophia in *The Female Face of God in Auschwitz: A Jewish Feminist Theology of the Holocaust* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003).

figure of Sophia.<sup>12</sup> In the wake of the Holocaust, numerous Jewish (and to a much lesser extent, Christian) theologies have taken problematic Biblical and theological images with more seriousness, challenging a tendency to imagine God in philosophical terms that elide distasteful Biblical images. This “theodic crisis” opened reflection on an alternative Prometheanism that legitimately opposed a truly evil God, what Zachary Braiterman calls “antitheism,” refusing to justify evil and investigating the violent and even abusive character of God in the Biblical tradition (*Auschwitz* 4). As Melissa Raphael notes, those antitheodicies typically upbraid God for not being masculine enough, for not flexing the divine muscles against Israel’s enemies. These theologies stand by divine omnipotence at the expense of divine benevolence, but they do allow for contestation with God (e.g. GN 18: 16-33, GN 32) in a way that a static, all-perfect philosophical God-image does not. Against the dual heteronomies of submission or resistance to God, Merton and Raphael (and other feminist thinkers more generally) imagine God from a perspective that rejects divine omnipotence for the sake of divine solidarity, mercy as presence rather than as vengeance against one’s enemies. Thus, where typical images of Promethean revolt against the gods suggest the range of antitheodicies that Braiterman catalogues, Merton’s God joins the struggle against those “orthodox” but false gods which have taken the kingdom of God by force.

Nevertheless, Sophia did not render Prometheus irrelevant in Merton’s symbolic landscape so much as complement God-talk which might otherwise be mistaken as classical theism. I suggest that Merton’s late references to Aeschylus’ Prometheus as a solitary and a rebel, one who suffers for the sake of standing for justice, provide a corrective to disproportionately “passive” readings of his sophianic meditations. While it is certainly a highly

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<sup>12</sup> Note, for example, George Kilcourse, *Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton’s Christ* and Chris Pramuk, *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton*, both of whom highlight kenosis as a centerpiece of Merton’s Christology.



significant goal to counter the excesses of Christendom, to “de-imperialize” the Christ of much Christian worship and belief, an overemphasis on kenosis, on gentleness, on yielding risked losing the critique that Merton saw as so important in the face of the destructive trajectories at work in the world. The confrontation was not with God, but with the powers and principalities, the “Zeuses,” not of the heavens, but of the earth, that Merton saw as so central to making the Titan’s rebellion intelligible and necessary. He clearly did not see quietism, gentleness, yielding as the final goal in the formation of the self: his challenge to the Cartesian ego was in the service of retrieving the fearless, unselfconscious freedom of heart that enabled the solitary to stand apart from the conventions of common opinion and mass atrocity.

It is at this level of prophetic challenge that it becomes clear that Merton’s tragic view of salvation via *sapientia* was not a merely interior or solipsistic one. If his theology simply replaced a powerful God with a powerless one and preached sentimentality instead of abstraction, it would lose any hope of calling on Prometheus as an icon of political resistance. In his later years Merton wrote furiously about the social issues of his day, from racism and the Vietnam War to the madness of nuclear proliferation, challenging the abstracting worldview that made such atrocities possible. Even as he was troubled by some of the more extreme actions of his friends in the peace movement, such as burning draft cards (or bodies)<sup>13</sup> and pouring blood on nuclear nose cones, his more serious concern was with the apparent ease with which people ceded their freedom (and their consciences) to collective power, supporting warmongering with their silences and their vocal approval. To that end, he noted, “The true rebellion against God today is not merely that of the defiant and promethean individual, but much rather that of the

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<sup>13</sup> Merton was horrified by the 1965 self-immolation of Catholic Worker Roger LaPorte, leading him to temporarily withdraw his support from the Catholic Peace Fellowship out of concern that the peace movement itself was driven by a moral void, itself as violent as the violence that it claimed to oppose.

massive and abstract collectivity in which man in the neuter, *das Mann*, [sic] man in the anonymous mass, becomes serenely convinced of his inviolable security as master of his own destiny and of his world” (Merton, *Mystics* 275). He pointed to Adolf Eichmann as a peculiarly extreme example of “mass man,” the individual who had so handed over his moral compass to the collective that there was nothing left of personal responsibility to challenge injustice.

Merton’s “Devout Meditation in Honor of Adolf Eichmann” examined Hannah Arendt’s book on Eichmann’s trial, in particular focusing on the horror of Eichmann having been found sane by the court psychiatrist: “The ‘sanity’ of modern man is about as useful to him as the huge bulk and muscles of the dinosaur. If he were a little less sane, a little more doubtful, a little more aware of his absurdities and contradictions, perhaps there might be a possibility of his survival” (*Raids* 49).

Against the mass mind as represented by Eichmann, Merton poised the solitary, like the lonely Titan on Caucasus, standing as an eternal NO to the tyranny of the mass mind. Against the institutionalized formalism he experienced in the monastery, he interpreted the eremitic life he was living by the mid-1960s as as “a sort of guerrilla-outpost” that he claimed enabled him to be more honest and authentic in his critique (both of the world and of the monastery) than he would be if he lived outside of the discipline that the monastic life afforded him. In the preface to the Japanese edition of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton wrote, “By my monastic vows and life, I am saying NO to all the concentration camps, the aerial bombardments, the staged political trials, the judicial murders, the racial injustices, the economic tyrannies, and the whole socio-economic apparatus which seems geared for nothing but global destruction in spite of all its fair words in favor of peace” (*Honorable Reader* 65). While he no longer understood the monastic vocation as inherently or automatically a mode of resistance to power (since he came to see how much the

monastic life could recreate its own distinctive false selves and false gods), he hoped that by deliberately standing apart from the secular world and, as a hermit, from the monastic production, he might create a liminal space from which to take a valuable perspective on the affairs of his time.

While dissent became increasingly important for Merton as a monk and a Christian, he knew firsthand the effects of that dissent: crucifixion, whether on Caucasus or Calvary, inflicted not by the living God (who was the very one being crucified) but by Caesar and all who prefer the small gods, theological or otherwise. Merton's late Prometheus, like Christ a true rebel, rebels against victimization in all its forms and thus always becomes another victim, not powerless but *vulnerable*, without *sovereignty*, the unenviable but inevitable reality of the human situation. Evacuating the image of God as guarantor of divine order in favor of a God who is the fly in the ointment, found (only) in the risky, uncertain and lonely voice of dissent, Merton antedated Milbank and Žižek by decades in affirming the "monstrosity" of Christ and all who dissent: drawing on the absurdist play *Rhinoceros* by Eugene Ionesco, he noted, "To be the last man in the rhinoceros herd is, in fact, to be a monster" (*Raids* 20). Merton's Christ and his Prometheus thus blended, not simply in Sophianic hiddenness and shyness, but in the consequences of standing against the destructiveness of the herd, the abstracting and de-individualizing worldview of Zeus. "There will always be a place, says Ionesco, 'for those isolated consciences who have stood up for the universal conscience' as against the mass mind. But their place is solitude. They have no other. Hence it is the solitary person (whether in the city or in the desert) who does mankind the inestimable favor of reminding it of its true capacity for maturity, liberty, and peace" (*Raids* 22). The Promethean solitude of Merton in his hermitage and Christ on the Cross became not turning away from the world and turning to God, as if the

two were opposed, but the very principle of “yes-saying” to life, an affirmation of the tragic character of existence and of God as the very force of resistance to that which does the crucifying by freezing life in any system of abstraction, whether religious or irreligious.

Merton’s protestations that the Christian God is not Zeus, that the struggles and sufferings of Prometheus against God are not only unnecessary but entirely self-imposed, demonstrate the degree to which his theology remained highly iconic, monastic, and mythic rather than scriptural or, to a lesser degree, even liturgical. Merton might well have agreed with Joseph McLelland’s attempts to defuse the tension of “Prometheus or God” by making the “will of God” simply equivalent to what upholds the wellbeing of humanity. McLelland argued, “The God of Israel is known as a covenanting deity whose will is so selfless that even his Commandments take the form not of heteronomous or arbitrary dictates but of guidance for the Way of authentic humanity” (*Prometheus Rebound* 39). Apart from missing the point that commandments need not be arbitrary to be heteronomous, however, McLelland seriously underestimated the problem of Biblical texts that certainly seem to present God as cruel, arbitrary, or heteronomous, the number of which is simply too high to be waved aside.

Merton began his “Two Faces of Prometheus” with a story told by Erasmus and Colet about the “first sin” of Cain, not the murder of Abel but the theft of seeds of corn from Paradise, from which humanity had of course been exiled: “He planted them and succeeded admirably as a farmer, but this drew down upon him the wrath of the Almighty. His sacrifices were no longer acceptable” (*Raids* 11). Merton’s only comment on this story was to note the humanist impulse behind it: “It is curiously significant that modern and ‘progressive’ man should consider himself somehow called upon to vindicate Cain, and that in doing so he should identify Cain with the fire-bearing Titan whom he has been pleased to make the symbol of his own technological

genius and of his cosmic aspirations” (*Raids* 11). In view of Cain’s punishment for resisting God’s monarchical imposition of exile from the Garden, who would NOT vindicate Cain? From the binding of Isaac (GN 22) to the death of the Egyptian firstborn to the xenophobic, heteronormative and misogynistic utterances and actions ascribed to God in both Old and New Testaments, the philosophical abstraction of God as all-good coming into contact with the irascible God of the Bible too easily leads to the nihilistic mental gymnastics of rationalizing texts that are genuinely terrible.<sup>14</sup> More critically, however, even a benevolent dictator remains a dictator, and seeing divine commandments, “God’s will,” as uniformly the path to “authentic humanity” risks closing off conversation: if God is issuing commands, they must be for the good of humanity, so again, conversation, the “democracy to come,” becomes antithetical to human flourishing.

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<sup>14</sup> See, as one investigation among many into problematic Biblical portrayals of God, Phyllis Trible’s classic *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984.

## Conclusion: Prometheus De-Livered

Merton's early essays on Prometheus challenged what he saw as a "death-mysticism" of self-loathing which made God a problem for humanity. This Prometheus, admirable for his willingness to face the terror of "having to be himself, having to be a person" (*New Man* 24) and pitiable in his sufferings, was finally mistaken for chaining himself to the rock of guilt for defying the small gods he himself created and despised. Merton's response was an effort to free religious people from unnecessary suffering at the hands of illusory gods who opposed human freedom and flourishing, in favor of a God who already in his theology did not occupy the judge's bench. As his theology and his contact with the world outside the monastery matured, he came to see that dispelling those small (theological) gods did not spell the end of the Titan's torment. Camus' "Prometheus in Hell" named the antihumanist risk of both antitheism and political rebellion: "Prometheus alone has become god and reigns over the solitude of men. But from Zeus he has gained only solitude, and cruelty; he is no longer Prometheus, he is Caesar. The real, the eternal Prometheus has now assumed the aspect of one of his victims" (McLelland, *Prometheus Rebound*, 235). "Render unto God what is God's" might no longer point to a God who was simply a bigger and stronger version of Caesar, but Merton saw that Caesar remained alive and well in the modern era, and rebellion against him carried its own dangers, both from within and without. Where Camus argued that, "we have but one way of creating God which is to become him" (*Literary Essays* 221), Merton challenged such illusory exaltation of humanity with what Camus already knew, namely that "since man has decided to occupy the place of God he has shown himself to be by far the blindest, and cruelest, and pettiest and most ridiculous of all the false gods" (*Raids* 61). That is, the (false) heteronomous God that modernity rejected as a

threat to human freedom too often became a template for the exalted/alienated humanity that now needed to fill the void of omnipotence and control.

Merton's response to the modern impulse to take the place of gods was, paradoxically, the retrieval of humility, not bowing and scraping before a more powerful force or hating humanity for its weakness or ignorance, but love of the human condition, a call to "be human in this most inhuman of ages, to guard the image of man for it is the image of God" (*Raids* 6). Merton believed that it was in acceptance of the naked and vulnerable self that humanity becomes most human by refusing to run from the fearful and shaming parts of life. His rejection of classical theism paradoxically functioned as a "yes" to the human condition: where classical theism exalted God through attributing to God descriptors which were the opposite of human limitedness, fallibility, and weakness, Merton's Sophia was an affirmation of the existential depths of the human condition, exemplified in the most marginal and "irrelevant" of persons. Naturally, this insight drew strongly on the kenotic images of Christ in the New Testament, but it sought to heal the odd rift between the weakness of Christ and the omnipotence of God which has endured in Christian theology for centuries. This meant that *kenosis*, self-emptying, was not in Merton's system about God "condescending" or lowering Godself from on high into the muck of the human situation, which would simply reinstate the bifurcation of a genuinely omnipotent deity merely play-acting or trying on humility for a while before returning to God's rightful sovereignty. Rather, if for Christians Christ is the "image of the invisible God" (Col 1:15), then for Merton the utter vulnerability of Christ indicated something about the character of the Christian God which is quite distinct from the power fantasies which remain at the backbone of much Christian liturgy and theology. Writing from a Continental philosophical perspective, J. Aaron Simmons notes the political import of such theological imagery: "kenosis contests the

idea of the detached, isolated modern subject. If God is not primarily conceived of as a self-enclosed, absolutely immutable being standing over and against the world, and as best defined in terms of power, but as an originally outpouring of love toward the world, then it follows that, as *imago Dei*, the self is plausibly understood as also originally poured-out to others” (*God and the Other* 168). Where “becoming God” in Camus’s system would entail flight from the vulnerability of humanity into the sovereignty of divinity, Merton reversed that pattern by having the suffering and failing Christ become not only the pattern of authentic humanity but that of divinity as well, rather than its antithesis: growth in humanity, in tragic acceptance of the human condition, became the mode of divinization. Insofar as exaltation of the infinite God as defined in opposition to the human condition denigrated the finite, love of God could only diminish humanity; in response, Merton recognized God precisely in facing the existential abyss of humanity’s contingency and absurdity, saw love of the human condition as the key to loving God. This was no trump card to “prove” the superiority of Christian dogma or make the Incarnation into a magical cure-all; on the contrary, since Merton saw so much ecclesial duplicity in claiming a crucified God but enacting the power fantasy of divine heteronomy. This was, against Christian orthodoxy, an effort to take kenosis seriously, not as “play-acting” with weakness, but the model of authentic entrance into the contingency of the human condition. The family resemblance with radical theology is significant; as Simmons puts it, “Since the God that Nietzsche rightly declared ‘dead’ is the metaphysical God, Vattimo contends that the God of the Book is a God best understood as kenotic. As incarnated, emptied, historical, and human, the kenotic God is not representative of classical theistic claims to God’s omnipotence, but instead exemplifies what John Caputo (2006) refers to as ‘the weakness of God’” (*God and the Other* 174).



Given the pains which Merton took to distance his God-talk from a classical theistic vocabulary, it remains worthwhile to ask if Merton so evacuated any content from God as to render his particular kind of “a-theism” indistinguishable from atheism. Just as his rejection of a Cartesian definition of the self manifested in a theological anthropology that was strongly marked by unsaying and negation, similarly his God-talk was heavily driven by “unsaying” much of what had come to be taken for granted in the Christian tradition. That is, the anthropological tendency to construct “false selves” against the nakedness of the human condition paralleled a theological trajectory of constructing a God-image out of the negation of human fallibility. While he certainly favored an apophatic vocabulary in his late writings on God, he grew past the temptation of the apophatic tradition to simply “lodge God more deeply still in the onto-theological circuit that circles between being and beings” (*Weakness* 10). Despite his disagreement with their social ethics, Merton was in fundamental agreement with the “death of God” theologians who saw the impossibility of imagining God in the same way as a medieval person might, as the topmost point of a great chain of being. This God issued no commands, stopped no atrocities, judged no sinners. Despite his invocation of God to the end, was Merton left with functional atheism? Robert Inchausti noted that Merton’s struggle to speak of God in a non-objectifying way indicates the limitation of language as it applies to the apophatic tradition: “Merton would agree with those atheists who deny God’s existence as some sort of super ‘decider,’ concept, or ‘thing,’ but he would disagree with those who then draw the conclusion that God, therefore, does not exist. What does not exist is the Cartesian God-object. What does exist is a presence revealed in and through the love that rises in us out of a ground that lies beyond us” (*Apologies* 7).

Merton's "weak" theology, lacking the "super-decider" who would impose some final decision from above, gave new impetus to human action, not in a simple utilitarianism that justified any means for the sake of the end of implementing a utopian project, but in what radical theology might call a "democracy to come." He eschewed the temptation to turn critique into an alternative program or reconfiguration, recognizing the revolutionary trajectory of replacing an old tyranny with a new one: "our task is to dissociate ourselves from all who have theories which promise clearcut and infallible solutions, and to mistrust all such theories, not in a spirit of negativism and defeat, but rather trusting life itself, and nature, and if you will permit me, God above all" (*Raids* 61). This trust of life itself suggests the redemption of the capacity for sane and simple acceptance of smallness while honoring the particular, the local, the individual rather than "looking through the wrong end of the telescope" and turning smallness into nothingness.

Just as Aeschylus' Prometheus knew that his eventual victory over the tyranny of Zeus would be one of patience and wisdom rather than force, Merton knew that, as a monk and poet, his only tools for advancing peace were his words, and that the ability to hold together opposites in conversation (*conversatio*) was the hallmark of monastic conversion (*conversatio*) in the post-Christian era. His later works included titles like "Letters to a White Liberal," *A Vow of Conversation* and *Cables to the Ace*, suggesting communication and dialogue, and while his writings did not typically include "conversation" with God, this was not because God was a conversation stopper, but because God as "other" had given way to God as the deepest reality of the self. In his "Letter to Pablo Antonio Cuadra Concerning Giants," Merton wrote, "Christ is found not in loud and pompous declarations but in humble and fraternal dialogue. He is found less in a truth that is imposed than in a truth that is shared" (*Collected Poems* 383). I suggest that Merton saw this non-sovereign Christ authorizing (in a non-authoritarian way) the possibility of

dialogue, the recognition that power-over is not the only kind of power, and the respect for the individual experience that might sanction democracy, a “democracy-to-come” that need not, could not, threaten disagreement with condemnation. Thus, without claiming that he accepted the “death of God” theology without reservations, I suspect that Merton would feel much more at home with radical theology or theopoetics, understood as the inheritor of the concerns of the death of God theologies of his time, than with most academic and ecclesial theology which was rooted in divine sovereignty, and which more generally attempted a prosaic explication of the fundamentally poetic character of religion and of life. This played out in Merton’s theology, not as atheism understood as disbelief in the existence of any God, but as a kind of “a-theism,” a refusal of classical theism as the production of a reified God-object imagined at the top of the pyramid of being and power and endorsing the sovereignty of non-democratic exercise of power. In place of that God-object was left something not unlike Caputo’s “weak force” of deconstruction, a non-dualistic, non-hierarchical “spark” at the center of the self, deconstructing both God and self.

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## VITA

Patrick Edwin Cousins was born in Biloxi, MS. After graduating from St Stanislaus College in 1995, he attended Loyola University New Orleans. He received a Bachelor of Arts in Religious Studies from Loyola University in 2001. While teaching religion in high schools in Baton Rouge, the Navajo Nation, and New Orleans, he earned a Master of Arts in Theology from the University of Notre Dame, graduating in 2007. He subsequently took a position as a Campus Minister and Adjunct Instructor of Theological Studies at Saint Louis University. He began his studies at Syracuse University in August of 2009.