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# Technology and the Loss of Paradise

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On June 5, 1966, Thomas Merton gave a talk to novices at the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani. He was living near the main compound at a hermitage, St. Mary of Carmel, where he spent more and more time. He received permission to sleep there in October 1964, "without any special restriction." This enabled him to experience himself as "fully *human* ... fit to be offered to God."<sup>1</sup> Merton welcomed his freedom to explore life in Christ. Like the holy men and women who went to the wilderness in the fourth century, Merton was seeking salvation. What he sought most of all was his own true self, or inner self in Christ.<sup>2</sup>

The hermitage was paradise on earth where he could recover his truest personhood. By paradise, Merton had in mind

a state ... a place, on earth ... in which man was originally created to live on earth.... What the Desert Fathers sought when they believed they could find 'paradise' in the desert was the lost innocence, the emptiness and purity of heart which had belonged to Adam and Eve in Eden.<sup>3</sup>

With the desert saints, Merton understood his calling as growing in love. His ultimate goal, however, was neither love, nor purity of heart: "the ultimate end," he stated, was the "Kingdom of God."<sup>4</sup> With Staretz Zosima, Merton believed "paradise is attainable because ... it is present within us and we have only to discover it there."<sup>5</sup>

Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) spent two years in a self-built house on the shores of Walden Pond outside of Concord,

Massachusetts. Like Thoreau, Merton recognized his place in nature, participated in the renewal of earth, and sought the recovery of paradise:

Thoreau sat in *his* cabin and criticized the railways. I sit in mine and wonder about a world that has, well, progressed. I must read *Walden* again, and see if Thoreau already guessed that he was part of what he thought he could escape. But it is not a matter of 'escaping.' It is not even a matter of protesting very audibly. Technology is here, even in the cabin. True, the utility line is not here yet, and so G.E. is not here yet either. When the utilities and G.E. enter my cabin arm in arm it will be nobody's fault but my own. I admit it. I am not kidding anybody, even myself. I will suffer their bluff and patronizing complacencies in silence. I will let them think they know what I am doing here.... Of course at three-thirty A.M. the SAC plane goes over, red light winking low under the clouds, skimming the wooded summits on the south side of the valley, loaded with strong medicine. Very strong. Strong enough to burn up all these woods and stretch our hours of fun into eternities.<sup>6</sup>

Technology routinely interrupted Merton's silence. His concern had to do less with his personal life and more with human rights, warfare, and the natural world, three areas impacted by technology. With respect to nature, Merton expressed concern that people used technology to change the natural environment into an artificial one without due regard for unintended consequences.

In his June 5, 1966 talk entitled "The Christian in a Technological World,"<sup>7</sup> Merton explained that some technological changes were useful. Lawn mowers were

a good thing, it's fine, there is nothing wrong with this, monastic life allows us to do the lawns, to have closely cropped lawns.... Technological society around a place like this requires cutting a lot of grass.... We used to have many creeks around here, and now we have one creek. When it rains, then you have plenty of creeks where the old ones

used to be. But this is a problem that technology doesn't solve. Instead of five fields, you have one; you can go down the creek and clean it up in one operation. But that's exactly how technology operates. You can simplify everything and get at it faster.<sup>8</sup>

Merton cautioned that the "ancient monastic outlook on such things" was suspicious of the technological revolution.

Attempts to control nature troubled Merton. What bothered him was the lack of concern for the effects of technology. What he discerned was "this whole instinct of man to gain mastery over the environment."<sup>9</sup> Merton challenged such "unquestioning belief in machines and processes ... [that] characterizes the mass mind." He called for humans to accept their limits, to use technology rightly, and to work for a "better world."<sup>10</sup>

Merton experienced "an unspeakable secret: paradise is all around us and we do not understand. It is wide open. The sword is taken away, but we do not know it: we are off 'one to his farm and another to his merchandise.' [Matt 22:5] Lights on. Clocks ticking. Thermostats working. Stoves cooking. Electric shavers filling radios with static. 'Wisdom,' cries the dawn deacon, but we do not attend."<sup>11</sup>

Merton made careful observations about the seasons, the elements, plants, and creatures. Emphasizing the intrinsic worth of creation and of the possible loss of our right relationship to nature, Merton wrote, humans are "part of nature." His April 13, 1963 journal entry continues:

Two superb days. When was there ever such a morning as yesterday? Cold at first, the hermitage dark in the moonlight (I had permission to go up right after Lauds), a fire in the grate (and how beautifully firelight shines through the lattice-blocks and all through the house at night!) Then the sunrise, enormous yolk of energy spreading and spreading as if to take over the sky. After that the ceremonies of the birds feeding in the dewy grass, and the meadowlark feeding and singing. Then the quiet, totally silent day, warm

mid morning under the climbing sun. It was hard to say psalms: one's attention was totally absorbed by the great arc of the sky and the trees and hills and grass and all things in them. How absolutely true, and how central a truth, that we are purely and simply *part of nature*, though we are the part which recognizes God. It is not Christianity, indeed, but post-Cartesian technologism that separates man from the world and makes him a kind of little god in his own right, with his clear ideas, all by himself.<sup>12</sup>

"We have to be humbly and realistically what we are ..." he concluded, "And one can be 'part of nature' surely, without being Lady Chatterley's lover."

Two days earlier, Merton had come upon a titmouse, a small resident bird. It lay dead on the grass, perhaps through his action. He had dumped some calcium chloride on a couple of anthills with the object of directing the ants elsewhere. He did not intend to poison them. Merton reflected as follows, "What a miserable bundle of foolish idiots we are! We kill everything around us even when we think we love and respect nature and life. This sudden power to deal death all around us *simply by the way we live*, and in total 'innocence' and 'ignorance,' is by far the most disturbing symptom of our time."<sup>13</sup>

Merton called on people to acknowledge how well God has made all things. Affirming the sacredness of all life, he concluded that denial of our place in nature resulted in the madness and cruelties of Nazism, in people becoming sick with junk or drugs, and in the loss of paradise. Merton respected other writers who championed taking every-day care of the earth. He pointed to the investigations of scientists like Rachel Carson (1907-1964), who challenged readers to reclaim their proper place in paradise. Carson had published her findings regarding the disruptive influence of DDT on nature in *The New Yorker* and then in *Silent Spring*. She dedicated the book to Albert Schweitzer, who said, "Man has lost the capacity to foresee and to forestall. He will end by destroying the earth."<sup>14</sup> Carson called for "new, imaginative, and creative approaches to the

problem of sharing our earth with other creatures."<sup>15</sup> Her publications stirred a firestorm of controversy. As much as any piece of writing can take such credit, *Silent Spring* fostered formation of the modern environmental movement and passage by the United States Congress of significant pieces of legislation. "*Silent Spring*," one commentator observed, "changed the world by describing it."<sup>16</sup>

Through a friend, Anne Ford, Merton secured a copy of *Silent Spring*. After reading it, he commended Carson for "contributing a most valuable and essential piece of evidence for the diagnosis of the ills of our civilization." He continued, "The awful irresponsibility with which we scorn the smallest values is part of the same portentous irresponsibility with which we dare to use our titanic power in a way that threatens not only civilization but life itself." He saw the need to address a "*consistent pattern*" that runs through every aspect of life—culture, economy, "our whole way of life"—and to arrive at a "clear, cogent statement of our ills, so that we may begin to correct them." Otherwise, humans might direct their efforts to superficial symptoms only. This risked aggravating the sickness in that the "*remedies*" became "*expressions of the sickness itself*." Merton characterized the root cause of the problem as a subconscious hatred of life as such and a death wish.<sup>17</sup>

There is no evidence that Carson received the letter, or replied. Merton wrote to her before he started to keep every letter he received and copies of every letter he typed and mailed. He kept a carbon of this one because he considered using it as an appendix to the *Cold War Letters*, a collection that went beyond the topics of war and peace.<sup>18</sup> Merton's letter reflected his growing concern about the impact of technology upon nature. In *Thoughts in Solitude*, written in 1953 and 1954, Merton defended the role of the solitary—monks, nuns, hermits, writers—in securing the future survival of life.

When men are merely submerged in a mass of impersonal human beings pushed around by automatic forces, they lose their true humanity, their integrity, their ability to love, their capacity for self-determination.... No amount of technological progress will cure the hatred that eats away the vitals of materialist society like a spiritual cancer.<sup>19</sup>

Merton recognized that our devices have become as angels, something in the realm of the sacred that had come to stand between the real world and us. The first characteristic of modern thinking that troubled him was a lack of awareness of one effect of technology, namely a numbing of the spiritual dimension of human beings. In his poem "Exploits of a Machine Age," Merton captured the emptiness of modern, technological society. In Merton's poem, a couple awaken one morning, dismayed by their own thin faces:

Once again they were dismayed  
By their own thin faces in the morning. They  
Hoped they would not die today, either.  
They hoped for some light  
Breakfast and a steady hand.

The couple flee to their "protected work" but "unsafe machinery" by which their employers lived well, while they lived empty lives. At the end of the day, "the machines were safe" and they carried on.

The machines were safe. Nothing  
At all had happened.  
Literally nothing.

The couple return to their grim dwellings, "muttering, 'Better luck tomorrow!'"<sup>20</sup> In this context both Albert Camus (1913-1960), who is mentioned frequently in Merton's journals and essays, and sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858-1917) characterized modern people as living at loose ends. They called this treadmill-like existence *anomie*, a formless living driven by an insatiable will, or "derangement."<sup>21</sup>

For Merton, technology could fulfill its promise only by serving all that is higher than itself—reason, humankind, God. "But becoming autonomous, existing only for itself, it [technology] imposes upon man its own irrational demands, and threatens to destroy him. Let us hope it is not too late for man to regain control."<sup>22</sup> Merton explained that technology is not in itself opposed to spirituality or to religion but that it has become a great and dangerous temptation. "There can be a deadening of spirit and of sensibility, a blunting of perception, a loss of awareness, a lowering of tone, a general

fatigue and lassitude, a proneness to unrest and guilt which we might be less likely to suffer if we simply went out and worked with our hands in the woods or in the fields." Invoking the possibility that good means could result in "bad ends," Merton concluded by calling for "a certain prudence . . . in the use of machines" and leaving to God the sanctification of our nature, and "the temple of our being."<sup>23</sup>

This higher awareness Merton sustained by faithfully observing the spiritual disciplines of Benedictine monasticism including meditation, confession, and the Liturgy of the Hours. The latter involved the Mass and prayers recited at prescribed times through the day. Such practices enabled Merton and other Christians to "reach and realize their limit" while recognizing that their praise "cannot attain to God." In Merton's words, "praise reaches not only the heart of God but also the heart of creation itself, finding everywhere the beauty of the righteousness of Yahweh."<sup>24</sup> The praise of God enabled Merton to reach both the heart of God and the heart of the created world.

Merton explored the relationship between God and nature in Mencius' Ox Mountain parable:

The trees on Ox Mountain were once beautiful. But being situated on the outskirts of a large state, the trees are hewn down by axes. Could they remain beautiful? Given the air of the day and the night, and the moisture of the rain and the dew, they do not fail to put forth new buds and shoots, but then cattle and sheep also come to graze. This accounts for the barren appearance of the mountain. Seeing this barrenness, people suppose that the mountain was never wooded. But how could this be the nature of the mountain? So it is also with what is preserved in a human being: could it be that anyone should lack the mind of humaneness and rightness? If one lets go of the innate good mind, this is like taking an axe to a tree; being hewn down day after day, can it remain beautiful? Given the rest that one gets in the day and the night, and the effect of the calm morning,



one's likes and dislikes will still resemble those of other people, but barely so. One becomes fettered and destroyed by what one does during the day, and if this fettering occurs repeatedly, the effect of the night will no longer be enough to allow him to preserve his mind, and he will be at scant remove from the animals. Seeing this, one might suppose that he never had the capacity for goodness. But can this be a human being's natural tendency? Thus, given nourishment, there is nothing that will not grow; lacking nourishment, there is nothing that will not be destroyed. Confucius said, 'Hold on and you preserve it; let go and you lose it. There is no appointed time for its going out and coming in, and no one knows its direction.' In saying this, was he not speaking of the mind? <sup>25</sup>

Mencius lived during the fourth century before the Common Era in China, where he is regarded as second only to Confucius in importance. In the Ox Mountain story, Mencius explored how human nature was created good but later corrupted. Religion served the purpose of helping the faithful to recover their true being, being good by nature. For Merton, the story was important in terms of his search for a spirituality by which he could claim his true humanity and satisfy his need for silence, solitude, stillness, and unhurriedness. Having escaped the "busy-ness" of the world, he found even the monastic life frenetic.

Fascinated by alternative spiritual paths to those laid down by technological culture, Merton looked to aboriginal peoples, those who in his view exemplified the qualities he sought.<sup>26</sup> He studied cargo cults, messianic movements that originated in Papua New Guinea in the nineteenth century. During Merton's lifetime, they appeared sporadically, notably during and immediately after the Second World War. Residents of the region observed the combatants bringing in large amounts of material goods. After the war, the military bases closed, thereby stopping the flow of material goods into the region. In an attempt to attract further deliveries of goods, indigenous people engaged in ritualistic practices such as building

crude imitation landing strips, aircraft, and radio equipment. They imitated behavior that they had observed on the part of the military personnel.

Merton's monastic colleague, Matthew Kelty, who had served in Papua New Guinea from 1947 to 1951, may have stimulated Merton's interest in the phenomenon. Around 1970, Kelty returned to Papua New Guinea, living there in a hermitage until 1982 after which he returned to Gethsemani.<sup>27</sup> Also, reading Kenelm Burridge's *Mambu* further sparked Merton's interest in the cargo cults, and he reviewed the book in an essay entitled "Cargo Cults of the South Pacific."<sup>28</sup> Merton saw the cargo cult phenomenon as an immensely important subject. He refused to dismiss what was occurring in New Guinea, as missionaries and colonial officials of the day did. He acknowledged that there were basic features of the thinking of Papua New Guineans that are essentially rational, for example, the observation that white colonialists had desirable goods that the New Guineans would like, and might leave behind if they left.

Merton saw parallels between the cargo cults and themes in apocalyptic literature or other contemporary phenomena that were sweeping the modern world. A universal feature of these social movements was to attack everything old, and to create something new. Reading *Mambu*, Merton found the notion of a New Man, a combination of white and Kanaka, who will get Cargo, paralleled in his own society, by myths that similarly equated technology with salvation. Merton concluded that such Western myth-dreams enable us to "spiritually enslave others in order to 'save' them. ... we should not be surprised when their own myth-dream demands of them that they get entirely free of us to save themselves. But ... each needs the other to cooperate in the common enterprise of building a world adequate for the historical maturity of man."<sup>29</sup>

A careful reader of indigenous spiritualities, Thomas Merton worried about the ongoing devastation by human beings of the natural world. He raised concern about ecological issues, and also about the need for people to unite technology and wisdom in total

self-forgetful creativity and service. "It would however be insufficient to limit Christian obligation, in the present crisis, merely to a course of action that can be somehow reconciled with moral principles. The problem is deeper. What is needed is a social action that will have the power to renew society because it springs *from the inner renewal of the Christian and of his Church*." "The real problem of our time," he believed, is "basically spiritual. One important aspect of this problem is the fact that in many Christians the Christian conscience seems to function only in a rudimentary vestigial faculty, robbed of its full vigor and inescapable of attaining its real purpose ... a life completely transformed in Christ."<sup>30</sup>

Merton wrote prior to the publication of a number of books that have enabled Christians to recover a spirituality like that of the early Christians. For authors Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, for example, the first Christians honored human dignity and rooted their lives "in the soil of this good and difficult earth."<sup>31</sup> Merton called on humans to live respectfully on earth, to leave a light footprint, and to tap into communities and cities with characteristics of respect for integrity. He worried that humans had come to believe technology could fix whatever problems life presented. He sounded alarm bells similar to those of the wider, global environmental movement that was emerging in his lifetime. In April 1970, less than two years after Merton died, 300,000 people demonstrated in the U.S., and more around the world took part in Earth Day, then the largest environmental demonstration in history.<sup>32</sup>

We may read Merton's writings on technology as fruit of his dual affirmation of his true self and of his monastic identity. Without delineating a detailed plan for a transformed world, Merton saw his writing as a contribution to mitigating the worst effects of technology: bombs, racism, media, big business, and other cultural developments that prevented people from claiming their truest selfhood. Merton sought ways by which he could personally resist. One was to see the humanity in one's ostensible "enemy." On 26 May 1966, a time the U.S. was at war with North Vietnam, he met Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh, whom Merton called his brother.<sup>33</sup> Another way was to call for demilitarizing life by

refusing to consent to preparation for the destruction of the human race by nuclear war.<sup>34</sup> A third approach was to simplify his life monastically as a step to giving up one's attachment to the relative prosperity of the U.S. and the West.

Merton called on humans to be nondestructive and freely to recover paradise, a world created by the love of God. He advocated restricting the possession and use of nuclear weapons. He understood that humans, having the power to destroy, also had the power and the freedom to nurture, to love "without need and without name,"<sup>35</sup> to see that the glitter of modern technology is false, to turn to the Light, and ultimately "*to save man*."<sup>36</sup> He understood that technology could allow people to flourish and that technology could be harnessed to advance the common good. There is, in fact, he maintained, a choice.<sup>37</sup> Merton also highlighted less encouraging aspects of technological innovation, including the tendency to concentrate power and wealth among the few, which led to the loss of connection with others. "Never before," lamented Merton, "has there been such a distance between the abject misery of the poor ... and the absurd affluence of the rich. Our gestures at remedying this situation are well meant but *almost totally* ineffective."<sup>38</sup>

Merton thought of human beings as a part of nature and of the entire created order, an order that he essentially viewed as paradisaical. The divinely conceived integrity of creation meant that human beings needed to include ecology within their overall understanding of justice. This in turn meant that the human participation in creation or nature through technology had to unite wisdom and service to the whole order of nature. In this way human beings would recover that which had been endangered by modern technological culture, the wholeness of *being*.

### Endnotes

1. Patrick F. O'Connell, "Hermitage," *Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), 198, Merton's emphasis.
2. See Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert. Sayings from the*

*Desert Fathers of the Fourth Century* (New York: New Directions, 1960), 3-5.

3. Thomas Merton, "The Recovery of Paradise," in *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968), 116.

4. Merton, "Recovery of Paradise," 132.

5. Merton, "Recovery of Paradise," 120. Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881) characterized the starets as a wise elder in a Russian Orthodox monastery.

6. "Rain and the Rhinoceros," in *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966), 12-14, Merton's emphasis.

7. Thomas Merton, "Conference on The Christian in a Technological World," available as Appendix 1 in Paul Dekar, *Thomas Merton: Twentieth-Century Wisdom for Twenty-First-Century Living* (Cambridge: Lutterworth, 2012).

8. Thomas Merton, "The Christian in a Technological World," in Paul R. Dekar, *Thomas Merton. Twentieth Century Wisdom for Twenty-First Century Living* (Eugene: Cascade, 2011), 208, 209. Merton gave the talk to novices on June 5, 1966. It followed a eulogy Merton gave for Dom Vital Klinski, who had been novice master and Merton's confessor during Merton's novitiate at the Abbey of Gethsemani. I do not alter Merton's words. I trust he would now use inclusive language.

9. Thomas Merton, "Introduction," *Breakthrough to Peace. Twelve Views on the Threat of Thermonuclear Extermination* (New York: New Directions, 1962), 11-13.

10. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 148.

11. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Image, 1968), 132.

12. Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World*, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: Harper, 1996), 312.

13. Merton, *Turning*, 311-312. Entry for 11 April 1963, Merton's emphasis.

14. Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962), v.

15. Carson, *Silent Spring*, 296.

16. Elizabeth Kolbert in the *New Yorker*, 28 May 2007, 23.

17. Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis*,

ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994), 70-72. Letter to Rachel Carson (January 12, 1963).

18. See William H. Shannon, "Preface," *Cold War Letters*, ed. Christine M. Bochen and William H. Shannon (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006), xxiii; Paul M. Pearson, 14 February 2010 email.

19. Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1958), 13.

20. Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), 237-238.

21. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anomie>.

22. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 77.

23. Merton, *Conjectures*, 25-26.

24. Merton, *Conjectures*, 136-7.

25. "Parable of Ox Mountain," D. C. Lau, *Mencius* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1970), 164-5. Paul M. Pearson discusses Merton's use of the text in his article, "The Ox Mountain Parable: An Introduction," *Merton Annual* 15 (2002), 14-19.

26. See *Ishi Means Man: Essays on Native Americans*, foreword by Dorothy Day (Greensboro: Unicorn, 1976).

27. I benefitted from several conversations with Father Kelty. See Rose Marie Berger's obituary in the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, <http://rosemarieberger.com/2011/02/24/Matthew-kelty-and-the-beauty-of-a-good.death>.

28. Thomas Merton, "Cargo Cults of the South Pacific," in Naomi Burton Stone and Patrick Hart, eds. *Thomas Merton, Love and Living* (New York: Harcourt, 1985), 80-94; Kenelm Burridge, *Mambu. A Study of Melanesian Cargo Movements and Their Ideological Background* (New York: Harper and Row, 1960); Other studies include Peter Lawrence and Kenelm Burridge, "Merton, Cargo Cults and *The Geography of Lograire*," *Merton Annual* 17 (2004), 206-15.

29. "Cargo Cults of the South Pacific," 94.

30. Thomas Merton, *Peace in the Post-Christian Era* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004), 149, Merton's emphasis.

31. See John McCormick, *Saving Paradise. How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire* (Boston: Beacon, 2008),

410; Sallie McFague, *Super, Natural Christians. How We Should Love Nature* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997); Brian Swimme, *The Hidden Heart of the Cosmos. Humanity and the New Story* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996).

32. John McCormick, *Reclaiming Paradise. The Global Environmental Movement* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 47.

33. See Robert King, *Thomas Merton and Thich Nhat Hanh: Engaged Spirituality in an Age of Globalization* (New York: Continuum, 2001); Thich Nhat Hahn, *Being Peace*, edited by Arnold Kotler (Berkeley: Parallax, 1987).

34. Merton, *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*, 158.

35. Merton, "With the World in My Blood Stream," *Collected Poems*, 618.

36. Merton, *Conjectures*, 341, Merton's emphasis.

37. Thomas Merton, "Day of a Stranger," in *A Thomas Merton Reader*, ed. Thomas P. McDonnell (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974), 431.

38. Merton, *Conjectures*, 73. Merton's emphasis.