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Merton on Atheism in Camus

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Reflecting in 1966 on his eclectic and complex role as Trappist monk and twentieth-century cultural critic, Thomas Merton characterized himself as increasingly living a kind of “submarine” life in which religious faith sometimes took on the aspect of doubt.¹ Furthermore, in his reconstructed journal *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* Merton suggested that as far as the countries in the West were concerned there was present a “spiritual cretinism” that made it difficult at times to distinguish Christians from atheists.² In part this was because what passed for religious faith often involved fictitious substitutes for authentic religious belief that had accumulated over the centuries in religions like Christianity. Once these fictitious accumulations were recognized and cleared away, however, the reformed, religious believer, Merton thought, often found himself or herself culturally stranded. Even those with a genuine faith, he observed, had felt themselves drifting towards unbelief because of the secularism surrounding them. Indeed, Merton’s own interest in matters of doubt and belief was heightened in the late 1960s by his awareness of atheism and agnosticism as the dominant states of mind in modern culture and by the stance of some Christian writers who had taken to arguing that the God of Christianity was dead.

In the 1960s Merton became increasingly convinced that those who retained religious belief would be dwarfed by those who hadn’t and that the place of believers within society would become ever more marginal.³ In an essay entitled “Godless Christianity?” he argued that the pervasive, technological culture of the modern world was essentially atheistic and had led to the downgrading of religion

as a significant part of contemporary culture.⁴ Nevertheless, Merton was reluctant to turn over the field entirely to the assumption that the modern and the atheistic were coterminous. With an apparent reference to his own dramatic conversion, he drew attention to the sweep of God's hand into individual lives irrespective of what the surrounding culture in general stood for. Few recognize, he recalled passionately, the "confusion, the bewilderment and the suffering" of an atheist who has suddenly been "overwhelmed" by the "reality of God."⁵ There had always been many, Merton maintained, who, like the poet Rilke, had sought God in a world in which the temples and churches were unattended or left in ruins.⁶ Amidst the decay of the past Merton anticipated that new life would be breathed into religion in the present and future by a transformation in the perception of the present by those who had been touched by God.

As has been suggested, included in Merton's reflections about atheism in the 1960s was his reaction to the God-is-Dead theologians led by the Anglican Bishop, John A.T. Robinson. Robinson's book *Honest to God*, published in 1963, proclaimed the death of God in a culture that had become separated almost entirely from its religious roots. Merton saw Robinson's repudiation of belief, which he took as disingenuous, to be the announcement of a post-Christian culture by those who felt that Christianity in the West had become alienating and irrelevant. In assessing the depth of the God-is-Dead theologians, Merton responded rationally that there was a considerable difference between saying that God was dead and saying that God had never existed.⁷ He also pointed out that the God who was said to be dead was no God at all but was rather a caricature whose image had been corrupted over the centuries.⁸ For this reason many people, whom Merton saw as hungering for God, were more and more deflected, he maintained, by the practice of religion in the West.

At the same time Merton was reluctant to espouse the view that modernity and belief were alien to each other. He pointed to the example of Teilhard de Chardin, the paleontologist and priest who had attempted to reconcile science and belief. Moreover,

while Merton was well aware of the antipathy to religion shown by modern intellectuals like Marx, he was firm in his judgment that Marx had simply substituted one religion for another. Nonetheless, Merton took seriously the religious alienation to be found among many who were open to the possibility of God's existence, conceding that beneath the surface of atheism and agnosticism lay a profound sense that God might or might not exist but that God had in any case become part of an ostensible, cosmic indifference. In an essay entitled "Apologies to an Unbeliever" Merton admitted that people in the twentieth-century lived in a world in which God was perceived to be silent and apparently absent.⁹ Against such silence, however, he pointed to the prophets in the Jewish scriptures for evidence that God's silence could be a sign of a divinely sent meaning. At the same time, what was taken to be God's silence, Merton felt, could simply be the inability of institutionalized religion to engage non-believers.

Merton's thoughts about atheism in the 1960s tended to become centered on Albert Camus, with whom he felt a strong intellectual and spiritual sympathy in spite of Camus' professed atheism. Merton admired Camus' interest in religion even while aware that Camus was profoundly skeptical about religion. Furthermore, the spectrum of atheism in Camus' writings is broad, ranging from the atheistic nihilism of Clamence in *The Fall* to the secular sainthood of Dr. Rieux in *The Plague*. Indeed, Rieux embodied what Camus paradoxically called the "heroic side of negation."¹⁰ In attempting to sort out the various faces of atheism in a letter written in 1966, Merton distinguished its rather militant and nihilistic face, which he associated largely with Europe, from the more domesticated and courteous atheism which he associated with America including those individuals whom he characterized as his "warm atheist friends."¹¹

Regarding him as an exception to militant, European atheism, Merton perceived Camus as having been driven partly by his rejection of the Christian church. Except for the Christian members of the French Resistance with whom he had served and whom he

praised, Camus viewed institutional Christianity in a dim light. “Happy Christians,” he observed in a notebook that Merton came to read, who had kept “grace for themselves and left us charity.”¹² As this comment implies, Camus had a devotion to human unity, and he resented what he regarded as the chopping up of the spirit of Christianity into arid pieces of dogma and into a clericalism that frequently led Christian leaders to align themselves with shabby and autocratic regimes, as in the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War.¹³

Nevertheless, Merton saw Camus as a post-Christian intellectual who combined an inherited, “obscure sense of Christian values” with an “accusatory, satirical analysis” of Christianity and its believers.¹⁴ About the latter there would appear to be little doubt. Camus was alienated from believers who loaded themselves down with what he called the contradictions of the Gospels and the historical excesses of the church, the latter including the ecclesiastical tribunal that had condemned Galileo.¹⁵ Nonetheless, Merton’s belief that Camus harboured Christian values, without necessarily attributing them to Christianity, has been confirmed by other scholars, including Patrick McCarthy, who described Camus as “haunted by the absence of God.”¹⁶

Moreover, because of his underlying sympathy towards Camus’ writings, Merton was inclined to give him the benefit of the doubt, as in the depiction of Meursault in *The Stranger*, whose reluctance to say the prayer, the Our Father, prior to his execution, won Merton’s sympathy. Merton commented that he fully understood Meursault’s reluctance based on the stony image of God represented by the prison chaplain, who is portrayed as part and parcel of the hypocritical and unjust society that had condemned Meursault.¹⁷ Similarly, Father Paneloux in *The Plague* represented for both Camus and Merton a grotesque figure of Christianity in which suffering, including the death of children, is seen as an inducement to submit to the mystery of God. For both Camus and Merton such a faith was an absurdity and the divine object of such faith a monster. However, for Merton, in the characterization of Paneloux, Camus

was quixotically attacking a caricature of Christianity.¹⁸

Camus’ atheism, which ruled out the existence of a providential God, pictured a cosmos in which all existence was “governed by death.”¹⁹ Although on occasion Merton considered Camus to be more of an agnostic than an atheist, it would seem that Camus was not openly searching for God but rather determined not to succumb to even the possibility of belief lest this amount to a sentimental and illusory act. As Camus’ writings attest, he had made up his mind, and had especially rejected the idea of a providential deity. This doesn’t mean that he wasn’t haunted by the absence of God, especially of the Christian God who had been part of his cultural background—even though his mother, who brought Camus up on her own—was unsympathetic towards religion. Indications of this cultural background surface from time to time as when Camus declared that the rising of melancholy within the heart constituted one’s “nights of Gethsemane.”²⁰ In fact Merton wavered in his view of Camus as can be seen in his response to Czeslaw Milosz’ comment that the protagonist in Camus’ *The Fall* represented a cry of despair and a treatise on grace. Merton replied skeptically, arguing that the novel was essentially the story of a narcissist and if concerned with grace it did so, if at all, only within the narrow and bleak confines of a rejected “Manichaean theology.”²¹

Merton’s ambiguity in discussing Camus’ ontological outlook is evident in his claim that Camus was not an atheist and that Camus simply regarded Christianity as a foreign element in his thinking, a rather extraordinary claim given Merton’s knowledge of Camus’ thesis at the University of Algiers on St. Augustine and Plotinus.²² In that thesis, as Merton points out, Camus wrote about early Christianity and especially about Augustine’s attitude towards evil, which Camus saw as having been derived from Manichaeism and Neoplatonism. Given the fact that his essays on Camus were all published in the late 1960s, Merton appears in that same period of time to contradict his judgment that Camus was not an atheist. Such is the gist of his essay, “Terror and the Absurd: Violence and Nonviolence in Albert Camus.” There, he

describes Camus' writings as "basically atheistic."²³ In another essay on Camus and the church, Merton refers to Camus' "rejection of faith in God."²⁴ Moreover, at another point in the essays on Camus Merton observed that, for Camus, theological faith was a "temptation" but a delusory one since God had been manufactured by human beings to provide meaning to an otherwise absurd universe.²⁵ Nevertheless, in a display of what appears to be special pleading, Merton argues that Camus' doctrine of the absurd was not so much a denial of God as a sign of God's irrelevancy.²⁶ Merton's wavering in his view of Camus' atheism would seem to issue from his attraction to Camus' sensitive consideration of the spiritual bonds that united human beings.

Furthermore, Camus' emphasis on the overshadowing of life by the inevitability and finality of death brings to mind, even if it doesn't quite parallel, Merton's observation following his reading of Heidegger in the 1960s that the acceptance of death was the guarantee of authenticity in one's thinking about life.²⁷ Merton's view of death was at times somewhat ambivalent even if not as rebellious towards religion as Camus'. At times Merton's thinking about death was quite traditional as in his praising of Karl Rahner's chilly, orthodox conviction that serious sinfulness arose from the "will to die autonomously."²⁸ On some other occasions one is struck by Merton's dismay in the face of death as in the death of his friend, the artist Victor Hammer, in 1967. In that case he characterized death as a "basic absurdity" which writers like Camus had confronted and about which religious explanations fell short. Merton added that, instead of facing the "inscrutable" fact that the meaning of death lay beyond us, many religious adherents pretended to a knowledge that in fact they did not have.²⁹

Writing in his journal in 1963, Merton confronted the dark certainty of his own death and its erasing of the memory and consciousness of the "good of existence and of life."³⁰ This loss, he recognized, would be replaced by a higher life but one that was inconceivable even if it was a gift from God. Reflecting on the dissolution brought about by death, Merton noted in his journal

in 1964 that human beings are so rooted in the body and in the self that it is extremely difficult to imagine themselves in some other form.³¹ In Camus' *The Stranger* Meursault reflects grimly that the only afterlife for which he had any desire was one in which he could remember his life on earth.³² Similarly, confronting the terrible weight of death on the psyche Merton wrote to Victoria Ocampo in 1967 that death was both mysterious and unacceptable and that among believers there was often a speculativeness and a complacency in considering it.³³

At the same time, Merton distinguished his own anxiety about death from what he thought of as the "neopagan" and "naïve atheism" of Camus, who grounded all of his thinking about death in sensual experience.³⁴ For Merton, Camus, in rejecting religion had left himself with an immature conception of life that overlooked the religious wisdom inherent in the major religions. This wisdom taught that human beings are here to grow and that this growth involves an ascetic transcendence of the sensual self.³⁵ The source of this wisdom in the case of Christianity was the cross upon which Christ surrendered himself to death in order to secure life for humanity. In Camus' novel, *The Fall*, the central character, Clamence, reflects gloomily that the silence of God included the life of Christ, whose heroic sacrifice exceeded the capacity of human beings to follow.³⁶ However, for Merton a Christ-modeled immersion in a life of sacrifice for others led to the realization that the purpose of life was not merely sensual and experiential and that life as such was not meant to be "interminable."³⁷ Here, Merton's view recalls Keats's famous depiction of interminable life, no matter how pleasurable, as a source of ennui. Death, Merton argued, is the point at which life, through a spiritually illuminating process of giving oneself to others, leads to a transformation of the self that is anything but a source of ennui. For the authentic Christian, then, death should mark the apogee of this transformation and thus be a moment of fulfillment rather than of loss.

For Camus the problems for religious belief presented by death were coexistent with those presented by evil, especially physical

evil. These are the problems that sealed Camus' atheism in *The Rebel*, whose narrator otherwise represented many ethical ideals that elicited Merton's admiration. A further example is provided by one of Camus' most important characters, Dr. Rieux, in *The Plague*, who cannot accept the existence of God in a world filled with innocent suffering. Moreover, Rieux reflects that instead of drawing human beings together, the encroachment of a physical evil like the plague can just as easily be the occasion for moral evil. Such is the effect of the plague on the citizens of Oran who are soon divided between those who are reduced to poverty and wretchedness and the rich, who lack comparatively little. In his essay, "The Plague of Albert Camus," Merton wonders how, with his stinging memory of the Vichy clergy in mind, Camus can fall short of a belief in original sin.³⁸ In this respect Merton may be unduly impatient with Camus, who posits no theories about the origin of evil in either a physical or moral sense. The world of both, Camus, the existentialist, believed is the world as experienced.

Somewhat disappointedly, Merton saw that Camus had settled on the myth of Sisyphus and the theme of the absurd as a working ontology. In the Greek myth the greedy king of Corinth is doomed forever to roll uphill a heavy stone that always rolls down again. Camus embraced the absurd as the only possible position for human beings who knew that, in spite of their longing to live, their hopes would inevitably be cut off by death. He longed for an afterlife that was continuous with this one, and he located the absurd in the confrontation between this human need and what he called the "unreasonable silence" of the cosmos.³⁹ For Camus, as Merton noted throughout his writings on Camus, the mind's task was to measure the silence of the universe in as lucid a manner as possible. In this context the myth of Sisyphus is accepted as the most important ontological norm by one of Camus' most persuasive characters, Dr. Rieux in *The Plague*. Rieux tells Rambert that life is all about "starting again," repeatedly and futilely pushing a large rock uphill in a kind of defiance of an indifferent universe. At the least this ostensibly pointless activity could serve to unite human beings to one another.⁴⁰ In this way, Camus believed, one expressed

the only freedom that human beings could properly possess.

In his journal, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, Merton conceded that he had great sympathy for Camus with whom in large measure his "heart" agreed.⁴¹ His admiration was largely based on his view of Camus as one of the most serious and articulate ethical thinkers of the twentieth century.⁴² Merton went out of his way to try to understand the value of Camus' use of the myth of Sisyphus and the ontological doctrine of the absurd which that myth illustrated. Whereas in the light of the lack of meaning in the cosmos there would seem no point in continuing with life, Merton points out that Camus saw this as precisely an opportunity for human beings to assert a modicum of freedom in going on with life, which for Camus and Merton could lead to moments of happiness, even if these were unattached to any ultimate meaning. In this matter the critic, Patrick McCarthy, has observed that the central character, Meursault, in *The Stranger*, derived a limited but real happiness from his direct, sensuous experience of the sea and of the woman he loved.⁴³ Nevertheless, Camus, like Merton, was not pantheistic and thereby sidestepped a religion that C.S. Lewis described as the most "congenial" and most lasting in its attraction to the human mind.⁴⁴ Merton saw that Camus proceeded with the mind's eye open, as it were, driven by courage and a desire for lucidity.⁴⁵ Moreover, Merton understood that Camus' atheism was not materialistic, and he correctly foresaw that Camus' later work, published posthumously as *The First Man*, would go on to celebrate "love and compassion."⁴⁶ In that work the protagonist, Jacques, is depicted as having every reason to live, to grow old, and to die "without rebellion."⁴⁷ On the whole Merton appreciated the warmth of Camus' approach, whether atheistic or not, and he contrasted Camus' atheism with the bleak negativity of the aforementioned God-is-Dead theologians of the 1960s. In contrast, he associated Camus with a Franciscan spirituality that embraced the beauty and radiance of the world.⁴⁸

However, Merton, concluded that, rationally considered, the absurd was not a convincing, ontological reality but was rather

a psychological entity, a subjective reaction by Camus based on his disappointment with what he regarded as the indifference of the universe. Merton ascribed the absurd to a Cartesian element in Camus' thinking whereby all of the weight lay inwardly on one's perception of being. In this matter Merton regretted Camus' reluctance to embrace a Pascalian wager through which one accepted the existence of God as a relatively risk-free option. However, in the notebooks which Merton had read Camus suggested that the claims of Christianity were extinguished on the cross when, in the Gospel accounts, Christ cried out that he has been forsaken by God. Because of this, while Camus conceded that the suffering Christ had founded a religion of "loneliness and human grandeur," its greater claims, especially those connected with Christ's divinity, he argued, defied belief.⁴⁹

Moreover, while rejecting contemporary nihilism, Camus also rejected any turning backward towards a religious medievalism that ignored the advancement of scientific knowledge in order to make room for religious assurance.⁵⁰ At the same time, Camus was quick to point out that such a delusion was as true of secular ideologies as of religious ones, insisting that both Christianity and Marxism involved a "faith" which was simply a "mystification."⁵¹ In particular, Merton noted supportively that Camus had satirized the rejection of religion and its substitution by a secular, political ideology in the short stories "The Growing Stone" and "The Renegade."⁵²

As readers of his journals and poems will attest, Merton, like Camus, turned towards nature as a primary source of beauty and thus of value. In Camus' novel, *The Fall*, one can imagine Merton having at least a trace of sympathy for Clamence, who observes that he could understand a man who gave up his religious vocation because his cell, instead of overlooking a vast landscape, as he had expected, "looked out on a wall."⁵³ In addition, both Merton and Camus affirmed nature not only as a source of beauty but as an alternative to the Marxist view of life as governed solely by history. Like the ancient Greeks, both Merton and Camus saw nature as a

source of reality in the case not only of nature in general but of *human* nature in particular. In *The Rebel* Camus argued that the reason why human beings could support each other in solidarity was precisely because human nature did exist and as such underlay the bond that human beings could and should feel for each other.⁵⁴

Camus' emphasis on the importance of human solidarity in relation to a shared human nature no doubt derived in part from his thesis at the University of Algiers on Plotinus and Augustine. Plotinus' emphasis on unity clearly appealed to Camus as did his respect for intuition, both of which are also strong themes in Merton's work. The emphasis on an innate, intuitive wisdom was not a repudiation of reason in either writer but rather an affirmation of intuition as an oblique form of reason. Looked at in this way, Camus' thought, particularly about the absurd, was based on an ethical and metaphysical awareness that was innate in human beings. Merton characterized this ontological position sympathetically in Camus as the "clarification of man's consciousness of his lot in the world."⁵⁵ That Merton, like Camus, connected this ontology with human solidarity can be seen in an introduction he wrote in 1950 to St. Augustine's *City of God*. There, he pictured the Edenic state of human beings as that of contemplatives who were "united to one another" in their vision and love of the "One Truth."⁵⁶ Thus, while the bases for their valuing of human unity were different in many respects, Merton supported the value that Camus placed on intuition and on contemplation even if not in a theistic context.

Camus' humanism, which as in Merton's case had been imbued from the ancient Greeks, formed a unity between the two writers which helped to overcome the barrier of Camus' acknowledged atheism. For both Merton and Camus the ancient Greeks were more concerned with the nature of human beings than with the gods, as Merton put it in a comment about Camus.⁵⁷ The Greeks often provided a straighter route to the understanding of the place of humanity in the cosmos than could be obtained, Merton added, through the medium of theological doctrine.⁵⁸ Nonetheless, Merton drew a distinction between this static, philosophical aspect of

Greek thought, which Camus affirmed, and the dynamic and more personal religious consciousness of those like himself who were in the Judeo-Christian tradition.⁵⁹

Through their tragedies and philosophies the Greeks, in the judgment of both Merton and Camus, provided a deep, ontological insight into the human psyche. Furthermore, for both Merton and Camus this insight was essentially religious even if only so in a non-institutional sense. For this reason Merton came to see Camus as a classic moralist in the Stoic tradition, a seeker of permanent values. Camus sought such values within the human psyche and thus within nature rather than within history. High up in these values for both Merton and Camus was the Greek sense of moderation, which upheld the importance of limits. In Camus, for example, there is mention in the notebooks of the close connection between the observing of such limits and the possibility of unity among human beings, a sentiment that was clearly in harmony with Merton's thought. Merton praised Camus' moderation, his reluctance to claim more than he knew and his overall sense of the "human limits" and the "human measure."⁶⁰ At the same time Merton differed from Camus over the admissibility of violence in bringing about the overthrow of political oppression. Still, he described Camus' rebel as fulfilling the role of the prophet in modern society and he agreed with Camus' conviction that the authentic voice of prophecy in the Western society of the 1960s was not likely to come from organized religion.⁶¹

As has been suggested, one of the strongest bonds felt by Merton towards Camus was their shared humanism. Even though Merton typically referred to himself as a Christian humanist, he and Camus shared the Greek view that there were innate tendencies towards both good and evil embedded in human nature and yet that beneath these tendencies was an underlying affirmation of life. Merton lauded Camus' life-affirming humanism as of great value in encouraging the solidarity of human beings in revolt against the absurd, a solidarity that involved the determination to discover and to reject all illusions in the name of what Camus called lucidity. At the top of the values either directly or obliquely represented in Camus'

writings, as at the top of Christianity's, was a personal and communal love, which Camus pitted against institutional inhumanity whether secular or ecclesiastical. In affirming this humanism, Camus used sacred language, as if to bridge the humanistic and the religious, calling the striving for freedom by human beings, for example, whether cosmic or political, a "sacrament."⁶² Through this term Camus drew on religious iconography to elevate human experience, if not to a transcendental, then to a majestic, spiritual level. Whereas Camus located human dignity and its concomitant freedom within the self, he rejected as specious what he recognized in modern society as the cult of the self.⁶³

While affirming the need to protect the true self that had been belittled historically by totalitarian regimes and philosophies, both Camus and Merton were careful to avoid making the self the only sufficient cosmos. If Camus looked outward to the whole of humanity, Merton did as well with the added qualification that he regarded humanity as having been elevated by the example of Christ. He went farther, arguing that in his writings Camus had dignified humanity by depicting the "old argument of grace versus the law" even if he had proclaimed himself an atheist while doing so. On such occasions Merton indicated that he felt free to understand Camus in a "Christian sense."⁶⁴ Nevertheless, there was a fundamental difference in the humanism exhibited in Merton and Camus. If Merton was a Christian humanist, Camus, in Merton's eyes, embraced a humanism that Merton saw as based not on a religious or political ideology but rather on a "deeply authentic" though quite clearly secular relationship between human beings.⁶⁵

Furthermore, in his essay, "Apologies to an Unbeliever," Merton dismissed what he called the "soothing platitudes" of some religious believers, whose words of comfort precluded a sincere and thoughtful skepticism such as that which he found in Camus.⁶⁶ Indeed, Merton went farther in suggesting that the existence of God was not deducible from a Cartesian reasoning but rather was something that could be intuited from a shared consciousness of what he called "pure Being."⁶⁷ Merton perceived in a work like *The*

Rebel that Camus was seeking existentially a moral philosophy or even a religion. Metaphysical rebellion of the sort discussed in *The Rebel*, Camus insisted, was pursued in the hope of finding a “new god.”⁶⁸ Moreover, in *The Rebel*, Merton believed, Camus emerged not so much an atheist as a “blasphemer,” who denounced the creator as the author of death and suffering.⁶⁹ Attracted by Camus’ integrity and forthrightness in these matters, Merton went so far as to characterize him as one of the “true monks” of the twentieth century whose vocation involved not a formal religious practice but rather the authentic monastic qualities of “solitude,” “integrity” and “commitment.”⁷⁰

Noticing Camus’ later emphasis on love, Merton saw such a trajectory as possibly in time leading to a full contemplative thinking in which the ultimate model of love would be perceived to be the Christian God. Merton admired Camus’ honesty in remaining skeptical about religion given that Christianity in particular had been marred historically in Merton’s view by an ugly triumphalism and legalism. For this reason Merton himself, like Camus, had turned in the 1960s towards *being* as a way in which God could be encountered existentially. Being was also for Merton the source of unity among believers and non-believers alike since all living creatures shared in its life. Merton also identified the cross of Christ as a paradoxical source of unity. In Merton’s view the acceptance of suffering in imitation of Christ, that is, for the good of others, brought with it a liberating power that detached human beings from the pursuit of “earthly power” and the rule of passion.⁷¹

Although Camus regretted the lack of a providential God, he did admire, as did Merton, the beauty of the physical universe. Camus was sensitive, as Merton recognized, to the immense beauty of creation; nor was he unaware that suffering, as is evident in *The Plague*, could be a source of unity among human beings. Camus taught Merton that an atheist could search insightfully for truth without the aid of theological tenets. What Camus revealed to Merton was the innate richness of the mind, which in Merton’s view contained a spark of its creator’s wisdom and being. He and Camus met, as it were, on the threshold of creation, both of them

having been attracted by existentialism in the flight from purely abstract thought.

More than this, Merton was struck by the immense freedom present in Camus, which such a genuine seeker of truth could exhibit in a world believed to be without God. The prizing of intellectual freedom, which engaged Merton particularly in the 1960s, was something which he valued in Camus almost as a benefit of Camus’ underlying atheism. This atheism Merton of course would not have judged necessary to the pursuit of truth since he was not an atheist himself. At the same time he admired Camus’ use of atheism in fostering the development of exploratory thinking. The commitment to exploratory thinking permitted both Merton and Camus to elude dogmatism from either secular or religious sources.

Merton sharply distinguished the unity that Christians experienced from that set forth by secular ideologies including the Marxist. He thought of these secular ideologies as merely organizational, giving rise to a unity held together by an abstract ideal rather than by a personal love of the sort that ideally united Christians and those of other religions. Certainly, Camus’ scornful depiction of a human unity based upon loveless ideologies, whether religious or atheistic, was well documented, as Merton recognized, in Camus’ writings. In *The Rebel* in particular Camus cautioned against the virtually inevitable transformation of the rebel into the dictator unless the rebel retained an attachment, not to ideology, but to those oppressed people for whose welfare he had initially fought.

Based upon Camus’ later writings, it is impossible to say whether or not he might have edged closer to religion and to Christianity in particular even if he had come to see love for others and for the cosmos itself as the supreme basis for human unity. Although Merton was perceptive in seeing the underlying closeness of Camus to a Christian outlook, especially in the later works, Camus might have remained separated, had he lived, from any association with Christianity itself. It may be that Camus would, from Merton’s point of view, taste Christianity by living a life of love in some respects similar to the Christian, while retaining his skepticism about the

vices of historical Christianity. On the whole Merton saw Camus as disappointedly rejecting the likelihood of the existence of God because of his perception of the fundamental indifference of the universe and the imperfection of existence with its concomitant suffering. For Merton, who as a Christian had been schooled in the developmental and ethical possibilities of suffering, the imperfection of being, including the ineluctable presence of death, involved a consciousness that imperfection could lead to a compassionate bonding with others and to psychological maturation. Moreover, in works like *The Plague* Merton saw that in Dr. Rieux, particularly, Camus had in effect depicted such solidarity and maturation while remaining reluctant to grant that God had had any part in it.

Overall, what drew Merton to Camus was Camus' attempt to confront ultimate truths with modesty and lucidity and without the consolations of religion. Camus led Merton to examine his own beliefs about the institutional church and its cultural traditions. When he found himself turning more and more to literature in order to locate spiritual truths, Merton conceded to Rosemary Radford Ruether in a letter written in 1967 that he might in fact be "sneaking out the back door of the Church" without telling himself that that was what he was doing.⁷²

For Merton, atheism was not only a matter of philosophical argument but a kind of culture, parallel to his own Christian and monastic culture. It was also a lens by which he could judge the strength of his own religious convictions. Typically, when a particular culture caught his eye, Merton set about mining it, as he did with Buddhism, in order to see what insights and values might be added to his own way of thinking. Atheism, as Merton found it in Camus, presented itself as an interesting and challenging culture. There is no doubt that Camus changed both the way Merton viewed religion and his own place both within and outside of it. Essentially, Merton concluded that Camus was engaged with many of the same ontological issues that had characterized his own search for reality. In this respect he recognized that, atheist or not, Camus had responded to the immense gift of creation while not recognizing the author of that gift. Merton saw that both he and

Camus had perceived in *being*, however imperfect and incomplete, something of inestimable value and a basis on which one could, in concert with one's fellow human beings, begin to love. The difference, one that Merton regretfully acknowledged, was that Camus came to love the world while declaring himself an orphan within it. Merton, on the other hand, in looking at being, saw within it an incandescence that pointed beyond the natural world.

In part the reason that Merton could move beyond the natural world was due to his affinity with the Romantic writers, especially Blake. The Romantics had extended the dimensions of Western religion by seeing the transcendental as a luminous aspect of nature or of what Merton called creation. Camus was not a Romantic, and as such in Merton's eyes lacked an ontology that extended beyond the senses. For this reason, in the period in which he was writing about Camus, Merton turned towards the Jesuit paleontologist, Teilhard de Chardin, for a metaphysical and theological reading of the world of matter. In fact, Merton hypothesized that, had Camus had the opportunity to read de Chardin, he would have been less locked in to atheism.⁷³ The French scientist had concluded that God was the transcendental creator and sustainer of life without being reduced pantheistically to the evolving cosmos itself. However, in spite of his turning toward de Chardin, Merton in fact preferred Camus' existentialism to de Chardin's abstract conceptualization. Where Merton felt an even more positive kinship with Camus was in their shared humanism, with Merton referring to himself frequently in the 1960s as a Christian humanist. While recognizing the force of Camus' atheism, Merton valued the humanism that led Dr. Rieux in *The Plague* to become, not a saint or a hero, but a human being in the fullest sense. That objective, Merton added, was already "heroic enough."⁷⁴ Merton saluted Camus' honouring of the wisdom and courage that were immanent in the nature of man.

Merton understood Camus' rejection of Western religion to have been rooted in what Camus regarded as its humiliating image of human beings. At the same time Merton ironically came to

regard Camus' atheism, the most authentic form of atheism he had encountered, as capable of renewing ideals that under institutional religion had languished over time. Atheism not only cleaned the slate, historically speaking, but gave rise to values of friendship and solidarity in what Merton called the "starting point of a new creation."⁷⁵ Even the absurd, Merton finally concluded, brought a "cleaning of the ground" for something else.⁷⁶ Faced with the absurd, human beings in Camus were led to seek solidarity with each other in the face of an otherwise indifferent universe.

Thus, Camus' atheism allowed Merton to see that the human values affirmed by Camus, including "[F]riendship, loyalty. . . lucidity" and "courage" arose from atheism as a creative force.⁷⁷ Even if Merton did not himself turn to atheism, he recognized it in Camus as a potential source of communal ideals that had somehow been sidelined by an emphasis on theological abstraction and ecclesiastical protocol. Camus had confirmed Merton's humanism in a way that Christianity, with its traditional emphasis on the inherent, predominant sinfulness of human beings, had not. Thus, Camus' atheism had led him to a place where, in earlier, more conventional and more enclosed years, he might have been surprised to find himself. This was a place in which with his increasing confidence in the importance of freedom in relation to faith, he was content to be.

Endnotes

1. Thomas Merton, "Apologies to an Unbeliever," in *Faith and Violence* (Notre Dame, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame P, 1968), 213.
2. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 37.
3. See Thomas Merton, "Apologies to an Unbeliever," in *Faith and Violence*, 209.
4. Thomas Merton, "Godless Christianity?" in *Faith and Violence*, 286.
5. Thomas Merton, "The Contemplative and the Atheist," in *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), 175.
6. Merton, "Godless Christianity?" in *Faith and Violence*, 284.

7. Merton, "Godless Christianity?" in *Faith and Violence*, 259.
8. Merton, "Godless Christianity?" in *Faith and Violence*, 286.
9. Thomas Merton, "Apologies to an Unbeliever," in *Faith and Violence*, 211.
10. Albert Camus, *Notebooks 1942-51* (New York: Knopf, 1956), 19. Merton had read both this notebook and the notebook for 1935-42. See footnotes # 6 and # 2 in Merton's essay "The Plague of Albert Camus: A Commentary and Introduction," in *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1981), 193 and 184.
11. Thomas Merton, Letter to Mark Stone, Aug. 9, 1966 in *The Road to Joy*, ed. Robert Daggy (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1989), 341.
12. Albert Camus, *Notebooks, 1942-51*, 164.
13. See Albert Camus, "Why Spain?" in *Rebellion, Resistance, and Death* (New York: Knopf, 1961), 82.
14. Thomas Merton, "The Plague of Albert Camus," in *Literary Essays*, 211.
15. Albert Camus, *Notebooks 1935-42*, trans. Philip Thody (New York: Modern Library, 1965), 16.
16. Patrick McCarthy, *Camus* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1982), 8.
17. Thomas Merton, "Camus and the Church," in *Literary Essays*, 262.
18. Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love*, ed. Christine Bochen (San Francisco: Harper, 1997), 134-35.
19. Albert Camus, *The Plague*, (London: Allen Lane, 2001), 98.
20. Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1955), 98.
21. See Thomas Merton and Czeslaw Milosz, *Striving Towards Being*, ed. Robert Faggen (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997), 70.
22. See Merton, "The Plague of Albert Camus," in *Literary Essays*, 182, 184.
23. Merton, "Terror and the Absurd: Violence and Nonviolence in Albert Camus," in *Literary Essays*, 232.
24. Thomas Merton, "Camus and the Church," in *Literary Essays*, 271.
25. Merton, "Terror and the Absurd," in *Literary Essays*, 236.

26. Merton, "Terror and the Absurd," in *Literary Essays*, 248.
27. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life*, ed. Robert Dagg (San Francisco: Harper, 1997), 54.
28. Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World*, ed. Victor Kramer (San Francisco: Harper, 1996), 212.
29. Merton, *Learning to Love*, 260.
30. Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life*, 4.
31. Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life*, 174.
32. Camus, *The Stranger* (New York: Knopf, 1973), 150.
33. Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth*, ed. Christine Bochen (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1993), 211.
34. Merton, "Terror and the Absurd: Violence and Nonviolence in Albert Camus," in *Literary Essays*, 240..
35. See Thomas Merton, "Death," in *Love and Living*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone and Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1979), 104.
36. Albert Camus, *The Fall* (New York: Knopf, 1957), 114.
37. Merton, "Death," in *Love and Living*, 104.
38. Merton, "The Plague of Albert Camus," in *Literary Essays*, 205.
39. Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 29.
40. Camus, *Plague*, 123.
41. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 164.
42. Merton, "Terror and the Absurd," in *Literary Essays*, 232.
43. McCarthy, *Camus*, 162.
44. C.S. Lewis, *Miracles* (London: Geoffrey Blas, 1947), 100.
45. See Thomas Merton, "The Plague of Albert Camus," in *Literary Essays*, 197.
46. Thomas Merton, "Three Saviors in Camus: Lucidity and the Absurd," in *Literary Essays*, 275.
47. Albert Camus, *The First Man* (New York: Knopf, 1995), 284.
48. Merton, in *Learning to Love*, 102-03.
49. Camus, *Notebooks 1935-42*, 174.
50. Camus, *Notebooks 1942-51*, 15-16.
51. Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*, 166.
52. See Thomas Merton, "The Death of God and the End of History,"

- in *Literary Essays*, 249.
53. Albert Camus, *The Fall*, 25.
54. Albert Camus, *The Rebel* (New York: Vintage, 1991), 16.
55. Merton, "Three Saviors in Camus," in *Literary Essays*, 275.
56. Thomas Merton, "Introduction," St. Augustine, *The City of God* (New York: Modern Library, 1950), xviii.
57. Thomas Merton, "Baptism in the Forest: Wisdom and Initiation in William Faulkner," in *Literary Essays*, 96.
58. Merton, "Baptism in the Forest," in *Literary Essays*, 96.
59. Thomas Merton, "Godless Christianity?" in *Faith and Violence*, 266.
60. Merton, "Terror and the Absurd: Violence and Nonviolence in Albert Camus," in *Literary Essays*, 251.
61. Thomas Merton, "Camus and the Church," in *Literary Essays*, 270.
62. Camus, *The Rebel*, 15.
63. Camus, *Notebooks 1935-42*, 25.
64. Merton, "The Plague of Albert Camus," in *Literary Essays*, 202.
65. Merton, "The Plague of Albert Camus," in *Literary Essays*, 186.
66. Thomas Merton, "Apologies to an Unbeliever," in *Faith and Violence*, 210.
67. Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968), 26.
68. Camus, *The Rebel*, 101.
69. Camus, *The Rebel*, 24.
70. Thomas Merton, in *Learning to Love*, 108.
71. Thomas Merton, "The Contemplative Life in the Modern World," in *Faith and Violence*, 223.
72. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love*, ed. William Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985), 509.
73. Merton, "The Plague of Albert Camus," in *Literary Essays*, 214.
74. Merton, "The Plague of Albert Camus," in *Literary Essays*, 207.
75. Merton, "Terror and the Absurd," in *Literary Essays*, 233.
76. Merton, "Terror and the Absurd," in *Literary Essays*, 244-245.
77. Merton, "Terror and the Absurd," in *Literary Essays*, 233.