

# **The Secret Hope and the Hoped for Secret:**

## **Keys for Life**

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*The great error of Promethean mysticism is that it takes no account of anyone but the Self. For Prometheus, there is no "other." His spirit, his strivings, have no relation to any other person. Everything converges upon himself. But the secret of Christian mysticism is that it fulfils the self by selfless love for other persons. After all, if our salvation consists in finding ourselves in God, it means finding ourselves to be as God is... acting as He acts.<sup>1</sup>*

On 20<sup>th</sup> August 2006, the feast of St. Bernard of Clairvaux, Pope Benedict XVI, in his greeting to the pilgrims in St. Peter's Square at the hour of the Angelus, devoted a few words to this great monk so dearly loved by the Cistercians, words for which we are very grateful and which I feel are "prophetic," since they came just when I was preparing this paper.

Benedict XVI said:

Dear brothers and sisters: the calendar today mentions, among the saints of the day, St Bernard of Clairvaux, great Doctor of the Church, who lived between the XI and XII centuries (1091-1153). His example and his teachings are revealed as particularly useful also in our days. After retreating from the world following a period of intense inner turmoil, he was chosen abbot of the Cistercian monastery of Clairvaux at the age of 25, and remained as its leader during 38 years, until his death. His devotion to silence and contemplation did not prevent him from undertaking intense apostolic works. He was also exemplary in the commitment with which he struggled to control his impetuous temperament, as well as for the humility with which he knew how to

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Merton, *The New Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1961), 34.

recognise his own limits and faults. The richness and value of his theology are not due to the fact of having blazed new trails, but rather depend on having managed to put forward the truths of the faith in a manner so clear and incisive that it fascinated the listener and prompted the soul to meditation and prayer. The echo of a rich inner experience, that he managed to communicate to others with amazing persuasive ability, is found in each of his writings.

Around this time, in the Sunday Eucharist, monks were singing the following verses as a communion hymn:

Your saints, Lord, are our friends; they light our way; they are the most beautiful turnings in the road, safe springs, a haven; they are Your saints, Lord, the clamour that repeats Your message, the brightness that persists through the centuries, an example that encourages us onward. For Your saints, oh God, we praise You, we glorify You!

Thomas Merton himself defined Bernard in the following way. Indeed, he is often inspired by him:

It has been the Cistercian formula ever since St. Bernard of Clairvaux and a score of Cistercian Bishops and Abbots in the Middle Ages. Which brings me back to my own life and to the one activity that was born in me and is in my blood: I mean writing.

I brought all the instincts of a writer with me into the monastery, and I knew that I was bringing them, too. It was not a case of smuggling them in.<sup>2</sup>

And on another occasion he said:

The more I read Saint Bernard and the Cistercian Fathers the more I like them. There was a time when I was tempted not to like Saint Bernard at all (when the *Sermons in Cantica* were read in the refectory, during my novitiate, I was irritated by the breasts of the Spouse). I think that now, after eight years and more, I am really beginning to discover the depth of Saint Bernard. This is because I have realized that the foundation of his whole doctrine, which is expressed, as clearly as anywhere, in Letter 18, is that God is Truth and Christ is Truth Incarnate and that Salvation and sanctity for us means being true to ourselves and true to Christ and true to God. It is only when this emphasis on truth is forgotten that Saint Bernard begins to seem sentimental.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948), 389.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1953), 271-72.

What Benedict XVI said about St. Bernard can also be applied to Thomas Merton, and the communion hymn quoted, although it refers to the saints, summarises my thoughts and feelings towards Merton. For me, and I am sure for many other people too, his writings light the way, are beautiful turnings in the road towards our interior life, an example to encourage us onward. The end is not the person of Merton, but rather to gather the seeds of contemplation in hope that he scattered them in the furrows of the world.

I would dare to say that there is no hope when memory of the past has been lost, when personal or collective continuity with all that has gone before us has been broken: we are the fruit of seeds planted long ago; we are the result of a higher design than that which our immediate experience attains. In our life we have models whose steps we can follow; we are not the first to arrive anywhere; with the end of our life only our time comes to an end, our chance to grow, but life does not end, the current of goodness is not extinguished, the steps of history do not come to a halt. This is the reason for all hope: a virtue, a strength, an impulse that is at the same time intimate and worthy of being conserved. This impulse does not depend on the outside; neither must we allow anything to take it from us. It is a spring from which we must drink, and it is water we must always keep clean.

## 1. Where is the anchor fixed?

*In one sense we are always travelling, and travelling as if we did not know where we were going.*

*In another sense we have already arrived.*

*We cannot arrive at the perfect possession of God in this life, and that is why we are travelling and in darkness. But we already possess Him by grace, and therefore in that sense we have arrived and are dwelling in the light.*

*But oh! How far have I to go to find You in Whom I have already arrived!<sup>4</sup>*

In my childhood, when walking along the beach of the small north Cantabrian town of Laredo, I was surprised to see the anchor

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<sup>4</sup>Thomas Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, 419.

hanging in the bow of the fishing ships. I imagined that the seabed was like the beach; and if the seabed was all sand, where was the anchor fixed to secure the boat?

In the stained glass windows of the church of Santa María, in the same town, there were several anchors, and in catechesis I learned that Christian hope was symbolised by an anchor.

I was surprised when I read a few lines in *The Seven Storey Mountain* in which Merton describes a visit to the old Zion church in Douglaston accompanied by his father:

I remember the procession that came out of the sacristy, a choir of men and women, dressed in black, with white surplices, and led by a Cross. There were stained glass windows up behind the altar, one had an anchor on it, for its design, which interested me because I wanted to go to sea, and travel all over the world. Strange interpretation of a religious symbol ordinarily taken to signify stability in Hope: the theological virtue of Hope, dependence on God. To me it suggested just the opposite. Travel, adventure, the wide sea, and unlimited possibilities of human heroism, with myself as the hero...

One came out of the church with a kind of comfortable and satisfied feeling that something had been done that needed to be done, and that was all I knew about it. And now, as I consider it after many years, I see that it was very good that I should have got at least that much of religion in my childhood. It is a law of man's nature, written into his very essence, and just as much a part of him as the desire to build houses and cultivate the land and marry and have children and read books and sing songs, that he should want to stand together with other men in order to acknowledge their common dependence on God, their Father and Creator. In fact, this desire is much more fundamental than any purely physical necessity.<sup>5</sup>

To me, this statement seems extraordinary, and very enriching. Here Merton speaks of "life as a journey" and a "self" as the main character and hero of existence itself – projected towards the future, but "anchored" in a real situation given at one's birth.

As Fernando Beltrán says, the main discourse of Merton's work is basically built around two recurrent images, that of the "journey" and that of the "self." Both converge in his monastic path, defined as a vertical journey towards the true personal self,

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 13.

alone; his deliberate adoption of a new civil citizenship will represent a new journey, this time horizontal, towards his fellow men, in society. We cannot understand the process of Merton's conversion without situating it in a context of *metanoia*, transformation, or in monastic terms *conversatio morum*, a conversion which, by a humorous play on words, was for Merton a real "conversation of the heart," the reason behind his lengthy letter of love to the world. In *New Seeds of Contemplation* Merton reads the story of Genesis from the existential point of view, from which the "fall" of man is nothing but the concealing of his true identity.<sup>6</sup>

From this perspective Merton's words should be considered:

To say I was born in sin is to say I came into the world with a false self. I was born in a mask. I came into existence under a sign of contradiction, being someone that I was never intended to be and therefore a denial of what I am supposed to be. And thus I came into existence and nonexistence at the same time because from the very start I was something that I was not.<sup>7</sup>

Merton, then, speaks of reality anchored in one's own birth. As some philosophers indicate, man, although he is not complete, neither is he incomplete. We are, as one author indicates in a recent study on anthropology of religion,<sup>8</sup> what we say we are on the basis that we have not decided ourselves. Hence, the importance of accepting the given fact, life, and accepting it from the gratuitousness of the meaning discovered in the fascination for the beginning: love, truth, the ability to find a meaning beyond our own circumstantial and primary needs. Man, after all, is a biographical being, not just a biological being.

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<sup>6</sup> Fernando Beltrán Llavador, *Soledad y Sociedad en Thomas Merton: El Nuevo Adán y la Identidad Americana* (Valencia: Servicio de Publicaciones de la Universidad de Valencia, 1991). See also, by the same author, a summarised version of it: *La Contemplación en la Acción: Thomas Merton* (Madrid: San Pablo, 1996), and an updated and revised publication: *La Encendida Memoria: Aproximación a Thomas Merton* (Valencia: Biblioteca Javier Coy D'Estudis Nord-Americans, Universitat de València, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961), 33-34.

<sup>8</sup> José María Barrio, *Antropología del Hecho Religioso* (Madrid: Rialp, 2006).

The next step is that of accepting others. It means that we are seeking the truth, and we find it revealed, manifested, made explicit in history and in the lives of others, of those who preceded us and of our contemporaries.

I would like to emphasise this because of the current circumstances in which we find ourselves, and because it is a fundamental point for education in religious values, especially during youth. We must especially bear in mind that, with the fall of Communism, the forms legitimating the negative rationale over the religious one broke down. Now we have entered the flight from reality, the virtual, amusing ourselves by wearing masks until dying denaturalised, and fantasies can enslave us. The unusual sales of fiction novels prove these attitudes. The circle of the double truth of modernity seems to have closed to introduce us to a neo-romanticism of the myth and Eros. The mythological drift, of which Girard and Boghesi, among others, have written, is a drift of the religious face of man. The mythological drift leads us inexorably to polytheism. If it is true that the aesthetic view of religion is essential now, in the age of the image, it is no less true that it may contain a lethal trap whenever it conceals nihilism proper to gnosis. One of the problems that Christian anthropology faces, and which Merton detects and manifests in the words quoted, is that of religious gnosis, a transcendence wrapped in the cellophane of sentimentalism, characterised by a logic of the individual: in short, remaining throughout life with a mask imposed at birth, a fruit of the reigning culture, and which is nothing like the face that corresponds to us.

Dropping the anchor in the "unlimited possibilities of human heroism, with myself as the hero" is, in short, the negation of all that which is given freely in the gift of life.

There is something else in the paragraph quoted, something that caught my attention, and I would like to think about it: "One came out of the church with a kind of comfortable and satisfied feeling that something had been done that needed to be done, and that was all I knew about it." I would say that our present mentality, even in Christian and monastic spheres, is somewhat contrary to this feeling of childlike innocence and evangelical simplicity that

Merton describes and which, in part and at the right time, is the basis, the anchoring point, for a healthy and balanced development of the child and of anyone embarking upon a spiritual adventure. It is the ability to accept what life itself offers joyously and without utilitarian ends, without making it undergo the scrutiny of manipulation, of appraisals or corrosive criticism, partisan historical revisionism or deceiving publicity.

Years later, now a monk and finding himself by chance in Louisville, Merton realised that the years of monastic purification, the search for truth in himself and in others, the aesthesis of detachment imposed by his monastic vows are spontaneously leading him to the great revelation, to the discovery of the point where the anchor of all hope can be fixed and ride out all the storms.

Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty 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. If only they could all see themselves as they really *are*. If only we could see each other that way all the time. There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed... I suppose the big problem would be that we would fall down and worship each other.<sup>9</sup>

## 2. When the chain of the anchor breaks

*Teach me to go to this country beyond words and beyond names.  
Teach me not to stay on this side of the frontier, here where the woods are.  
I need to be led by you. I need my heart to be moved by you. I need my soul  
to be made clean by your prayer. I need my will to be made strong by you.  
I need the world to be saved and changed by you.*<sup>10</sup>

In 1956, while African Americans in Montgomery were boycotting discrimination on the buses, and the name of Martin Luther King, Jr. began to be seen in the newspaper headlines,

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 142.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 46. In his personal journal Merton wrote "Teach me not to stay on this side of the frontier, here where the woods are" - "Stay" was wrongly transcribed as "pray" in the published version.

Merton was reading Gandhi. His interest came from the past, from when he was studying at Oakham, although now there was something more involved than being in a radical position among the students in his class. It was partly a process of analysis of the social implications of the gospel and one of the first steps of connection with contemplative non-Christians.

Spring of that year also marked the beginning of Merton's immersion in Russian religious literature and writings. That autumn the first Sputnik was launched, but what the Russians could offer Merton was not journeys into space but a deep tradition of spirituality. He became convinced that the restoration of unity in the Church began with the recovery of unity in oneself. A note in his journal, made in April 1957,<sup>11</sup> was included in the book *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*:

If I can unite *in myself* the thought and the devotion of Eastern and Western Christendom, the Greek and the Latin Fathers, the Russians with the Spanish mystics, I can prepare in myself the reunion of divided Christians. From that secret and unspoken unity in myself can eventually come a visible and manifest unity of all Christians. If we want to bring together what is divided, we can not do so by imposing one division upon the other or absorbing one division into the other. But if we do this, the union is not Christian. It is political, and doomed to further conflict. We must contain all divided worlds in ourselves and transcend them in Christ.<sup>12</sup>

Merton was in his prime spiritually and monastically and also as a writer. He was a brilliant novice master in a great abbey; he gave classes and lectures to the novices and to the monastic community; although he cherished the project of a hermitage in the monastery grounds, and his wish had been granted, he had given it up for the time being so as to devote himself to instructing the young men aspiring to be monks.

At this moment of his prime he wrote paragraphs such as the following:

Christian hope in God and in the world to come is inevitably also hope in man, or at least *for* man. How can we despair of man when the Word

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>12</sup> Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 12.



of God was made man in order to save us all? But our Christian hope is, and must remain, inviolably pure. It must work and struggle in the chaos of conflicting policy which is the world of egotism: and in order to do so it must take on visible, symbolic forms by which to declare its message. But when these symbols become confused with other secular symbols, then there is danger that faith itself will be corrupted by fictions, and there is a consequent obligation, on the part of some Christians, to affirm their faith in all its intransigent purity.

At such a time, some men will seek clarity in isolation and silence, not because they think they know better than the rest, but because they want to see life in a different perspective. They want to withdraw from the babel of confusion in order to listen more patiently to the voice of their conscience and to the Holy Spirit. And by their prayers and their fidelity they will invisibly renew the life of the whole Church.<sup>13</sup>

His spiritual attitude was very clear and perfectly defined:

I pray much to have a wise heart... To have a "wise heart," it seems to me, is to live centered on this dynamism and this secret hope - this hoped-for secret. It is the key to our life, but as long as we are alive we must see that we do not have this key: it is not at our disposal. Christ has it, in us, for us. We have the key in so far as we believe in Him, and are one with Him. So this is it: the "wise heart" remains in hope and in contradiction, in sorrow and in joy, fixed on the secret and the "great deed" which alone gives Christian life its true scope and dimensions!

The wise heart lives in Christ.<sup>14</sup>

The chain of the anchor to which such security was fixed was to be sorely tested in 1956. Merton's growing interest in psychoanalysis, which surfaced due to his interest in giving better help to the novices, led him to a shattering experience which made him wonder about his own mental balance. In July 1956 Merton flew to St. John's University in Minnesota, to take part in a two-week seminar on psychiatry and its application to the religious life. The Abbot, Dom James, intended to join the seminar later. The person directing the seminar was Dr. Gregory Zilboorg, a recent convert to Catholicism whose books were published by a company that also published Merton's books. Zilboorg arrived at the meeting

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<sup>13</sup> Thomas Merton, *Disputed Questions* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1960), 193.

<sup>14</sup> Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 191-92.

full of prejudice against Merton, based on his reading of *The Sign of Jonas*. In a private conversation, Zilboorg told Merton that he found him in bad shape and that he was a half-psychotic charlatan and, furthermore, his thirst for fame indicated megalomania and narcissism. His writing was illogical verbosity and his longings for the hermit's way of life were pathological. As he listened to him Merton could only think of Zilboorg's similarities with Stalin. What Zilboorg was saying was no worse than what Merton had written in his diary in his darkest moments.

The next day, with the arrival of Dom James, Zilboorg organised a meeting with both of them –the Abbot and Merton– a meeting at which Zilboorg stated that Merton's wish for greater solitude formed part of his longing for public attention. What he wanted was a hermitage in Times Square, "with a large sign over it saying 'HERMIT'." This was too much for Merton. He felt humiliated and destroyed. He sat with tears streaming down his cheeks, muttering "Stalin! Stalin!" Dom James's doubts about Merton, and Merton's doubts about himself, had been confirmed by a famous psychiatrist.

Plans were made for Merton to go to New York to undergo psychoanalysis with Zilboorg, but they were replaced by others so that he would see a psychologist in Louisville, Dr. James Wygal. When Zilboorg went to the Abbey in December, he said that he had formed a second opinion about Merton and that, after all, his state was not so bad. "It transpires that though I am indeed crazy as a loon I don't really need analysis," Merton wrote to Naomi Burton at the end of the year.<sup>15</sup>

From childhood, Merton sought the stability that the early death of both his parents had taken from him; but with time he learned not to look back, but rather to focus on the future to which his fine and alert sensitivity propelled him. He had lost his parents as a child and felt lonely and out of place in strange worlds. His youth, like that of many students then, was happy and sad at the same time, hectic and somewhat Bohemian at times, with long

<sup>15</sup> For more detailed information on the meeting of Merton and Zilboorg and its consequences see Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), 290-99.

intervals of shallowness and moments of strong religious experiences. He certainly became absorbed in many names and words, in dangerous friendships and in his fondness for literature; he felt deeply the need for a pure heart and a strengthened will, and needed, above all, a new world in which he would play the role of healer precisely because of the gifts he knew he had received, gifts which would lead him to the fullness of his being and which could not be an obstacle for his personal fulfilment in accordance with God's designs.

What many of Merton's writings and attitudes reveal to us is that we cannot listen to prophecies from a position of flight, but from involvement. At a certain moment, there has to be a psychoanalysis which reaches the deepest levels of the psyche and the spirit, a confrontation with truth, a purification of unconscious motivations, a complete stripping of oneself and of one's projects.

In *The Sign of Jonas*, which was precisely the book that Zilboorg had read, Merton had already completed this task well, and like Jonas, had tried to answer the basic questions the mariners asked him: "What is your occupation? Where are you from? What is your country? Of what people are you? Who are you really?" These are the big questions (Jonah 1.8-10). The mariners reveal Jonas' deepest truth: you are really a fugitive, someone without roots, someone who has not settled. Your way of serving God has not served for putting down personal roots, your religion has not shown the basic meaning of your existence, you have not anchored your being in the quest for truth, the true quest. You are a prophet without roots in life who does not know how to act if removed from his religious parameters, a fugitive in deepest solitude who has not discovered the roads of communion.

The definitive therapy for the mariners is "to cast him into the sea" – to throw him into the "great sea." Here, in the deep solitude of the sea the prophet would have to learn how a prophecy must be for the sea, for every thing and for all people. When one goes to the sea, to the citizenry, to the cosmos, the negative forces of the sea are calmed, one enters the fair weather of fraternity; a new dawning that all peoples await is glimpsed. Paul of Tarsus understood his mission to the pagans "as a new dawning" (Acts 26.23).

The mariners were the midwives of Jonas' identity as a prophet. But Jonas still had before him a long road of conversion, a conversion that Merton had already undergone in the solitude of his monastery and which Dr. Zilboorg had not intuited.

Jonas, in the belly of the whale, in his prayer, in his attitude, still reveals that his religious structure is solid, no one can damage the world of his convictions. Jonas makes God responsible for his evils: "You cast me into the deep... all your waves and your billows passed over me" (2.3-4). Furthermore, Jonas' religious absolutes remain sacred to him: his great hope is to see the temple again. His desire is not that the peoples should find God in order to thus find unity, but rather that the religious absolutes, so enduringly loved, should not be questioned.

Hence, the final confession is definitive: the pagans will always be disloyal; I will follow my "vows," my absolutes. All is as always, nothing has changed, neither can the sudden entry of God modify them if one is not receptive to grace. The religious experience, when it is closed, immunises against the very action of God. This is the tremendous paradox of the person who is not open to the overall prophecy of unity and of one God for everyone.

In *The Sign of Jonas*, apparently the diary of a monk increasingly at home in his monastery, Merton mixes his spiritual convictions with his social experiences, and this gives rise to a prophecy of universal vision, not just the outpourings of a prominent author. Merton seeks to demonstrate that he is the first fruit of that prophecy of unity inside a monastery, not because he has found the solution for the conversion of Nineveh, but because he has become convinced that in Nineveh also there are seeds of hope: Nineveh needs "proclamations," offers of life, rather than condemnation and exclusion. He himself confesses in *New Seeds of Contemplation*:

I must look for my identity, somehow, not only in God but in other men. I will never be able to find myself if I isolate myself from the rest of mankind as if I were a different kind of being.<sup>16</sup>

Nineveh is, certainly, the most wicked portrait of humanity, that "dark zone" with the maximum influence of inhumanity. But Jonas must become a prophet of possible life, rather than a prophet of

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<sup>16</sup> Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 51.

condemnation: the prophet must make people see that their situation contains possibilities of change, that horizons can be opened up.

In Nineveh there is a "cosmic conversion," a reorientation - men and animals, cows and sheep. But this cosmic conversion was of no interest at all for Jonas' prophecy, which sought a religious conversion, that everyone should recognise the superiority of God Yahweh and that the temple should be understood as the centre of the universe. A conversion of the cosmos, a reorientation of what has been created, the new path of a world at peace and good relations between its creatures are of little interest for the prophecy in a framework of narrow religiousness. Yet, in this general reconciliation lies the secret of a new world.

God rejoiced on seeing that even Nineveh could vibrate with the prophecy of goodness and justice. But Jonas prayed again from anger (4.1-4). In *The Sign of Jonas* Merton reminds us that a prayer made from anger, mistrust of another, or the position of superiority, is inhuman and absolutely useless, both for the one praying and for his intentions. False religion, religion that does not live focused on that "secret hope - [that] hoped-for secret," cannot make us embrace the great values of the Gospel (peace, mercy, justice, transcendence, generosity, accompanying the weak, service, etc.).

God's mercy is neither restrictive nor exclusive, but it is rather all embracing, absolutely fraternal. That a Cistercian monk should manifest this in a personal and monastic diary was, at that time, incomprehensible for many in the Cistercian Order. But Merton had understood very well what had gone wrong with Jonas, and what was outstanding in God, and he knew that as a contemplative monk he should understand what God wanted for him and for the whole world. He reflects this in *New Seeds of Contemplation*:

So God became man. He took on the weakness and ordinariness of man, and He hid Himself, becoming an anonymous and unimportant man in a very unimportant place. And He refused at any time to Lord it over men, or to be a King, or a Leader, or to be a Reformer, or to be in any way Superior to His own creatures. He would be nothing else but their brother, and their counsellor, and their servant, and their friend.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 293.