

ABP. JÓZEF ŻYCIŃSKI

THE CRISIS OF SCIENTIFIC-TECHNICAL
CIVILISATION AND THE WORLD OF SPIRITUAL VALUES
IN THE REFLECTIONS OF THOMAS MERTON*

A great differences of moods representative for the beginning of the 20th and 21st century clearly show, the closing stages of the second millennium were a period of particularly immense disappointments, which have demonstrated the utopian character of hopes professed on the threshold of the 20th century – the hopes that concerned the development of science and technology as well as anticipating social revolution that was about to happen. For the followers of Comtean positivism or Pearsonian scientism, the 20th century, thanks to the unavoidable success of physics, was to bring about both a universally acknowledged view of the world, and the realization of everlasting dreams of an ideal society, based on scientific premises. For our contemporary postmodernism the tragedy of September 11th, 2001 remains a symbol of civilization threatened with despair, which in the jigsaw of pluralistic influences emerges as a challenge for humanism. If one was to look for a relatively constant element for those two eras, one could point to

* Transl. by Anna Muranty.

Nietzsche pronouncing God's death. On the brink of 20th century it presented a proud herald of man's emancipation. A hundred years later the dominating role is that of philosophy of resignation, pessimism and disappointments which undermine the great ideas of the Enlightenment – belief in man, progress and rational reflection.

Between euphoria and despair

Thomas Carlyle, who passed away in 1881 declared typically for the age he lived in rejection of God, formulating it in sentences copied from young Engels: "There is no longer any God for us! God's Laws are become a Greatest-Happiness Principle, a Parliamentary Expediency. . . . There is no religion; there is no God; man has lost his soul, and vainly seeks antiseptic salt¹". Young A. C. Swinburne (1837-1909) formed his provocative theses of John Steward Mill's superiority over Bible in the same spirit; he proposed to substitute *Te Deum laudamus* with *Te hominem laudamus*². The enlightenment fascination with man and his intellectual output, were quickly transformed into negation of reason, progress, humanism. In contemporary criticism of Enlightenment delusions these ideas are considered to be a great illusion, which was burnt in the Auschwitz crematories or was buried together with the prisoners of Kolyma. In this view *homo postmodernus* appears to be a tragic being doomed to a meaningless wandering around in the world of spiritual emptiness.

Odo Marquard, a German authority on postmodernism, claims that intellectual crisis of our age was caused mainly by the declarations of God's death. Just as Greek civilization was at a certain stage fascinated with scepticism, and medieval thought discovered the appeal of nominalism, the fascination of our age appears to be "weak thought", whose policy is to pass over all theses concerning God, truth, the sense of history, and human dignity³. Those ideas are treated as myths, which had already used up their culture-formative functions. Small narrations of weak thought are taking their place. They encompass merely a small splinter of human existence.

¹ A.N. Wilson, *God's Funeral. A Biography of Faith and Doubt in Western Civilization*, New York: Balantine Books, 1999, p. 69.

² *The Swinburne Letters*, ed. Cecil Y. Lang, New York: AMS Press 1972, vol. 2, p. 312.

³ O. Marquard, *Lob des Polyteismus. Über Monomythie und Polymythie*, Frankfurt am Main 1979.

They positively preclude any possibility of a Christian God of feeling and history appearing in them.

As a result of comparable intellectual transformation the meaning of terms such as sense, truth, human person, have been profoundly reviewed. While Voltaire's contemporaries believed that, when living according to the rule of "one ethics and one geometry" it was possible to work out one system of true knowledge, nowadays it is customary to accept an infinite number of non-Euclidean geometrical systems, and to consider the whole variety of ethical systems to be rightful. The concepts of fact, truth, and the state of affairs were also fundamentally revised, it was acknowledged that "each of them is an empty concept, meaning something quite undefined and undefinable"⁴. This created an ideological basis for casting doubt on both the concept of the human person and human dignity. Joseph Fletcher⁵ and Gregory E. Pence⁶, while defending the fully unrestricted right for genetic engineering experimentation and attempts at human cloning, opt for the purely behaviourist understanding of a human person. They claim that one can only use the term 'person' in reference to an individual who makes use of reflection, shows self-consciousness, and establishes pragmatic contact with his environment. Those definitions make it possible to call into question the personal nature both of the human foetus, and of the handicapped. They carry the danger of anthropological precedents, in which the acknowledgement of any person's dignity will depend on terminological conventions and designers' definitions introduced in an arbitrary manner.

Admittedly, on the brink of the 20th century anthropology was the least developed field of scientific reflection. The breakthrough connected with the Darwinian theory of natural selection focused attention on a number of controversial issues; yet it didn't bring exhaustive studies on man's spirituality, overcoming of the materialistic monism, peculiarity of striving for attitudes that didn't bring any pragmatic advantages in the fight for existence. In the context of the scientific discoveries of the early 20th century, cosmology unquestionably dominated anthropology. The physical world, which had been previously considered man's homeland, was gradually becoming

⁴ R. Rorty, *Czy nauka o naturze to kategoria naturalna?*, in: *Obiektywność, relatywizm i prawda*, Warszawa: Aletheia, 1999, p. 84.

⁵ "The Cognitive Criterion of Humanhood", *Hastings Center Report* 4 (1975, Dec), pp. 4-7.

⁶ *Who's afraid of human cloning?*, Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998, p. 88.

a stranger and stranger environment, in which all the expanding spaces were destroying the sense of cosmic "cosiness" and theological order, so characteristic of medieval cosmology.

Already in the times of Darwin his contemporaries made every effort to defend the view that the age of the world does not exceed 6 thousand years. Indeed, Darwin himself did not distinguish the Old Testament content from naive calculations of Archbishop James Ussher, presented in *Annales Veteris et Novi Testamenti*. According to the latter, the universe was created in October 4004 BC, and although palaeontologists of Darwin's age knew Archbishop's Ussher's estimations to be inane, they thought that it would suffice to multiply their result by a factor not greater than 100. Nowadays we know that the age of the universe in its present form is approximately 15 milliard years. During the century that passed since Darwin's death the age of the universe had to be multiplied by a factor of 3 million. All this was leading to the sense of cosmic alienation and a radical departure from the value hierarchy accepted prior to the scientific-technical revolution.

In this changed cognitive perspective the Enlightenment optimism was abandoned. Its place was taken by death declarations, which were by then no less popular than the Enlightenment rhetoric of progress. It follows from them unambiguously that God is dead, man is dying, the meaning is disappearing, and theodicy, metaphysics and history have reached their final limits. All that remains for us to do is to return to the small mythology in which "the weak thought" draws attention towards seasonal idols⁷. While Nietzsche proclaimed God's death with enthusiasm, as a great achievement, his modern followers are reduced to a choice among scepticism, the absurd, and despair. In the changed cultural context man appears to be a tragic Nomad, who exists in the scenery where the place occupied previously by the paradise tree is now overgrown by weeds, symbolising the tangle of our life choice and judgements. Being a perpetual wanderer, he doesn't consider any territory his own, everywhere he goes he feels like a drifter, whose journey has no aim. Being part of the process of constant movement, he fills the open space of his travel without leaving any trace of himself. It is precisely this space that is overgrown with weeds – complicated, devoid of linear structure, complex like the lot of beings doomed to eternal lack of fulfilment on his journey.

⁷ Cf. G. Vattimo, *Al di là del soggetto*, Milano: Feltrinelli, 1981.

Speaking of those who find the metaphorical representation of their existence in the symbolism of weeds one cannot even say that they are uprooted from tradition and culture.⁸ However, their experience of crises leads to drawing attention towards spiritual values, which hadn't been appreciated in materialist anthropology. While scientism developed a naive view of science, far from the actual the naturalists' research activities, nowadays there appear attempts at developing a naive vision of spirituality in its New Age version, by proposing spiritual substitutes alien to the great mystical tradition. Those propositions are just as groundless as the transition from the apotheosis of science to the radical criticism of it, from the Enlightenment poetics of progress to an easy philosophy of despair and hopelessness. In order to avoid extremities of this nature, one should search for solutions which blend together both giving more value to the rational components of our culture, and taking into consideration the transcendent aspect of man in relation to the physical reality and his openness to the world of spiritual values.

The example of Thomas Merton's life provides interesting illustrations which present a great adventure of faith, showing the human Nomad's openness to the supernatural reality of a personal God. In this view the descendants of our forefather Jacob, "a wandering Aramean" (Dt 26,5), are searching for a new heaven and a new earth while travelling along the trail of Christian Nomads (Rv 21,1). This search constitutes a cultural necessity for our generation. In his essay *Mysticism in the Nuclear Age* Merton claims that no other generation has ever experienced such great crises or disappointments as ours has. Yet we shouldn't be under the illusion that it automatically leads to an affirmation of spiritual values. However, the world of these values gives a real chance of avoiding irrational wandering about among gullible enthusiasm and easy despair⁹. Among the axiological deserts of the third millennium the witness of meaning discovered in the space of spiritual dialogue with personal God takes on a particular significance.

⁸ Human condition in postmodern anthropology is fully discussed in my work *Bóg postmodernistów [God of Postmodernists]*, Lublin: RW KUL, 2001, pp. 49-66.

⁹ Cf. Th. Merton, "Mysticism in the Nuclear Age" in: *TMR*, p. 371ff.

*Multidimensional existence of man as depicted
by Thomas Merton*

In Thomas Merton's biography one finds a significant uncovering of the values which influence the understanding of the meaning of human life in a decisive fashion, despite the policy to ignore them in the scientific-technical vision of the world. Born in France, of two artists, representing two such far-away worlds as Ohio and New Zealand, Thomas Merton was faced with a difficult decision, whether it was his vocation to lead the life of an artist, a professor, a priest or a writer.¹⁰ His master's thesis *Nature and Art in the Works of William Blake* testifies to his youthful interests, which in a later period will find their fulfilment in his openness to the invisible reality of grace. In the year of his ordination Merton, then 34 years old, stresses the importance of this reality, as he writes: "there are waters of Siloam that flow in silence". So as not to pass thoughtlessly as they flow by, one has to be able to see, ask, experience wonder. It is in the core of our culture to discover in our consciousness "the silent self", whose nature is impossible to express by rational means of articulation. It requires going beyond the level of words and voices, a silent "listening" to fundamental reality, which nevertheless is so often ignored in the practice of living dominated by consumption and haste.¹¹

In the earlier stage of life Merton's communion with reality going beyond the physical world came about mainly by means of art, poetry and literature. His correspondence with Boris Pasternak or Czesław Miłosz shows how close he was to the world of poetry open to the basic values: meaning, dignity, humanity. His essays on the works of Joyce or Faulkner indicate how deeply he was moved by the problems of the human lot. Having joined the Trappists Merton completes the artistic message of T.S. Eliot, Auden, Rilke, Pasternak, Dylan Thomas or García Lorca with the content of the mystical writings of St. John of the Cross, Therese of Avila, Jan Ruysbroeck, Bonaventure, Bernard of Clairvaux.¹² The discovery of the new world of Biblical characters, whose dilemmas and life choices become a basic ingredient of everyday monastic reality will also prove interesting. Merton will

¹⁰ Cf. Victor A. Kramer, *Thomas Merton. Monk & Artist*, Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publication, 1987, p. 7.

¹¹ Th. Merton, *Love and Living*, New York: Farrar, 1979, p. 40.

¹² Th. Merton, *Art and Spirituality*, in: *TMR*, p. 406.

write of this entering a new perspective of meaning on the pages of *The Sign of Jonas*:

Isaias, Moses, David, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are all part of me. They are always about me. They look over my shoulder, earnest men, belonging to the facade of the medieval cathedral. I feel that they are very concerned about me and that they want me to understand what God told them to write down. . . . They are more a part of my world than most of the people actually living in the world. . . . I know well the burnt faces of the Prophets and Evangelists. . . . And I read their books with joy and with holy fear, *cum tremore divino*, and their words become a part of me. . . . I am more and more possessed by their vision of the God's Kingdom, and I wonder at the futility of seeking anything else on earth but the truth revealed in them.¹³

This fascination with a new world cannot be achieved by means of simply shutting out sensual stimuli, which reach our psyche. And yet a certain kind of closing is necessary, since our senses inevitably experience so many sensations, that if we hadn't developed some kind of protective insensitivity, our organisms would most probably react by escaping into madness.¹⁴ Renunciation itself doesn't however lead us to the path of great mysticism. It is necessary to discover a new level of reality, the level which absorbs, fascinates, captivates. A similar phenomenon takes place in aesthetic experience when a surprising beauty surpasses the physical structure of canvas covered with paint, and the performance of a violin quartet resists all attempts at reducing it to the physical description of the friction between the bow and the strings. Understanding the essence both of the experience of fascination with beauty and mystical elation requires that we go beyond the world of physical determiners and discover the autonomy of the invisible world which proves to be no less real than the everyday world of physical objects. For Merton this 'mystical realism' is once more rooted in contemplating the Bible. It shows great personas who had experienced the same dilemmas before we did, and from whom we can learn the truth of life. Having discovered this truth, Merton confesses:

¹³ Th. Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, New York-London: Harvest HBJ Book, 1979, p. 224.

¹⁴ *Art and Spirituality*, p. 386.

I also have great reverence and love for the Patriarchs of the Old Testament – Abraham, Isaac, Jacob – and for the Prophets – Samuel, Elias, Eliseus. When I walk in the cemetery in the cool evening when the sun is going down – there is almost no sunlight left now in the interval after supper – I think of Isaac, meditating in the fields at evening and of Rebecca coming to marry him from a far country riding on a rich camel, sailing across the desert like a queen in a great ship.¹⁵

In this perspective contemplation appears to be the process of finding the invisible, transcendent dimension of everyday life and a thorough change of the whole meaning of life. Just as the experience of love shows the same persons and events in new light, the skill of contemplation introduces one into the formerly unknown world of meaning and beauty. To ignore this dimension is to impoverish our existence significantly. The world devoid of contemplation is impoverished in a similar fashion like the world devoid of music, poetry or love. Contemplation, ultimately directed towards God unifies all those factors, bringing great harmony into man's life, harmony in which we find our fulfilment, caring about proper 'ecology of mind'.¹⁶ This concern doesn't come to a mere conservative saving the *status quo*, but comprises a clear promethean quality – it directs our existence towards new challenges and courageous undertakings.

Prometheus of the Mystics

According to Merton a contemplative view of the world comprises a deeply promethean quality, since, just like new fire, it brings a perception of the world unjustly belittled in our present culture to weary humanity. Both Marx and the followers of natural sciences were fascinated with this promethean view of man; in all the new discoveries they were searching only for benefits resulting from stealing away nature's secrets. All in all the promethean fire in our generation failed to fulfil expectations. In Kolyma it failed to melt the snow among which prisoners of conscience were dying. In Auschwitz it was used to build crematories whose efficient functioning had a crucial influence on the extent of the extermination of innocent human

¹⁵ *The Sign of Jonas*, p. 224.

¹⁶ Th. Merton, *Day of A Stranger*, in: *TMR*, p. 432.

beings. Nevertheless, these facts do not justify our condemnation of Prometheus, or our making him feel guilty because of a lack of success in his actions.

In fact, on Good Friday Jesus Christ was also unsuccessful, since crucifixion seemed to close His earthly mission. Merton remains under the spell of analogy between Prometheus chained to the rocks of Kuakas and Christ nailed to the cross¹⁷. Significant differences manifest themselves in that Jesus is bringing fire which is to burn in human hearts. He does not steal it away from jealous gods, but instead he wishes to show the familiarised love of God to man. He accepts death voluntarily, in order to present man with a new dimension of life, in which the darkness of searching and dilemmas becomes illuminated with the light of God's fire of love. The difficulty is that, like the ancient Greeks, we are also used to suspecting God of jealousy and searching for human autonomy, liberated from God's light. Yet the God of the Gospel isn't the God of alienation, who would jealously guard His gifts. He is the God of love, without whom our life becomes dark and empty, like the life of those beings whom promethean fire didn't reach.

In this view the contemplative bond with God becomes a promethean undertaking, in which we strive towards spiritual fullness. Merton refers to St. Thomas of Aquinas who considered contemplation to be *quaedam inchoatio beatitudinis* – the initiation of heavenly bliss, in pointing out that the secularisation of interests by no means distinguishes our generation, living in the cultural *post mortem Dei* climate. At the same time he recalled on St. Bonaventure's painful reflections that to describe his contemporaries one could quote Mt 12:42, where it says that the queen of the south had to travel a long way in order to hear the wisdom of Salomon, while the contemporary generation ignores God's wisdom, focusing attention on its substitutes passed on in the form of purely human, gaudy wisdom.¹⁸

Promethean courage is in its very essence solitary. In the past great scientific discoveries were also usually a result of a solitary pursuit of truth. Nevertheless, such discoveries were accompanied by social enthusiasm and optimism, which saw the beginnings of a new era in putting to use the state-of-the art achievements of human intellect. The contemplative search

¹⁷ Th. Merton *Prometheus: A Meditation*, in: "The Behavior of Titans", *TMR*, p. 343.

¹⁸ *Art and Spirituality*, pp. 404ff.

for a hidden dimension of the world is as a rule free of interpretative tumult and utopian declarations. However, it shapes all beings who show their freedom by striving for holiness. It serves to form 'God's artists', in whom personal holiness, like in the case of St. John of the Cross, unifies the approach of a mystic and a poet. Nonetheless Christian ascetics is neither Plotyn's intellectualism nor stoical renunciation. There is in it a fullness of fascination with God, which shows the hidden beauty of events, by linking them with the models shown by Christ in the Sermon on the Mountain.¹⁹

In *The Sign of Jonas*, while describing his night patrol in the abbey on July 4th, 1952, Merton presents a metaphorical description of an attitude of a person living the spirit of contemplation as 'the guardian of the morning'. These notes are given extra importance by the fact that the date of this sentry coincides with national American holiday. This correspondence is a reminder that American realities cannot be reduced to mere economic success or efficiently functioning democratic institutions. There is in them also an openness in prayer to God, solitary reflection in the night, the words of psalms, penetrating looking for light among darkness, poetic meditation on droplets of water glittering in the grass illuminated by the rays of the rising sun. All these factors determine the richness of human being and integral cultural development, which was impossible to attain by means of realisation of utopian dreams of extraordinary achievements of scientific-technical revolution.

Paradoxes of spiritual growth

A critical estimation of the cultural achievements of our scientific-technical civilisation often leads, by right of contrast, to an apotheosis of spiritual values as such. The symbol of the latter may be the New Age movement with its propositions of spirituality pop. It isn't rare to attempt to justify fascination with this kind of spirituality by claiming that spirituality – even an extremely impoverished one – is still better than ignoring spiritual values in the earlier fascination with technology by policy. While evaluating such propositions it is worthwhile to take into consideration analogies with art. In the wide spectrum of various works of art the extreme positions are designated by masterpiece and kitsch; the former introduces into the world of the great classics of beauty, the latter brings a poor substitute for art, which is capable of subjectively satisfying unrefined minds, yet in essence is an

¹⁹ *Art and Spirituality*, pp. 413f.

infantile proxy for art. In science a similar substitute remains the UFO theory, or pathological attempts at constructing the *perpetuum mobile*. New Age combines in itself kitsch and pathology. Taking up the debate on the superiority of spiritual kitsch over materialistic monism remains unfounded as far as content is concerned, as the output of classics of spirituality brings a chance of relating to the great mystical tradition, which has shaped cultural achievements of our species in a crucial way. It doesn't mean in the least that there is one paradigm of spirituality in force, or that one should aim to unify contemplation.

Merton's writings provide important witness to his spiritual evolution, where among the changing forms we find the same essence of content discovered on various level of depth. Yet it is devoid of striving for uniformity, or conviction that one, best way for spiritual perfection can be discovered. Merton is aware of the multiplicity of tradition in Christian mysticism. In it he can see both those who, following the example of Augustine, Bernard, or Thomas of Aquinas, developed the metaphor of light, and those who, in the style of Gregory of Nyssa, or John of the Cross, spoke of God who comes in our experience of the darkness of life. Finally, he perceives attempts at joining both opposite attitudes, made by Jan Ruysbroeck, among others, yet he is far from treating them as an unavoidable necessity.²⁰ This dissimilarity of valid approaches makes Victor Kramer write that the two completely opposing sides of Merton come out while reading his *Sign of Jonas* and *Waters of Siloe*.²¹

It is understandable that when reading the notes Merton wrote directly after being baptised, the reader is stricken with his positive search for an inner logic of the spiritual world. They are dominated by a sense of freedom and liberation that results from openness to the loving God. In *The Seven Storey Mountain* this motif appears together with the sense of inner joy and peace in the description of a positive conversion: 'I belonged to God, not to myself: and to belong to Him is to be free, free of all the anxieties and worries and sorrows The only thing that mattered was the fact of the sacrifice, the essential dedication The rest was only accidental'.²² A similar agenda appears in *The Sign of Jonas*: 'None of me belongs to

²⁰ Th. Merton, *The Ascent to Truth*, in: *TMR*, p. 383.

²¹ Thomas Merton. *Monk & Artist*, p. 58.

²² Th. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Harcourt Brace: New York, 1948, p. 414.

anybody but God. Absolute loneliness of the imagination, the memory, the will. My love for everybody is equal, neutral and clean. No exclusiveness. Simple and free as the sky because I love everybody and am possessed by nobody'.²³

His bond with God, felt in such categories, must not be reduced to mere subjective experiences, since its essence consists in liberation from illusion, which shows the truth formerly unnoticed. It is also crucial that he discovers the vast sphere of God's meaning, which significantly influences our entire view on reality. This world of God's meaning, integrated by the grace of God, unified books and ideas, poems and short stories, pictures and music, buildings, cities, places, philosophies. This great spiritual integration showed a new hierarchy of values and new sources of life optimism, unnoticed in the period prior to conversion. In those times, the self-identification he had made with Catholicism makes Merton put down in writing certain critical remarks about protestant theology. This attitude disappears in later texts. Explaining this change with the ecumenical approach of the Vatican Council II is discretionary in that Merton died only three years after the Council had ended. In that context it seems more grounded to claim that the changes brought about by the Council resulted from deep prayer and a spirit of contemplation in which important theological ideas were maturing even before Vatican II.

Merton's notes made during his journey to Asia provide a number of expressions of openness to the positive heritage of spirituality present in the tradition of the East. They are devoid of naive fascinations with esotericism, so characteristic of establishments that value political correctness highly. At the same time Merton dedicates a lot of attention to the role of prayer in the lives of Tibetans, the means of monastic formation, meditation, discipline of prayer, similarities between the spiritualities of the West and the East. He considers "total dedication, continued effort, experienced guidance, real discipline, and the combination of wisdom and method"²⁴ to be characteristic of Tibetan mysticism. This view of Eastern spirituality is an enrichment and development of the mystical tradition of the West. However, it has nothing in common with rejecting it or escaping into superficial-ritualistic esotericism.

²³ *The Sign of Jonas*, p. 253.

²⁴ Th. Merton, *Two Asian Letters*, in: *TMR*, p. 449f.

Simultaneously with spiritual growth Merton dissociates himself from the logical actions ascribed to God, actions which correspond to our common sense feelings. The richness of God's paradoxes appears in their place. The mystical *todo y nada* creates a feedback system – everything is hidden in nothing, while giving we receive. The God of the mystics fascinates also in that he is different from our expectations and ideas. 'a god who is fitted into our world scheme . . . is *not God*. Such a world is not to be taken seriously, such a god is not to be taken seriously. . . . But the magicians keep turning the Cross to their own purposes'²⁵. This is why in the mystical adventure of faith we experience situations which demand constant departing from previously simplified patterns. It doesn't mean abandoning the previous spiritual models, merely accepting the inevitable process of growth in which maturing into a fuller bond with God is expressed. It is a protective measure against absolutism of means that possess only relative value.

The distance resulting from perceiving the world in the right proportions bears fruit both in the peace of mind and a specific sense of humour. It flows from the freedom of heart, unfamiliar with ideologists' fanaticism and simple recipes for yet another cultural revolution. Instances of this style are provided in the essays published after Merton's death such as *Day of Stranger*:

There is a lot of talk about a married clergy. Interesting. So far there has not been a great deal said about married hermits. Well, anyway, I have the place full of icons of the Holy Virgin. One might say I had decided to marry the silence of the forest. . . . So perhaps I have an obligation to preserve the stillness, the silence, the poverty, the virginal point of pure nothingness which is as the center of all other loves. I attempt to cultivate this plant without comment in the middle of the night and water it with psalms and prophecies in silence. It becomes the most rare of all the trees in the garden, at once the primordial paradise tree, the *axis mundi*, the cosmic axle, and the Cross²⁶.

Reading such texts is accompanied by an experience of the polyphony of being. Hans Urs von Balthasar's concept concerning symphonic nature of truth is illustrated by concrete instances in the texts born in silence imbued with prayer and the logic of God's paradoxes.

²⁵ *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. Patrick Hart, New York: New Directions, 1981, p. 126f.

²⁶ *Day of a Stranger*, in: *TMR*, p. 434.

Polyphony of spirit

Contemporary disappointment with the heritage of the modern world has its intellectual roots in the simplified vision of a one-dimensional world in which people strove to solve all problems by considering only a small array of simple mechanisms. A substantial collapse of this oversimplified vision took place with the fall of mechanism. Its cultural recuperation is still taking place nowadays in the radical propositions of postmodernism which are expressed in the easy negation of thesis considered to be characteristic of the Enlightenment heritage, while attaching little importance to anthropology that takes into consideration the richness of contemplative-mystical experiences of man. In this context Thomas Merton's reflection provides us with studies that can function as *experimentum crucis* in anthropology. Those trends that ignore this kind of thinking must be deemed inadequate for the same reasons why studies of human species history that ignore the million years long cosmic evolution are ignored as well.

It was an illusion of scientific-technical mentality to think that perfect, i.e. final and complete solutions are within easy reach. They were to manifest themselves in both the unification of physics and the classless, perfect society. Time had proven such ideas of perfection to be false, nihilism brought a temptation of the easiest reaction. It states that there is no objective perfection, and that, subjectively speaking, anything can be considered perfect. Such relativism of values, justified by the system of tolerance and pluralism, may bring cultural aftermaths even more painful than those whose symbol remains Auschwitz and Kolyma. Thomas Merton's spiritual path brings a tangible proposition, which gains particular importance in the pluralistic society of the postmodern. It stresses personal effort put into striving for perfection and thus moves the focus of attention towards personalisation, where earlier generations had put their hopes in the necessary laws of physics, society or history.

In the philogenetic development of mankind there were periods when man knew nothing of the energy hidden inside the atom, of electromagnetic fields, vitamins or genes. The horizons of his interest were reduced to the simple objects needed in the biological fight for existence – stones, clubs, and fruit. Today the information about invisible world unknown to the primitive man consist the basis of our knowledge. However, we push to the margin of interests the contemplation of the area of the spirit that enables us to discover life harmony, beauty, and meaning. The passing reality of the

world devoid of the ultimate reference to Divine Absolute appears to be a cultural desert, in which two main propositions are consumption and despair. In the eschatological view of the ultimate meeting of man and God Merton expressed his feelings full of poetry and trust: 'Here there is no darkness. . . . The first rays of the morning sun, the Divine Word, have penetrated the pure depths of the soul transformed in His Light. . . . here is God. He is the Promised Land. Nothing is lost in Him. . . . He is the Word, He is the Beloved'.²⁷

For the contemporaries of St. John, the word – Logos – was both an active principle of action and a criterion of meaning. In the Christian vision of the world we acknowledge that the ultimate source of our actions is beyond this world. We discover its presence thanks to openness to the reality of a transcendent God. The great utopias of the past century offered a domain of easy consolation by presenting interpretations according to which man was the sole continuant of meaning and the developer of a purely human soteriology that brought universal happiness. Departure from such illusions more often than not leads to the spiritual desert marked with the absurd and nonsense. In the Judeo-Christian tradition the desert is a particular place of meeting God. Great spiritual tradition ranging from Moses to Merton is substantially in discovering its spiritual wealth.

²⁷ *The Ascent to Truth*, in: *TMR*, p. 452f.