

Thomas Merton Center
Bellarmino University
2001 Harburg Road
Louisville, KY 40205

Why Barth needs Merton¹

1. Prelude: Barth's Death

On the evening of the 9 December 1968, age 82, Barth was up late, writing a lecture, taking phone calls from his godson and from his friend Eduard Thurneysen. He went to bed, leaving the lecture manuscript on his desk, unfinished, mid-sentence, put aside ready to be picked up the next day. The final sentence of his lecture read: "God is not a God of the dead but of the living.² In him they all live."³ Barth didn't get to finish his draft. Sometime that night, he met his "God of the living". He died peacefully on the same day as Thomas Merton. His wife, Nelly, found him in the morning (she said) "with his hands gently folded from his evening prayers".⁴ He was an old man, who departed in peace, after a happy and busy retirement. Free from the constant burden of finishing the *Church Dogmatics*, his final years were spent, with time to "read, carry on conversations [with friends], smoke, sing psalms, listen to Mozart, enjoy [his] fourteen grandchildren and exist from day to day in this positive kind of way."⁴ Unlike Merton, he had time to prepare to die, to plan his funeral.

1 This is a lightly revised version of the talk I gave at the conference.

2 Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 498.

3 Busch, *Karl Barth*, 498.

4 Busch, *Karl Barth*, 472.

His *magnum opus*, the *Church Dogmatics*, nine times the length of Calvin's *Institutes*, almost twice as long as Thomas' *Summa*, was left unfinished, incomplete, fragmentary, an *opus imperfectum*.

2. Barth, Merton and me

Barth and Merton are the kind of theologians who generate endless, rich conversation. Both have inspired nearly as much as secondary commentary on their theology as they wrote themselves. But these two have not often enough been brought into dialogue with each other; and there are good reasons why such a dialogue is not as straightforward as one might hope. Let me explain what I mean by beginning with my own experience of reading these two theologians, a starting point which might have been more pleasing to Merton than Barth.

I spent the first year of my doctoral studies on a strict diet of Barth's *Church Dogmatics*.⁵ The plan was simple. Begin at the beginning of the *Church Dogmatics* and end at the end (6 million words, 9185 pages, half a stone of paper later). It was a very odd experience, of really getting into the mind of Barth, of inhabiting a single theological vision stretched out over such an expansive landscape.

I was living in my Cambridge college at the time. My reading regime was punctuated by the rhythm of the daily office which I said with others in the college Chapel. It was accompanied, in a very real sense, by prayer: reading became a sort of liturgy. One of the things that quickly fascinated me about Barth, as it does about Merton, is that both really cared about the *craft of writing*. They both saw the praxis of reading theological texts as theologically significant – formative, life changing events:

5 The fruit of which is published as Ashley Cocksworth, *Karl Barth on Prayer* (London: T&T Clark, 2015).

reading these texts change us. Good theological texts aren't simply containers of information but lead the reader into a place of "being" different. Reading is "practice" in the theological sense of that word, It's about formation over information-giving; and Barth and Merton keep an eye on this pedagogical dynamic. I'll return to the theme of prayer in a moment – as it is central to Barth's theological imagination as it is to Merton's.

Alongside my reading of Barth, my supervisor had me reading some figures from the tradition of Christian spirituality who thought very differently to Barth. Top of the list was Thomas Merton. This was my first encounter with Merton. So, I took a break from the *Church Dogmatics* one Christmas vacation and read Merton intensively. And that was an even stranger reading experience! Merton's world was a very different world to Barth's, but no less odd. For a while, I toyed with the idea of a Barth-Merton thesis. Think of all the fascinating connections I could unearth between these two giants of the twentieth century. But after this brief but exciting flirtation with Merton, I reached a conceptual dead end. I couldn't build the conceptual bridges needed to make them fit. So I gave up. That itself taught me a lot about the nature of theology, and the humility it demands from us.

Barth, the systematic theologian *par excellence*, called his dogmatics "scientific": his was disciplined, exacting, precise, orderly. There is an elegance, a beauty in how doctrines overlap and intersect and are held together, wrapped around a single christological vision of what theology is – an elegance and sophistication that, I think, has yet to be surpassed. Then, then there is Merton who in comparison felt to me a whole different beast: more erratic, chaotic even, certainly eclectic, messier, an essayist rather than systematician, a monk rather than academic, elusive and impossible to pin down. If with Barth you climb a mountain, and once you get to the top you see all things as Barth sees, refracted

through the lens of his christology, with Merton you seem to tunnel underground, led through this extraordinary labyrinth of ideas and imagination, never quite knowing what might come next, never quite sure you can make it out in one piece.

While Barth is at the epicentre of so much of academic theology, Merton isn't. He sits on the side-lines of the canons of modern theology. This is symptomatic of a broader problem many encounter with much of modern theology.⁶ Our two theologians are generally banished to either side of a great ugly ditch that emerged in the modern period and separated the body from the brain, spirituality from dogmatics, theology from prayer, the professor from the monk, the church from the university.

Merton and Barth look, on paper (literally on paper) very different kinds of theologians. What are we to do with this? Are they bound simply by the coincidence of their death? Or is something greater at stake? Of Rudolf Bultmann, Barth once described their relationship as the theological equivalent of the elephant and the whale, "whose modes of existence are so utterly alien that [...] [when they meet] the most they can do is to stare at one another, quizzically and uncomprehendingly, before each turns away and goes its separate way", unchanged.⁷ Is a similar thing going on here? Is what we're dealing with really an elephant and a whale? Or, to re-ask a question Rowan Williams posed in one of the precious few attempts at a Merton-Barth dialogue, would Barth and Merton ac-

6 On this theme, see Andrew Prevot, *Thinking Prayer: Theology and Spirituality amid the Crisis of Modernity* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015); Mark A. McIntosh, 'Theology and Spirituality', in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology Since 1918*, ed. by David F. Ford and Rachel Muers (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2005; 3rd edition), 392-407; and Gavin D'Costa, *Theology in the Public Square: Church, Academy and Nation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005).

7 Cited in George Hunsinger, *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth*. (Grand Rapids: Wm B Eerdmans Publishing, 2004), 48.

tually have much to say to each other in that heavenly waiting room on that fateful night fifty years ago?⁸

Well, I would like to think that that waiting room would indeed be filled with conversation. Actually, I rather think they would have a good laugh – at themselves mostly.⁹ They would also, no doubt, talk politics. Later, we'll reflect on another intriguing point of connection that links our two theologians: their shared understanding of the political dimensions of prayer. For now, I want to explore from two different angles how that conversation in that heavenly waiting room might have played out. First, I want to suggest that although on paper they might look like elephants and whales, sitting as they do on either side of these carefully policed disciplinary divides, once you scratch the surface you reveal a theological sensibility that forges a connection between the two on the most fundamental of levels. Put simply: they are motivated by the same basic theological conviction that all theology, in order to count as theological, must take place in the context of prayer. Second, I want to suggest that in that heavenly waiting room it's Merton who needs to do the talking and it's Barth who needs to do the listening. Put differently, my sense is that *Barth needs Merton more than Merton needs Barth*.

3. Theology and prayer: strange bedfellows

Despite their differences, Merton and Barth seek – in very intentional ways – to integrate theology and spirituality. Listen to what they each have to say on the topic. Here is Merton:

8 Rowan Williams, *A Silent Action: Engagements with Thomas Merton* (London: SPCK, 2013).

9 For Barth, laughter and joy are theological categories; see *Church Dogmatics* II/1, 656. All references are to the *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1936-1977) – hereafter, CD followed by volume, part-volume and page number.

Contemplation, far from being opposed to theology, is in fact the normal perfection of theology. We must not separate intellectual study of divinely revealed truth and contemplative experience of that truth as if they could never have anything to do with one another. On the contrary, they are simply two aspects of the same thing. Dogmatic and mystical theology, or theology and "spirituality", are not to be set apart in mutually exclusive categories [...]. But the two belong together. Unless they are united there is no fervour, no life and no spiritual value in theology, no substance, no meaning and no sure orientation in the contemplative life.¹⁰

Now Barth. On page 23 of those 9158 pages of the *Church Dogmatics* Barth commends "prayer as the attitude without which there can be no dogmatic work."¹¹ He then cites Augustine's *Confessions*, the first chapter of Anselm's *Proslogion*, and finally the prayer Thomas Aquinas placed at the beginning of his *Summa*:

*Grant my request, merciful God, that I may earnestly desire, soberly examine, truly understand, and perfectly complete those things that are pleasing to You, to the praise of Your name.*¹²

Then right at the end of Barth's life, in his swansong lectures delivered in part in America during one of his infrequent trips away from his home time, Barth concluded his long and distinguished career with these words:

The first and basic act of theological work is prayer. [...] But theological work does not merely begin with prayer and is not merely accompa-

*nied by it; in its totality it is peculiar and characteristic of theology that it can be performed only in the act of prayer.*¹³

Barth's first and last words were about prayer. That can't be coincidental.

Prayer is where the theological rubber hits the road: It's the real deal, it always was for Barth. Prayer both informed his theology, it provided the raw material, and he saw his theology itself as a form of prayer. Even at his most abstract, in the midst of those lengthy and demanding small-print sections where Barth expends so much exegetical energy engaged in the deepest dialogue with some obscure Protestant scholasticism with such urgency that you'd be forgiven for thinking it was a matter of life or death, his dogmatics is orientated toward a single vision. All this for the "praise of Your name." His funeral, four days after his death, in a packed to overflowing Basel Cathedral, began with these words from Psalm 103:

*Praise the Lord, O my soul, and all this in me praise his holy name!
Praise the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits.*¹⁴

What a fitting couple of verses to choose. All about praise. The arc of the *Church Dogmatics* is long but it is bent toward doxology.

13 Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theory: An Introduction* (London: Collins, 1965), 160. In that same lecture, Barth cites once again Anselm. Incidentally, it's worth saying that despite reading only a modest amount of Barth's writings Merton is one of the few of Barth's readers who really picks up on the decisive role of Anselm plays in Barth's intellectual development. This says something about Merton as a reader of texts - he is one of those readers who really "gets" the text - sees right into what's really at stake. In Anselm, Barth and Merton encounter a model for the unity of theology and spirituality. As Merton comments on his own engagement with Anselm of Canterbury, "in Anselm there is no divorce between intelligence and mysticism. They are one and the same thing." See Thomas Merton, "St Anselm and His Argument", in *The American Benedictine Review*, 17.2 (1966), 241.

14 Busch, *Karl Barth*, 500.

10 Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation* (Anthony Clark Books, 1972), 197-198.

11 CD, I/1, 23.

12 CD, I/1, 23.

Merton and Barth are hereby identifying themselves in the tradition of Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas – in a tradition that does its theology “on the knees”. In a tradition that says *the true theologian is the one who prays*, as another of Merton’s dialogue partners Evagrius of Ponticus put it in the late fourth century.¹⁵ Although this theo-doxological sensibility was completely normal for Evagrius, Anselm, and many others down the ages, by the twentieth century it was in danger of becoming a lost art.

Prayer was on the receiving end some stinging critiques by some of the great architects of modernity. Immanuel Kant, for example (on whose critical thought so much of modernity hinged), constructed an account of “thinking” in deep hostility to what he called the “fetishing” [*Fetischglauben*] tendencies of prayer.¹⁶ Then Nietzsche, even more pointedly perhaps, swiped that prayer was “invented for those who really never have thoughts of their own.”¹⁷ The unwritten conventions of modern theology dictate one must choose between “speaking theologically or devotionally but not both, lest one contaminate the other”.¹⁸ Hence, when I offer you my thoughts and prayers, I’ll think about you and pray for you, but never should these be confused.

As a monk, a man of prayer, it might have made more sense for Merton to root his theology in prayer than it did for Barth. But placed within Barth’s broader methodological commitments, the claim that the spiritual life of prayer is the primary context out of which the theological task

15 Evagrius’ *De oratione* is published in *Evagrius Ponticus*, trans. Augustine Casiday (London: Routledge, 2006), 185–201.

16 Immanuel Kant, *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason and Other Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 186.

17 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs* (New York, NY: Random House, 1974), 184.

18 A. N. Williams, ‘Contemplation: Knowledge of God in Augustine’s *De Trinitate*’, in *Knowing the Triune God: The Work of the Spirit in the Practices of the Church*, ed. by James J. Buckley und David Yeago (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2001), 121–146 (124).

is made possible becomes a recognizably Barthian concern and not least because it taps into one of the distinctive marks of his theology: his doctrine of revelation.

Barth is known as the “theologian of revelation”. His entire theology begins with and reflects on the claim that “God speaks”. God has spoken in the person and work of Jesus Christ and continues to speak in the world today through the Holy Spirit; and if God speaks, we’ll do well to listen to him. Given the historical context out of which he was writing, Barth felt that beginning elsewhere leads to all sorts of theological distortions, of the gravest kind.¹⁹ One of the most significant events in this history, for Barth, was the 1914 Manifesto of the Ninety-Three, published in a national newspaper, in support of the Kaiser’s policy of militaristic aggression. Among the Nobel Prize laureates, artists, philosophers, scientists, to Barth’s horror the Manifesto contained the signatures of many of his theological teachers. The question that pressed on Barth was what, theologically speaking, had enabled these theologians, for whom Barth had a great deal of respect, to these profound political mistakes. For Barth, something on a fundamental level had gone wrong. The theological framework within which they and he had been operating had failed. Something new was needed.

So, Barth begins again. He begins by picking up the Bible, especially the writings of Paul, and reading it if he was reading the Bible for the first time. He finds in Romans a strange new world – an entirely different world to the one that had been described to him by the theology around him. This world that challenges and interrogates rather than confirms our presuppositions and convictions. He writes up his war-time experience of reading Romans as a commentary first published in 1919 and

19 For a historically attentive reading of Barth, see Timothy Gorringe, *Karl Barth: Against Hegemony* (Oxford: OUP, 2005).

then revised in 1921. The world around him being ravished by war was reflected in the *Der Römerbrief*, replete as it is with the imagery and rhetoric of war.

His text, written hard on the heels of Germany's defeat and in full view of the turmoil that beset the new republic, might even be reckoned a macabre commentary on the war's most dreadful characteristics: the notorious "infinite qualitative distinction", a riff on Europe's twenty-five thousand miles of trenches, abiding symbols of unoblittable division, hostility, and alienation; revelation figured in terms of attacks, explosions, craters and disturbances; the over-whelming noise of the prose, reminiscent of bombardments that involved millions of rounds of ammunition; talk of "krisis", a tragic reflection of religious innocence, lost on blood-soaked battlefields.²⁰

What is being attacked here, however, are the idols erected in the place of God. These idols had made God into a no-God: too familiar, domesticated, mixed up with political ideologies of the most dangerous kind, made into a sort of super soldier, used as sponsorship for the violence of war. To all this Barth says *Nein!*

Although his theology begins it does not end on this negative note, this *Nein!* As Barth emerges from the theological trenches, he becomes compelled by the need to say *Yes!* alongside the *No!* Hence, he begins unhappily with revelation; and that means beginning with Jesus Christ. When he turns from the ground-clearing work of determining what God is not and to who God is, he speaks of God as not so much an object to be grasped but the subject to be encountered – or better, the one who grasps us, the one who meets us. Thus, knowledge of God depends

on encounter with God in Christ. This is where prayer, as an epistemological priority, kicks in. We encounter God in and through prayer. In prayer we experience a God who will not be domesticated into the confines of a system or brought under the control of human possession. Anyone who prays knows just that feeling of God being intensively close yet – at the very same time – uncomfortably other, impossible to grasp; those odd dynamics where knowing and unknowing increase in equal proportion. Thus, whatever kind of systematic theology Barth produces, it is always *unsystematic* – constantly being undone by the strange, dispossessive dynamics of prayer.

Knowledge of God, for Barth, is a participative, relational kind of knowledge. It's not about the accumulation of information. The church shouldn't be in the business of simply disseminating information. It should be about creating encounters. That's why the Wikipedia article on God will never convert anyone. Ideas alone are not enough. This was exactly Mozart's criticism of the Protestant project Merton was picking up on in Barth's dream. Mozart's problem, as Merton said, was that "Protestantism was all in the head".²¹

Often the Protestant tradition has been fallen into the trap of prioritising knowledge of God as primarily a cognitive thing. Theology has become about concepts and ideas, producing what one critic calls "brains-on-sticks",²² thinking-things, as if following Jesus is mostly a matter of acquiring the right information, knowing the Bible better, knowing what Jesus would do, and so on. For Barth, we come to know God as we are brought into relationship with the God, moreover, as we participate

20 On this see, Paul Dafydd Jones, "The Rhetoric of War in Karl Barth's Epistle to the Romans: A Theological Analysis", *Zeitschrift für Neuere Theologieggeschichte*, 7.1 (2010), 90–111 (92).

21 Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (London: Burns and Oates, 1968), 3.

22 See James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011).

(through partaking in the prayer of Christ)²³ in God's own knowledge of God's self.

That's one point of connection between Barth and Merton: their shared affirmation of the integrity of prayer and theological discourse. Another point of connection is their shared affirmation of the integrity of prayer and action; and more specifically the explicit connection that each draw between prayer and liberative action, prayer and protest, prayer and resistance. As Barth famously said: Theology is done with the bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. And if that's the case then the two come together as we clasp our hands in prayer, which is the "beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world". Incidentally, Barth wrote surprisingly positively of monasticism for precisely this reason – that monasticism formed an "effective protest and opposition to the world".²⁴ Merton too has been characterised as a "theologian of resistance". Like Barth's resistance of National Socialism, Merton played a similar role in 1960s America in terms of the Vietnam war, of racial conflict, of the nuclear threat. It is quite appropriate, then, that the 10th December marks not only the death of Merton and Barth but also World Human Rights Day.

23 Barth's theology of prayer is Christologically disciplined and multi-layered. You meet first a broadly exemplarist Christology in which Jesus Christ, the true pray-er, leads by example and teaches us to pray. Hence the overwhelming emphasis Barth places on the prayer Jesus gives his disciples to pray: the Lord's Prayer. Yet the ethical disposition of following after Christ's prayer soon gives way to a richer, more complicated Christology of prayer in which Christ is not simply the true pray-er but is prayer itself: the very embodiment of the relationality of prayer. Our prayer, then, is a participation in Christ's own prayer. We are incorporated into the prayer of the praying Christ who is at the right hand of the Father constantly interceding for us, on our behalf. Here Barth is combining the vicarious Christology of prayer he finds in Calvin (Christ doing something on our behalf) with an incorporative Christology (we are incorporated, via the Spirit, into what Christ is doing on our behalf) he might find in the Augustinian notion of *induire*: "putting on" or being "clothed by" Christ in what becomes a complex account of double agency.

24 CD, IV/2, 13.

In his ethics of reconciliation, which is structured around the petitions of the Lord's Prayer, Barth develops this idea of prayer as political action. What he means is less that prayer leads to political action (though it might do) and more that prayer itself is a political act. Prayer is *inherently* political. His claim that prayer counters the disorder of the world says something about how Barth understands the politics of prayer. He's channelling what is a broadly Augustinian thesis that through prayer our desires are interrogated, transformed and reordered toward the good – toward God. The more we pray the more our disordered desires are conformed into the likeness of Christ. The result is like dropping a pebble in water. There's a rippling effect, moving outward from the centre that is prayer, reordering the world as it flows. In prayer we discover and perform "alternative repertoires or scripts for envisioning the world to those of the dominant hegemony."²⁵ For example, by praying "give us today our daily bread" we begin to inhabit a political imagination that offers an alternative vision to the promise of self-sufficiency. We are weaned off the myth of independence via a prayerful logic of dependency on another and on God, even for our most basic needs. The disorder of the world is reordered from the inside out.

But there's another side to Barth's thinking too. The word Barth uses to describe the political shape of prayer is *Aufstand*, literally "stand-up" (which happens to reflect the most ancient posture for prayer: the *orans*). *Aufstand* gets translated into English as "revolt", or protest, or standing up to structures of injustice.

*Christians are summoned by God's command not only to zeal for God's honor but also to a simultaneous and related revolt, and therefore to entry into a conflict.*²⁶

25 Luke Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics: The Conditions and Possibilities of Faithful Witness* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 145.

26 ChrL, 206.

Barth's spirituality being active in shape. It takes form in concrete action that matches action with petition.

Against what are we called to revolt? Here Barth turns from the internal realm of disordered desire to the external realm of the forces of injustice at work in the world around him. In a remarkable rhetorical flourish, Barth goes into uncharacteristic detail about what these forces of injustice looks like.²⁷ He names them the lordless powers. First, there are the abuses of power in "historical life and in society" – politicians who fail to deliver on their promises, institutions that perpetuate lies. Barth says: "the demonic [...] is visible at work in all politics" – where there is power, there will be corruption.²⁸ Next, "mammon", the "very mobile demon" – the lordless powers of our obsessions with material possessions, private property.²⁹ "Our relationship to God and to the neighbour would have to be very different if we were not mildly or wildly fascinated by money".³⁰ Ideologies are third on his list, catchphrases, slogans, propaganda, the advertisement industry – these powers rob us of our imagination and socialize us into a state of unthinking (the banality syndrome of the kind Hannah Arendt theorized). Finally, the chthonic forces. He's speaking here the things that "rob us of our freedom under the pretext and appearance of granting every kind of freedom".³¹ He cites technology, which has developed in ways unimaginable to Barth; fashion, sport, football scores, celebrity culture, the Tour de France; the entertainment industry; the transportation system. The motorways that pro-

27 I'm thinking here of Biggar's critique that Barth's failure to offer ethical case studies renders his theology ethically unhelpful. See Nigel Biggar, *The Hastening That Waits: Karl Barth's Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003). Whereas elsewhere Barth might be reluctant to drill down into specifics, here he is not.

28 ChrL, 219.

29 ChrL, 222.

30 ChrL, 223.

31 ChrL, 229.

mise a faster journey become so congested they grind to a halt, bringing out the worst in us. These everyday realities begin life as the promisors of freedom but end up ruling us, over-ruling us. It's Goethe's *Der Zauberlehrling*, which Barth cites in this section. They are not intrinsically evil. They are good things gone wrong. Ordered things that become disordered. Privations of the good, as Augustine would say; *das Nichtige*, as Barth would say. In a sense, all this to say that evil lurks in the most normal of circumstances. That's why Arendt found Eichmann so terrifying – precisely because of his ordinariness, his boringness. The architect of so much evil was a paper-pusher, an administrator, a bumbling bureaucrat.

Barth's aim in these remarkable final sections of the *Dogmatics* is two-fold. He wants first to establish a language, a rich and descriptive way of speaking about the injustices of the world and naming these injustices for what they are: evil. He is entirely unembarrassed about using that word. By providing the language, Barth is helping us to identify evil in our own times. He is saying to us "look around you and see where evil operates" because by knowing what it is, we know what to revolt against. Second, he offers a practical theodicy and one that is profoundly uninterested in determining the origins of evil. It seeks instead a different end. He wants to redirect our attention away from the origins of evil to its ends. Barth's great worry is that when we pray to be delivered from evil in church on Sunday we kick back and wait patiently and piously for that time. Instead, when we pray, "deliver us from evil", we must expect to do something about it. We must stand up (*Aufstand*) against the disorder of the world. Whatever their differences, on this issue Barth and Merton would find a great deal of agreement.

4. Why Barth needs Merton: silence and experience

In this next section I want to explore my hunch that *Barth needs Merton more than Merton needs Barth*. In Barth's dream, which Merton knew so well, Barth had been asked to examine Mozart on his beliefs. Yet upon interrogation, Mozart offered no response to Barth's line of questioning. His answer to all his questions was always the same: silence. And this distressed Barth. Despite all those many millions of words he didn't say much about silence, for the more contemplative kinds of spirituality. The closest he comes is a throwaway line that true prayer "begins where this exercise leaves off". He is nervous of silence. He doesn't know what to do with it. There's an irony not to be missed. For all he said about revelation he lacks the receptivity to match his doctrine of revelation. He says a great deal about grace, but doesn't say enough about how that grace is received in the Christian life. What can be found wanting in Barth is present in abundance in Merton. Merton's silence isn't the awkward silence that comes from running out of things to say. It's the silence that comes from having *too* much to say – It's almost cacophonous. It's the silence you might share in those moments of quiet with those you care about the most – the kind that, oddly, says a great deal. Silence is the crack that lets the light in. Anyone who practices silent contemplation will know just how electrifying it is and exactly what Barth's missing out on. On the issue of silence, he has much to learn from the likes of Merton and his seemingly insatiable need to say stuff about silence.³²

32 Merton seems to spend his life chasing contemplation; there's this relentless, insatiable search for a theorization of contemplation that comes even close to matching his actual experience of contemplation. But he never finds it; as with Barth he leaves his most mature work on prayer unfinished. My edition of *The Inner Experience* is at least his third attempt at making sense of that experience. Practice is consistently outstripping theory. Thomas Mertron, *The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation*, ed. William H. Shannon (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2003).

The second reason Barth might need Merton more than Merton needs Barth is that Barth didn't know what to do with experience, *his* experience. As Christiane Tietz has uncovered through the recently published love letters he wrote to his secretary Charlotte von Kirschbaum, there are two Barths.³³ The Barth of the *Church Dogmatics* and the Barth behind the scenes. These two Barths reflect "a certain *double life*" of being in love with his wife, Nelly, and his live-in secretary, Charlotte. Barth was clearly at odds with himself. Emotionally torn, deeply insecure, marriage in crisis, feelings in turmoil. All this stands in some contrast to the theological Barth with his clear judgement, measured opinion, and the logical order and careful organisation of writings. His "negative, hopeless feelings" on the one hand, his theology full of hope and grace on the other.

Perhaps because of this experience Barth invests exhausting levels of energy trying to *write himself out* of the *Church Dogmatics*. He tries not to leave evidence of himself and his lived experience on the pages of his writing, erasing his fingerprints. However, these are just attempts. Some have said that there is a reason why Barth wrote so much about the theme of grace, It's because he was constantly seeking it. By attempting to write himself out of the text, he ends up (somewhat ironically) writing himself more deeply into it. For example, one of the most unattractive sections in the *Church Dogmatics* is his theological anthropology in which Barth likens the relationship of men to women to the letters A and B. First A, then B. A has priority, B follows. B is subordinated to the A.³⁴ This theorization could be passed off as a reprehensible patriarchy typical of the time. But it could equally suggest an attempt to make theological sense of, and indeed validate, his domestic experience. In any case, it is difficult to read this section outside of the context of Barth's own experience.

33 Christiane Tietz, "Karl Barth and Charlotte Von Kirschbaum", *Theology Today* 74, no. 2 (2017), 86–111.

34 See CD, III/4, §54.1.

While Barth spends his time (at least attempting) furiously to write himself out of his text, all Merton seems to want to do is write himself into his journals, books, articles. He leaves impressions of himself all over his writings. He supplies us with careful, forensic analyses of the inner self; a profound excavation of interiority – the spiritual self, the exterior self, the true self, the ideal self. He gives you a script, a language, a framework, a way of narrating your feelings. You learn something about yourself by reading Merton. You get many things from Barth but you don't get that.³⁵

While Barth may well overcome some binaries – the ones that separate the church from theology, practice from theory, prayer from dogmatics – his theology perpetuates an other, perhaps more dangerous binary: the great ugly ditch that separates the theological from the experiential. I'd like to think that Merton's writings could have helped Barth understand himself better and find ways of better levels of integration.

Where have we got to? If the whale and the elephant isn't the right metaphor to get a sense of complexity of their relationship, perhaps Barth and Merton are more like two dots on a circle – so close on many things and yet also couldn't be further apart.

35 Rarely ventured into the autobiographical. He attempted an autobiography right at the end of his life but gave up at the first opportunity.