

DEMYTHOLOGISING OUR TIMES: LIVING HUMANLY IN THE TWENTY FIRST CENTURY

INTRODUCTION

London—Gothenburg—Salzburg—Seattle—Montreal. Protestors throughout the world endeavour to expose the myths surrounding international capitalism. The popular appeal of Naomi Klein's bestselling book *No Logo* is a further sign that we want to pierce through these myths which dominate our culture and society. On another front, it seems that every war we fight threatens yet again to explode the myth that "our side" is always right. On yet another front, the findings of scientists, and the evidence of our own eyes, challenge the myth of "business as usual" for the environment.

Take technology—genetic modification; human genetic engineering; cloning—with every development comes questions about the ultimate purpose of science and technology: is it for humanity or for the corporations? For that matter, is government for the people or for the governors? Radical questions are being asked about the world we live in. Questions that go to the heart of our self-understanding as individuals and as a society.

This is what I mean by demythologising our times. The phrase itself comes from an essay on the French lawyer and lay theologian Jacques Ellul, where his work is described as seeking to 'demythologise the twentieth century in the light of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.'¹ The vocation, however, belongs to us all.

JACQUES ELLUL, HIS CONTEMPORARY AND KINDRED spirit William Stringfellow, also a lawyer and lay theologian, this time in the States, and Thomas Merton, no lawyer but certainly a theologian of sorts, and kindred spirit of both, will be our companions as we explore together what it means to demythologise this twenty-first century world in which we live.

As Ellul himself wrote in 1948:

The first duty of a Christian intellectual today is a duty of awareness: that is to say, the duty of

understanding the world and oneself, inseparably connected and inseparably condemned, in their reality. This means the refusal to accept appearances at their face value, and information for information's sake...²²

As we read Merton, Stringfellow and Ellul, we find ourselves challenged to look at the world in a new way. All three remind us in their different ways of the dangers of living in the world uncritical both of ourselves and of all that we take for granted.

For Merton the starting point is the self, and the journey inwards to discover the true self is also the journey outwards to discover our common humanity. As he writes in *New Seeds of Contemplation*:

For me to be a saint means to be myself... We are at liberty to be real, or to be unreal... We may wear now one mask and now another, and never, if we so desire, appear with our own true face.³

The contemplative vocation, however, is to seek with God one's own true self. Yet, as Merton writes a few pages later, the quest is personal but not individualistic:

Go in to the desert not to escape other men [sic] but in order to find them in God.⁴

Underlying Merton's entire life and thought is his awareness of what he described once as the 'hidden ground of love'—the love of God which frees women and men to both be themselves and to let others be themselves too. This "hidden ground of love" confirms our common humanity, and invites us to live in ways that seek true humanity for all. For Merton, the vocation of the contemplative (and that can include every one of us) is all about a "new way of seeing", rooted in the hidden ground of God's love, and leading from awareness of one's true self to an awareness of truths about the world that it would rather not face up to. This

is what is meant by dis-illusionment, the stripping away of the illusions we nurture about ourselves, about other people, about society.

For Ellul, the key to his approach to the demythologising of the world is to be found in what he termed 'technique'—the way in which technology is increasingly setting the agenda and the pace of social and cultural development. As Merton wrote about Ellul in one of his few references to him:

...I think that there is a definite importance in his rather dark views. They are not to be neglected, for he sees an aspect of technology that others cannot or will not recognize...⁵

Yet underlying Ellul's preoccupation with technique is a concern very much akin to Merton's. Already in 1948 in his first theological book *The Presence of the Kingdom*, Ellul put his finger on the illusion at the roots of twentieth century western society and observed how women and men are effectively manipulated in their view of the world:

Our contemporaries only see the presentations which are given them by the press, the radio, propaganda, and publicity....[and]... modern man, submerged by this flood of images which he cannot verify, is utterly unable to master them.

Therefore, women and men all-too-readily take on board the prevailing "explanatory myth":

But what is evidently very serious is that modern man has no other means of intellectual coherence or of political investigation than this myth. If he abandons it, he cuts himself off from the world in which he is living... [Furthermore] Modern man has a good conscience because he has an answer for everything; whatever happens to him, and whatever he does, depends on the explanation which is provided for him by the myth.⁶

For Stringfellow, the key to the demythologisation of the world is his growing understanding of the nature and prevalence of what St Paul terms

'the principalities and powers'—observable in the myriad ways in which political and social goods take on a life of their own and hold people, societies, nations in their thrall. As he puts it in *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land*:

In truth, the conspicuous moral fact about our generals, our industrialist, our scientists, our commercial and political leaders is that they are the most obvious and pathetic prisoners in American society... They are left with titles but without effectual authority; with the trappings of power, but without control over the institutions they head; in nominal command, but bereft of dominion.⁷

It is as if our leaders are locked in to a way of thinking and living and acting to which they are, quite literally, captive. Furthermore, the sole aim of the principalities and powers is to survive—at any cost—in their mutual struggle for domination:

...the only morality governing each principality is its own survival as over against every other principality, as well as over against human beings and, indeed, the rest of creation.⁸

At the time of writing it was the nuclear arms race and Mutually Assured Destruction. For ourselves the horrifying prospect of corporate "business as usual" in face of urgent and inescapable warnings about global warming demonstrates all-too vividly what Stringfellow saw in the American "Babylon". Now, however, we are in the midst of a global "Babylon". A quarter of a century on, from the other side of the Atlantic, Stringfellow's observations are no less relevant.

And, of course, it is not just our leaders who are captive to the powers:

[Women and men] are often so assailed with the immediate problems of managing their mortgages and other debts, so much at the mercy of a fragile, inflated credit system, so desperate to retain employment in their status, that their energies as human beings are depleted in coping

with these demands alone. Whatever the state of their conscience or whatever their intentions, they are left with little or no capacity to become informed or involved in the issues of politics and society. Thus, the manipulation of these economic factors becomes a means of effectual political control, and citizens who are too distracted or exhausted to become involved are consigned to ignorance and conformity and, as has been put, to being the silent majority. This is yet another form of dehumanization, another way in which the powers of death victimize human life, turning humans into automatons.⁹

Again, we are confronted with myth, illusion, manipulation and deceit. At the heart of our society lies emptiness and falsehood. As Ellul put it in 1948, '...everything has become "means"...' ¹⁰ Ends are assumed, but

No one is now concerned to question in what these ends consist, nor to see exactly in what direction we are going... Man [sic] has set out at tremendous speed—to go nowhere. ¹¹

Did the three contemporaries know—or know of—one another? Stringfellow and Ellul were friends—albeit long-distance. Stringfellow wrote of Ellul that he recognised him as a 'kindred mind', and that he attributed their meeting of minds not to collaboration (which they didn't), but 'to the prompting of the Holy Spirit.' Merton appears never to have mentioned or corresponded with Stringfellow, but the latter's 1973 book *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land* is dedicated 'for Thomas Merton'. Merton certainly read some Ellul. In 1964 he wrote approvingly in his journal of Ellul's influential book *The Technological Society*:

I am reading Jacques Ellul's book on the technological society. Great. Full of firecrackers. A fine, provocative, though pessimistic book. It makes sense. ¹²

'It makes sense.' What greater tribute could one make to a work of social critique than that 'it makes sense'?

So much, of course, actually doesn't make sense! Does it make sense, for example, that children are still dying in Baghdad because of U.N. sanctions against Iraq? Does it make sense to claim that because we can do it that we should do it, indeed must do it? Does it make sense to deny our shared humanity with the poor and the marginalised and the immigrant? It does if you accept uncritically the social and political and emotional narrative of the powers that be. Ideas, ideals, visions, good in themselves take on a life of their own, and instead of serving humanity demand that humanity serve them. The system—whatever it may be—imprisons women and men within itself and its reasonable demands. In Stringfellow's phrase, 'human life in society' becomes 'literally demoralized'.

THE SEARCH FOR AN ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVE

OUR THREE SUBJECTS share a concern for an alternative narrative, a counter-culture, a new vision of what life in the world is all about. Such a vision will refuse to be co-opted one hundred percent by any party or movement, but will remain critical even of the 'good guys'. Yet it won't be a narrow, religious vision. Stringfellow entitles one of his most powerful works *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land*. Merton's strong affinities with those active for that alternative narrative even beyond the boundaries of what we call Church are well known, and we have only to consider the number of books Ellul wrote for a general rather than a specifically religious audience to see that his vision too was open and inclusive.

Of course, their world is not our world, and so the narrative for which we are searching does not exist ready-made in the work of the past. Yet our narrative,

whilst not being the same as theirs, will have much in common with theirs, and will be in continuity with theirs too. How could it be otherwise? Yet we seem so easily to fall into one of two great traps. Either we take over the narratives of the past and adopt them for the here and now without question or qualification. Or we start from scratch, painstakingly (and totally unnecessarily) discovering for ourselves what others had before us.

So what is the shape of the narrative they have bequeathed us? Firstly, it will, to borrow a phrase, seek out the meaning and implications of 'living humanly during the Fall'. It will acknowledge that it is not human nature as such that is depraved, but it is our relationships with one another, the world, and God that are distorted.¹³ Furthermore, it will work to embody true humanity in the midst of the forces of dehumanisation and despair. Secondly, it will seek to look beyond the image to the reality, unmasking the illusions upon which so much of our lives are built. It will challenge head-on the accepted story, and thirdly, will offer its own vision of a truly human and humane world.

LIVING HUMANLY DURING THE FALL

THE PHRASE is Stringfellow's, but the vocation belongs to us all. Stringfellow reminds us that the Fall is not a far-off, long-ago fable, nor an abstract item of doctrine, but a present reality.

Unfortunately, our liturgies—and many of our popular spiritualities—continue to reinforce the notion that sin and fallenness is essentially about what I have done wrong to you, or you have done wrong to me. Yet in focusing so exclusively on the one-to-one, we neglect the enormous fallenness of

our nations, our institutions, of global corporations and political systems. Writing at the time of Vietnam and Watergate, Stringfellow reminds us that the vocation to live humanly during the fall involves opening our eyes to the myths that so conveniently mask the true intentions of our institutions, even our churches.

Living humanly means empowering others to live humanly too. It also means affirming the humanity of our opponents—those flesh and blood embodiments of the principalities and powers. It even means recognising our own inhumanity, the ways in which we too fail to live humanly—and humanely—in the midst of a broken world. The nineteenth century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche believed that the Christian ethic of humility was an act of revenge on the part of the weak against the strong. Whatever we make of his claim, we can all recognise the ways in which protest itself, motivated by high ideals and a passionate vision, can itself become captive to the very norms and values it seeks to overturn.

Thomas Merton had a continuing struggle with the newly-formed Catholic Peace Fellowship in the early 1960s. He agreed with what they stood for, but queried their methods of protest, a stance which was the source of some heart-searching for him. Merton wrote to Jim Forest in December 1965, soon after the death by self-immolation of Roger La Porte in protest at the Vietnam war, expressing his fears about what was going on:

...I think it is extremely important not to come out with some gesture that strikes the average Catholic as needless provocation and drives him [sic] back into the arms of conservatism and inertia.¹⁴

The previous month, Merton had written to Forest that:

This whole atmosphere is crazy, not just the peace movement, everybody. There is in it such an air of absurdity and moral void, even where conscience and morality are invoked (as they are by everyone)... The country is nuts.¹⁵

Some two years later, Merton wrote to Dan Berrigan in October 1967 in an attempt to set out his thoughts on the question of protest, and especially the question of violence against property:

Ethically and evangelically we are getting toward the place where we have to be able to define our limits... In my opinion the job of the Christian is to try to give an example of sanity, independence, human integrity, good sense, as well as Christian love and wisdom, against all establishments and all mass movements and all current fashions which are merely mindless and hysterical... The most popular and exciting thing at the moment is not necessarily the best choice.¹⁶

For even protest movements can become captives of the principalities and powers, and reflect the very values they seek to oppose. This was the reason for Martin Luther King's dogged insistence on non-violence in pursuit of the "Beloved Community". For King, any other way would have contradicted the very vision that so energised the civil rights movement. Much the same can be observed of all-too-many revolutionary and opposition groups which gain power and become embodiments of all they had stood against. No wonder women and men at the grassroots feel bitter and betrayed.

Over half a century ago, Jacques Ellul wrote of the Christian revolutionary in his first, seminal work, *The Presence of the Kingdom*:

This then is the revolutionary situation: to be revolutionary is to judge the world by its present state, by actual facts, in the name of a truth which does not yet exist (but which is coming)—and it is to do so, because we believe this truth to be more genuine and more real than the reality which surrounds us. Consequently it means bringing the

future into the present as an explosive force.¹⁷

This, then, is the task of the Christian revolutionary, to be in his or her particular time and place what Jesus is for all times and places, namely a sign of the end in the midst of time. Such a sign joins with Jesus in relativising the absolutes and exposing the pretensions of every age.¹⁸ As King, Merton, Ellul and many others have experienced and observed, Christian faith and political power pull in different directions. Therefore, in the name of a truth 'which does not yet exist' but yet is 'more genuine and more real than the reality which surrounds us' we share in the struggle for a new world whilst at the same time holding our struggle itself up to the penetrating critique of God's reign.

In purely pragmatic terms the effectiveness of the sign cannot usually be measured by the standards of conventional political power. The sign acts as a sign of contradiction. Former American president Jimmy Carter stands as an example in our own time and place of a phenomenon Ellul discerns in the history of Israel:

The books of Chronicles [and Kings], as they describe the kings following Solomon in Israel and Judah, offer us a very strange assessment of political power. Systematically... all those shown objectively to be "great" kings historically are represented as bad kings: idolatrous, unjust, tyrannical, murderous. These kings brought about better political organisation, made conquests, and enriched their people. In other words, they exercised power "normally". On the contrary, when it comes to historically weak kings, those who lost their wars, allowed their administration to unravel, and lost wealth, [these are considered to be] good kings. This observation could mean that the only acceptable power in the long run is the weakest one. Or it could mean that if a political leader is faithful to God, he is necessarily a poor political leader, and vice versa.¹⁹

Living humanly during the Fall is both a

personal and a political vocation, a way of life which cuts across the ways both of establishment and of revolution, taking its bearings not from the traditions of the past or from the pragmatism of the present but from the future as it is inaugurated in the crucified sign of contradiction.

UNMASKING THE ILLUSIONS

Reading the Vulgate I run across the Latin word *simulacrum* which has implications of a mask-like deceptiveness, of intellectual cheating, of an ideological shell-game. The word *simulacrum*, it seems to me, presents itself as a very suggestive one to describe an advertisement, or an over-inflated political presence, or that face on the TV screen. The word shimmers, grins, cajoles. It is a fine word for something monumentally phony. It occurs for instance in the last line of the First Epistle of John. But there it is usually translated as "idols"... "Little Children, watch out for the simulacra!"—watch out for the national, the regional, the institutional images!²⁰

IN HER POWERFUL and influential book *No Logo*, Naomi Klein describes the shift in corporate culture from products to brands. An interesting example of branding is the "Tommy Hilfiger" range of clothing. Hilfiger himself, it appears, does not actually manufacture anything, merely commissioning other makers to market, under license, clothes carrying the Hilfiger logo. A British example is the Virgin brand, established by entrepreneur Richard Branson with the intention of creating a reputation for 'quality, price and innovation', a reputation somewhat challenged since the brand bought into the fragmented British railway network.

More than ever before, advertising is not about selling a product but creating a brand identity:

With this wave of brand mania has come a new breed of businessman, one who will proudly inform you that Brand X is not a product but a way of life, an attitude, a set of values, a look,

an idea.

In the same vein, sportswear giant Nike's mission 'is not to sell shoes but to "enhance people's lives through sports and fitness"'.²¹

And we thought they were in business to make a profit!

It is as if we were afraid to admit in public what we are about in private. Our leaders seem genuinely surprised when demonstrators take to the streets. Nike seem genuinely offended that someone should want to personalise their training shoes with the word "Sweatshop"; 'We do not want to place [such words] on our products.' came the reply.²² Even arms and fighter planes are described in terms that evoke anything but the brutal reality of war. As British journalist Robert Fisk wrote about a visit to the international defence exhibition in Abu Dhabi, looking through the brochures:

Half the words used by the arms sellers... hinted at human goodness, even the achievements of the spirit. The other half... were words of naked aggression, a hopelessly infantile male sexuality to prove that might is right... The only thing they didn't mention was death.²³

What is going on here? What are we so afraid to face reality? The reason, again, is tied up with the question of identity: Why should the citizens of a civilised, prosperous society take to the streets to protest against injustice? Why should Nike's mission to enhance people's lives be associated with the suffering and injustice of sweatshops? Why should these fine feats of engineering be associated with the causing of death? "Injustice" — "Sweatshops" — "Death": these words upset the carefully crafted identities of the purveyors of the global image. They are like rents in the fabric of the civilised society we have created for ourselves, and of which we in all our illusory innocence are a part.

We live, therefore, in the context of the 'monumentally phony', and the

process of demythologisation begins with ourselves. Throughout his life Thomas Merton was concerned with the question of identity, for it is here in the individual that the illusions and images initially arise. As Merton wrote in *New Seeds of Contemplation*:

Every one of us is shadowed by an illusory person: a false self. This is the man [sic] that I want myself to be but who cannot exist, because God does not know anything about him.... My false and private self is the one who wants to exist outside the reach of God's will and God's love—outside of reality and outside of life. And such a self cannot help but be an illusion. We are not very good at recognising illusions, least of all the ones we cherish about ourselves—the ones we are borne with and which feed the roots of sin. For most of the people in the world, there is no greater subjective reality than this false self of theirs, which cannot exist. A life devoted to the cult of this shadow is what is called a life of sin.²⁴

Is it not precisely this illusory self, which Merton so graphically describes, that the purveyors of the image in twenty-first century society have dedicated themselves to cultivating? It is as if we lived in a society dedicated to the unreal and the inhuman. Or, as William Stringfellow chillingly describes the American middle classes (in words that apply to us all), we are

nurtured and conformed in a manner that results in a strange and terrible quitting as human beings.²⁵

For Merton, the diagnosis is there in the Biblical testimony:

The judgment of the world as by definition closed in upon itself and therefore closed to any revelation that demands to break through its defensive shell is surely one of the key ideas of the New Testament.²⁶

The process of demythologisation will start with our own selves but will very soon end up throwing us radically out of step with society. William Stringfellow's 1960s polemic *Dissenter in a Great Society* offered four "clues" to

a Christian lifestyle in the world. Firstly, the Christian is a realist. Knowing that, apart from 'God's work in all things... all relationships have been broken and all men [sic] suffer estrangement from one another and alienation from themselves', the Christian is free to face the world as it is without flinching, without shock, without fear, without surprise, without embarrassment, without sentimentality, without guile or disguise. He is free to live in the world as it is.

Secondly, the Christian is inconsistent. Though he or she will take a stand and speak out for specific causes,

he [sic] does so not as the servant of some race or class or political system or ideology but as an expression of his [sic] freedom from just such idols.

Thirdly, the Christian is a radical. In other words, he or she will continually and consistently be dissatisfied with the *status quo*, whoever's *status quo* it might happen to be. Fourthly, and finally, the Christian vocation in the world encompasses in intercession even those who would be considered opponents and adversaries.²⁷

What this means for us, surely, is a vocation to be on the edges; unmasking the illusions so carefully constructed by our own selves, our society, our institutions, even our churches; rejecting the propaganda that 'makes up our mind for us'²⁸; and pointing both to the reality that is and the reality that might be.

JOURNEYS OF RESISTANCE

ONE LINE NEAR the end of Stringfellow's *Ethic* gives us the clue as to the way forward for those of us who seek to live humanly during the Fall, for he states simply that:

In resistance persons live most humanly.²⁹

We are only too aware that we have not attained our destination. The

anti-globalisation protests continue. Indeed, in the course of writing this essay a protestor has been killed in Genoa. More books are produced scrutinising the global economy, and British scholar Noreena Herz is this year's talking point. The world carries on much as it always has and, unsurprisingly, the Kingdom seems to be no nearer.

In the meantime, so much of the Church seems fixated on numbers and success, and the works of its lay theologians Stringfellow and Ellul seem far from its agenda.

Yet it is in resistance that persons live most humanly. It is in our very dissatisfaction and struggle with the global order, the reigning myths of western society, the illusory identities created by corporate advertising, the ubiquity of 'technique', that we are in fact most human. For to live humanly during the Fall is not to have arrived, but to be on a journey—a journey of resistance.

The precise shape of those lives of resistance will be formed by our own specific time and place, and their interaction with our own self and gifts, but the alternative narratives envisioned by such prophets as those who have accompanied us in our explorations here will offer a framework for our efforts.

It all begins, however, when we embark on the awesome project of demythologising our times 'in the light of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.'

Notes and References

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3. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961), pp. 33–34.
4. *New Seeds*, p. 53.
5. Thomas Merton, Letter to Pere Herve Chaigne (April 1965)

in *Witness to Freedom: The Letters of Thomas Merton in Times of Crisis* (ed. William H. Shannon), FS&G, 1994, p. 38. The reference is from Phillip M. Thompson's essay 'Jacques Ellul's Influence on the Cultural Critique of Thomas Merton' (*Ellul Forum* #25), p. 13.

6. *Presence*, pp. 101–103.

7. William Stringfellow, *An Ethic for Christians and other Aliens in a Strange Land* (Waco: Word, 1973), p. 89.

8. *An Ethic*, p. 90.

9. *An Ethic*, pp. 90–92.

10. *Presence*, p. 63.

11. *Presence*, pp. 66, 69.

12. Thomas Merton, *A Vow of Conversation* (*Journals*, 1964–65), FS&G / Lamp Press, 1988, p. 91 (October 1964).

13. See Jacques Ellul, *Reason for Being* (Eerdmans, 1990), p. 97 (footnote).

14. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns* (ed. William H. Shannon), FS&G, 1985, p. 289.

15. HGL, p. 286.

16. HGL, pp. 97–98.

17. *Presence*, pp. 50–51.

18. See William R. Coats, *God in Public: Political Theology Beyond Niebuhr* (Eerdmans, 1974), p. 41.

19. Jacques Ellul, *Jesus & Marx: From Gospel to Ideology* (Eerdmans, 1988), pp. 165–166. See also Ellul's reflection on O.T. history *The Politics of God and the Politics of Man* (Eerdmans, 1972).

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21. Naomi Klein, *No Logo* (London: Harper Collins, 2000), p. 23.

22. Nick Spencer, 'Buy the Right Thing' in *Third Way*, July 2001, p. 13.

23. London: *Independent on Sunday*, *Sunday Review* (April 22, 2001), pp. 10 ff.

24. *New Seeds*, p. 34.

25. *An Ethic*, p. 21.

26. *Events & Pseudo Events*, p. 148.

27. William Stringfellow, *Dissenter in a Great Society* (Abingdon, originally published by Holt, Rhinehart & Winston, 1966), pp. 161–163.

28. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Doubleday Image, 1968) p. 238.

29. *An Ethic*, p. 156.

This essay was completed before the horrific events in New York, Washington & Pennsylvania of September 11 2001. In light of these incidents, and the ensuing response, much of the agenda of the anti-capitalism protestors has faded from the public consciousness. Yet their challenge remains, and the task to which this essay calls us, namely that of demythologising our world, becomes even more pressing in a world on the brink of war. Before September 11 the vocation to demythologise our times was important. Now it is vital.