

# Sparks of *Haecceitas*: A Scotist Reading of Thomas Merton

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*'Language was far too puny for his great theology:  
But, oh! His thought strode through those words  
Bright as the conquering Christ  
Between the clouds of His enemies:  
And in the clearing storm, and Sinai's dying thunder  
Scotus comes out, and shakes his golden locks  
And singles like the African sun.'*<sup>1</sup>

## **Introduction: Behind many great thinkers stands a 'dunce'**

John Duns Scotus is perhaps the greatest 'underdog' of the Middle Ages. Not that he was in his own time, but centuries later his significance is underrated and his relevance undervalued. Merton's connection to Scotus is anything but superficial.<sup>2</sup> In his letters, journals and books, Merton references John Duns Scotus a surprising number of times. Dan Walsh, who was a professor at Columbia University and later a mentor and friend of Merton, was the one who first introduced Merton to the Franciscans. It is also Walsh that deserves credit for identifying and encouraging in Merton what Michael Downey has called 'a profoundly Franciscan-Scotistic intuition.'<sup>3</sup> Downey's comment about the Scotistic quality of Merton's Franciscan intuition is significant because most associate the Franciscan intellectual tradition primarily with that of Bonaventure, a thinker who varies in style and content from Scotus, the Subtle Doctor.

Early in his life, we recall the significance Scotus had for Merton while he was working on *The Seven Storey Mountain*. In his manuscript he spends so much time on the theological insights of Scotus that Naomi Burton insisted that he take them out. Michael Mott describes this: 'It seemed clear Merton was under the spell of Duns Scotus, a name which might mean something to one reader out of a hundred.'<sup>4</sup> Merton's enchantment with Scotus was strong, for when he responded to Ms Burton's request, he wrote, 'Also, I'd like to keep as much as I can of the references to Duns Scotus, because even Catholics don't know him as they should.'<sup>5</sup> He also proposed to complete a doctoral dissertation on Gerard Manley Hopkins, a Scotist himself, while at Columbia University. It seems fair to say that in addition to the theological and philosophical insight acquired directly from Scotus's work, Merton might have also gleaned some Scotist thoughts from the poetry of

Hopkins that he so admired and who was so instrumental during the period of Merton's decision to enter the Catholic Church.<sup>6</sup>

Due to the limited scope of this paper I have chosen to focus on the concept of *Haecceitas* as it might have shaped Merton's theological and spiritual outlook. Because Merton's written output was so voluminous, I have selected portions of just two texts to illustrate this influence: Merton's 1961 *New Seeds of Contemplation* and his 1966 *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*.<sup>7</sup>

The structure of this paper is fourfold. First I will provide a very brief introduction to John Duns Scotus. Next we will explore what is meant by his doctrine of *haecceitas*. Following this explication, we will examine some themes in chapter five of *New Seeds of Contemplation* that bear resemblance to, and might be informed by, Scotus's notion of *haecceitas*. Before a brief conclusion, we will similarly consider *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* in light of Scotus.

### Who was John Duns Scotus?

As with so many medieval figures, the specific details known about John Duns Scotus's life are minimal. There are a few basic facts that are widely held to be accurate. Scotus was a Franciscan friar who was born sometime around late 1265 or early 1266.<sup>8</sup> It is largely believed that he was born in Duns, Scotland, just over the border from England.

We know that Scotus entered the Franciscan community as a young man (probably around the year 1279) and likely studied both in the Franciscan *studium* and later at the University of

Oxford, beginning around 1288. Many believe that he might have also spent some time studying at the University of Paris somewhere between 1288 and 1300.<sup>9</sup> We know that Scotus was working on his *Ordinatio*, the revised lecture notes of his commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard, in 1300. This is one of the most significant texts we have from Scotus. We also have manuscripts of various versions of his *Lectura*, the earlier version of his Sentence commentary. In July 1303 we know that Scotus had already moved from Oxford to Paris where he is recorded as a member of the Franciscan community there. Two years later, in 1305, he became a Master of Theology. Three years later he died in Cologne, Germany, on 8 November 1308.

Scotist scholar Mary Beth Ingham explains:

Scotus's travels during his years of study and teaching, along with his early death, leave scholars with an enormous quantity of textual material in various states of completion...The complex textual situation has also been responsible in part for the negative verdict brought against him by some historians of philosophy.<sup>10</sup>

He earned the nickname *Doctor Subtilis* (the Subtle Doctor) during his lifetime for the difficulty and penetrating quality of his work. This, in part, helps explain why so few have ventured to explore the thought and work of John Duns Scotus—it is not easy. It is likely his genius, insight and particularly positive theological and philosophical outlook

that captured the attention and interest of Thomas Merton.

### Scotus and the Doctrine of *Haecceitas*

In his short life, Scotus developed several original and significant philosophical insights.<sup>11</sup> One of these is a concept called *haecceitas* (literally 'this-ness').<sup>12</sup> In his early lecture at Oxford, *De Principio Individuationis* (The principle of individuation),<sup>13</sup> Scotus rejects a number of previously held theories about the nature of individuation. Ranging from the assertion of Aristotelian causes and quantity to negation and matter, Scotus found these proposals inadequate.<sup>14</sup> It seemed to Scotus that these views were beneath the obvious dignity of God's creative work. Instead, he insists, individuation is rooted in the very substance of a thing or person and not simply its accidents (shape, colour, number, etc.).<sup>15</sup>

Allan Wolter explains the significance of Scotus' development of the notion of *haecceity*:

[Scotus] makes an important claim, that where rational beings are concerned it is the person rather than the nature that God primarily desired to create. His remark is in answer to an objection that individuals do not pertain to the order of the universe, for order is based on priority and posteriority, and individuals are all on par with one another. Not only do individuals pertain to the order of God's universe, Scotus retorts, but, in communicating 'his goodness as something befitting his beauty, in

each species' he delights in producing a multiplicity of individuals. 'And in those beings which are the highest and most important, it is the individual that is primarily intended by God' (*Ordinatio* II, d. 3, n. 251).<sup>16</sup>

Scotus argues for the primacy of God's creative intent in the creation of every single person. In other words, it is not what we do, what we have, or how we act that makes us loved by God and worthy of love from others. Rather, it is *who we are*—individually created, willed and loved into being by God—that is the source of our dignity and value.

### *New Seeds of Contemplation*

In *New Seeds of Contemplation*, chapter five, titled 'Things in Their Identity,' the doctrine of *haecceitas* emerges with force and, coincidentally, it is in this chapter that Merton introduces his famous 'True Self' concept. Toward the beginning of the chapter he writes:

No two created beings are exactly alike. And their individuality is no imperfection. On the contrary, the perfection of each created thing is not merely in its conformity to an abstract type but in its own individual identity with itself. This particular tree will give glory to God by spreading out its roots in the earth and raising its branches into the air and the light in a way that no other tree before or after it ever did or will do.<sup>17</sup>

Merton then goes on to repudiate what

might best be described as some vague form of Neoplatonic individuation. An example of this response is found above when Merton rejects a thing's identity as 'conformity to an abstract type,' instead opting for an individual's perfection simply in itself.

We read in the next paragraph, 'Do you imagine that the individual created things in the world are imperfect attempts at reproducing an ideal type which the Creator never quite succeeded in actualizing on earth?'<sup>18</sup> This is Merton's way of pointing out, rather bluntly, the problems with theological systems rooted in certain features of Hellenistic philosophies. Principles of individuation that contain latent hylomorphic or Platonic undertones do not adequately represent his theological outlook. A creature's identity, its inherent dignity or holiness, cannot be an accidental attribute. This is made most explicit in Merton's discussion about human individuation and dignity. He writes, 'For us [i.e., human beings], holiness is more than humanity.'<sup>19</sup> It is more than the substance humanity modified by the form of our particular accidental attributes. Instead, Merton points out, first using the example of non-human creation and then humanity, 'Their *inscape* is their *sanctity*. It is the *imprint* of His wisdom and His reality in them.'<sup>20</sup> What Merton is describing here is a principle of individuation that is a constitutive element of a thing's very *being*. Whereas the commonly held position suggests an external, accidental quality or character that individuates, Merton is adopting the sense of Scotus's internal and intrinsic principle. Scotus holds that a thing's *haecceitas* is *really* identical with its *being*,

while also being *formally distinct*. In other words, it is inseparable from a thing's very being, but can be considered apart conceptually.

Merton does not simply adopt Scotus's *haecceitas*, but instead uses it as the foundation for the development of his understanding of vocation. Unlike trees or mountains or blades of grass or animals, human beings are not simply left to be individuals in some passive sense. God delights in all of creation simply as it is, simply because most of creation exists as God has intended it. Human beings, however, by virtue of rationality and free will, have some say in how to live in the world. While human dignity is an *a priori* element of God's freely loving each particular thing into existence, human behaviour and self-understanding is largely subjective. We have been given that gift as part of creation in God's image and likeness. Merton explains that this principle of individuation is what is the source of *who we really are*, but that most often men and women do not realize this. He explains: 'God leaves us free to be whatever we like. We can be ourselves or not, as we please. We are at liberty to be real, or to be unreal. We may be true or false, the choice is ours.'<sup>21</sup> Human beings have the challenge of being co-creators with God and ultimately discovering the meaning of our existence and our true identity in God alone. Merton puts it this way: 'We are free beings and sons [and daughters] of God. This means to say that we should not passively exist, but actively participate in His creative freedom, in our own lives, and in the lives of others, by choosing the truth.'<sup>22</sup>

As we can see from this brief

examination of Merton's reflection on identity, the theological insight of Scotus appears to have had a significant influence on one of the most treasured spiritual insights of this twentieth-century monk: the 'True Self.'

### *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*

For some time now it has been generally assumed that what Merton is primarily alluding to in his reflections following the now famous 'Fourth and Walnut' experience was the mystical insight of Meister Eckhart.<sup>23</sup> Elsewhere in his writing, particularly in his discussions about Islam and Christian mysticism, this connection is at times made more directly. While the influence of Eckhart in this respect may have indeed been instrumental, I offer an alternative reading (or a supplementary reading) based on both Merton's earlier work in *New Seeds* and the penchant for Scotist theological leanings evident throughout his written corpus. The primary text under consideration here is the following:

Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God's eyes. If only they could all see themselves as they really *are*. If only we could see each other that way all the time.<sup>24</sup>

If we recall the meditation on identity and individuation in *New Seeds*, we can see here a vestige of *haecceity* present in this experience. There is a sense in which Merton is drawing from his earlier work

on the 'True Self.' The use of phrases like 'core of reality,' 'as they really are,' and 'in God's eyes,' are evocative of the 'true' identity known only to God because of its individual created-ness. It is not seen by those Merton is discussing, perhaps because they are preoccupied and unable to, or perhaps it is not seen because *haecceity* in its fullness is known only to God for it is a constitutive element of our very being and existence and therefore unknowable in completeness.

An interesting line from *Conjectures* that is frequently cited supports this reading. Merton writes: 'It is so to speak His name written in us, as our poverty, as our indigence, as our dependence, as our sonship.'<sup>25</sup> There is a sense in which the deliberateness of the tone reveals a concrete reality that is presumed by Merton to be a constitutive element of our very being and relatedness to God. Scotus explains that this *haecceitas* is in fact something akin to the condition for the possibility for relationship. In this respect, the 'spark within us' echoes, not only Eckhart's sermons, but a particularly Scotist outlook that may in fact be the result of the Subtle Doctor's influence on Merton. There is first the sense of Scotus's principle of individuation present in this line of thought, but there is also here a more nuanced and complicated feature of Scotus's thought, namely the doctrine of the univocity of being. While we cannot explore this here, suffice it to say that the dimension of Merton's reflection that features the 'spark's' universality, as when he writes, 'it is in everybody,' is certainly compatible with aspects of Scotus epistemological and consequentially ontological intuitions.

## Conclusion

This brief examination of two short instances in the Mertonian corpus does not do justice to the true relationship between the thirteenth century Franciscan friar and the twentieth century monk. The frequency with which Scotus appears in the early journals and Merton's strong attraction to the work of Hopkins at the same time signal for me the need to return to the Subtle Doctor in order to uncover additional insight into the thought of Merton. And perhaps, just maybe, we can also see the sparks of *haecceitas* that 'is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody, and if we could see it we would see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of the sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely.'<sup>26</sup>

## Notes

1. An excerpt from Thomas Merton, 'Duns Scotus,' in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions Publishers, 1977), pp.164-165.
2. Previously, the most extended treatment of Scotus's influence on Merton is found in the brief encyclopedia entry by Patrick O'Connell, 'Franciscanism,' in *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia*, eds. William Shannon, Christine Bochen and Patrick O'Connell (New York: Orbis Books, 2002), pp.161-163.
3. Michael Downey, 'Merton's Franciscan Heart,' *Franciscan Studies* 55 (1998): p.300. For more on Merton's Franciscan theological insight, see Daniel Horan, 'Thomas Merton's Vernacular Franciscan

Theology,' *The Merton Journal* 16 (Advent 2009), pp.26-36.

4. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1984, 1993), p.231.
5. Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, p.232. For a selection from that letter, see Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis*, ed. William Shannon (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1994), pp.123-124.
6. For more on this, see Jim Forest, *Living With Wisdom: A Life of Thomas Merton*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), pp.58-60; and Hywel Thomas, 'Gerard Manley Hopkins and John Duns Scotus,' *Religious Studies* 24 (1988), pp.337-364.
7. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions Publishers, 1961) and Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Doubleday, 1966).
8. Richard Cross, *Duns Scotus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.3. There was an ordination on 23 December 1290 and, had Scotus been old enough, it would seem likely that he would have been ordained at that time, thereby supporting the hypothesis that he was born between 1265-1266.
9. Mary Beth Ingham, *Scotus for Dunces: An Introduction to the Subtle Doctor* (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Press, 2003), p.15.
10. Ingham, *Scotus for Dunces*, p.17.
11. For more on Scotus's theological contributions see Daniel Horan, 'Revisiting the Incarnation: Why the "Franciscan Thesis" is not So Franciscan and Why it Does not Really Matter,' *The*

*Cord* 59 (October/December 2009): pp.371-390; and Daniel Horan, 'How Original Was Scotus on the Incarnation? Reconsidering the History of the Absolute Predestination of Christ in Light of Robert Grosseteste,' *Heythrop Journal* 51 (November 2010) forthcoming.

12. Wolter summarizes the meaning of *haecceity*: 'Haecceity or "thisness" has a twofold function: (1) it makes each individual unique and incapable of duplication, even by an omnipotent God; and (2) it differentiates it radically and ultimately from each and every other individual, whether it be of the same or a specifically different type.' Allan Wolter, *John Duns Scotus: Early Oxford Lecture on Individuation* (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2005), p.xii.

13. The English translation is found in Allan Wolter, *John Duns Scotus: Early Oxford Lecture on Individuation* (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2005).

14. Kenan Osborne, 'Incarnation, Individuality and Diversity: How does Christ reveal the unique value of each person and thing?' *The Cord* 45 (1995), p.25.

15. Osborne, 'Incarnation, Individuality and Diversity,' p.25.

16. Wolter, *John Duns Scotus: Early Oxford Lecture on Individuation*, p.xxi.

17. Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, p.29.

18. Merton, *ibid*, p.29.

19. Merton, *ibid*, p.31.

20. Merton, *ibid*, p.30.

Emphasis added.

21. Merton, *ibid*, p.32.

22. Merton, *ibid*, p.32

23. See Meister Eckhart, 'Sermon 48: *Ein meister sprichet: alliu glichiu dinc minnent sich under einander*,' in *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, eds. Edmund Colledge and Bernard McGinn (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), esp. p.198.

24. Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p.158.

25. Merton, *ibid*, p.158.

26. Merton, *ibid*, p.158.

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