

Contemplation as Connection: Fruitful Action on an Unraveling Planet

Gordon Oyer

Introduction

We need no further reminders that, contrary to the voice of modern Western hubris, our human species cannot stand aloof from the natural biosphere that surrounds us. Unfolding 'natural' crises, both immediate and gradual, perpetually impress that reality upon us. The rapid global spread of COVID-19 feels like a Gaiac¹ warning shot across humanity's bow, a wake-up call to our vulnerability, a reminder not to take for granted the delicate balance of the ecosphere we have always relied upon. Although this pandemic of 2020 compels our immediate focus, the broad unraveling of biospheric stability continues unchecked, carrying existential implications that transcend the many human 'social issues' we also face.

The following reflections focus on our human role within that precarious balance and how Thomas Merton's contemplative engagement might inform our response. After recapping certain recent Catholic writings that reframe how we relate to Earth, the paper reflects on how Merton's contemplative experience somewhat anticipated these reframings and models a grounding from which to engage fruitfully with the problem.

Climate Crisis and Human Response

Various options have surfaced to address our ecological crisis, emergency, catastrophe, collapse — you may pick your favorite description. Many of these options draw upon a pragmatism that presumes our historic trajectory of human development, economic expansion, and material consumption can more or less continue with only some technological tweaks. Others, however, suggest a much deeper and more fundamental problem, one that rests with the very assumptions

embedded within those technocratic approaches. They instead see our key task as transforming the very role humanity plays within the biosphere that sustains us. This means in particular dismantling the perceived objective for human life as that of autonomous individuality and reconfiguring it into one of partnered participation with fellow species within our landscapes.

This was the message of Passionist theologian Thomas Berry, who asserted in the 1990s that, 'The historical mission of our time is to reinvent the human — at the species level, with critical reflection, within the community of life systems.' He elaborated:

'At the species level' because our problems are beyond any existing cultural solution. ... 'With critical reflection' because ... our knowledge needs to be a creative response to the natural world, rather than a domination of the natural world. ... 'Within the community of life systems' because, [since] the Earth, at present, is not adequately understood either by our spiritual or our scientific traditions, the human has become an addendum or an intrusion [into] the total Earth community.²

Catholic theologian Elizabeth A. Johnson echoed Berry in her 2014 book *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love*. She challenged our traditional reading of the mandate in Genesis 1 to 'have dominion' as something that grants humans 'the right to master the natural world' through possession of an 'innate superiority' that implies our prerogative to 'command and control' the planet. Even versions of this 'dominion' that issue a theological 'call to stewardship' and mandate us to 'protect and care for creation' still place humanity at the 'apex of the pyramid of living creatures with rights over otherkind'. Johnson contrasts this with a different interpretation of scripture that reveals a 'paradigm of the community of creation' where 'humans and other living beings ... form one community woven together by the common thread of having been created by God.' She ultimately calls upon us to deconstruct and dissolve this hierarchical pyramid and reshape human self-perception. Rather than sit atop such a pyramid, we must become coequal participants within a dynamic circle of life.³

The year following Johnson's book, Pope Francis encouraged a similar, though perhaps not as radical, rethinking of humanity's place on the planet in his encyclical, *Laudato Si'*. He asserted that 'as part of the universe ... [all created things of this world] are linked by unseen bonds

and together form a kind of universal family, a sublime communion.' Therefore, 'Nature cannot be regarded as something separate from ourselves or as a mere setting in which we live. We are part of nature, included in it and thus in constant interaction with it.'⁴

Personhood

Within this *homo sapiens sapiens* apex of inter-species hierarchy, humans have *also* tended to construct pyramids of *intra*-human hierarchies.⁵ We have done so since the dawn of civilization itself, jockeying for the social supremacy of our own particular brand. Whether we order by culture, race, gender, sexual orientation, nation, political party, class, educational level, intellectual or physical capacity, what have you — we consistently seek to construct and impose our version of domination over other humans. It goes without saying that these *human* stratification paradigms also have catastrophic consequences for those relegated to the base levels of these pyramids-within-a-pyramid. So in all cases—whether it's the grand endgame of climate catastrophe or the intertwined array of human 'social issues' — our paradigm of self-constructed pyramids of domination is busily at work driving our destructive behaviors.

One of the themes to which Thomas Merton often returned can help to dismantle this pyramid of domination amongst humans: his Catholic version of human 'personhood'. It lies within a diverse and eclectic stream of thought often collectively labeled 'personalism' that gained traction among Catholics to counter the Enlightenment's alternative concept of the free-floating, autonomous 'individual'. It asserts the premise that full personhood originates not through liberation and separation from others, but through a shared connection to a common source of existence intrinsic to all. Some strains of Catholic personalism became ensnared within that 'pyramid of domination' trap to grant personhood only for members of the Catholic faith. But as the concept evolved over the course of the twentieth century, blossoming with the Second Vatican Council and its final statement, personhood became recognized as innate to *all* human beings.⁶

As for Elizabeth Johnson's larger pyramid, which elevates humans as dominant over all else on the planet, Franciscan Daniel Horan's book *Catholicity and Emerging Personhood: A Contemporary Theological Anthropology* offers a helpful response. He expands this notion of 'personhood' still further, helping to retain Johnson's critique without jettisoning the concept of personhood itself. Horan returns to the original Greek root of the term 'Catholic' as reflecting a sense of 'wholeness' and the pursuit of 'wholemaking', rather than simply 'universality'. He

proceeds to frame humanity as a distinct yet interdependent part of the 'whole' of Johnson's community of creation — a view that weaves together inclusivity *and* distinctiveness within a larger whole.

Horan also rethinks the concept of *imago Dei*, humans as God's image. Drawing on other writers, he notes that despite its long-standing use to signify human superiority within the created order, we have no clear biblical basis for doing so. He sees instead a stronger biblical case that *all* creation contains the *imago Dei*, not just humans: 'Humans reflect the divine image when ... [we] pattern our choices after God's plan for us. So, too, our nonhuman creaturely neighbors reflect the divine image when they live and move and have their being in accord with God's plan for them.' The great '*imago Dei*' question then becomes one of discerning God's place for humanity as a whole *within* the overall community of creation — neither above it nor focused just on the place of individual persons within it. Though he does not explicitly define what that plan of God is, Horan explores these implications for how we see gender, race, and sexual orientation within the human family, as well as calling upon us to recognize and respect the *imago Dei* residing within other species.⁷

Horan's study is not as expansive as it could be — he does not explore where plant life and the landscape itself fit in this expanded *imago Dei*. But his catholicity resonates with many indigenous views that regard life as fully interdependent with *all* of creation. Mirroring this theme, Pope Francis noted in *Laudato Si'* that: 'indigenous communities and their cultural traditions ... are not merely one minority among others. ... For them, land is ... a sacred space with which they need to interact.'⁸

Shared Being

So what does all of this have to do with contemplation, fruitful action, and Thomas Merton? For one thing, probing Merton's social commentary and writings on the primacy of connecting with our "true self" as persons helps envision a path toward freedom from those paradigms of domination. In his study *Merton and Walsh on the Person*, Robert Imperato suggests that 'the person' was in fact Merton's 'root metaphor', and that Merton's social writings used 'principles that are linked to his intuition of the person'.⁹ In some writings, such as those on nonviolence, Merton explicitly invokes the concept. Merton's use of personhood offers an alternative both to modern individualism and also to a competing ideal of 'community' that has sometimes devolved into seeking 'uniformity'. In navigating this individuality/community tension, Merton's idea of 'person' as being grounded in a transcending connection with, rather than in opposition to, other humans becomes life-giving. It

provides a basis for participation in collaborative community while also honoring distinct and unique personalities.

For Merton, the universality of personhood was never in doubt. He especially emphasized this universal connection to relations within the human family, as did most of his contemporaries. But, to a degree that is impressive for the 1960s, he also pointed toward extending its implications beyond our own species. Merton often named the source of this connection as 'God', but he drew on various other images as well, to help better envision the nature of that reality. One image is that of a 'common ground' from which all things emerge. He uses this, for example, in a passage that inspired the title of William Shannon's anthology of Merton's letters on social concerns and religious experience. In a 1967 letter to Amiya Chakravarty Merton described 'the happiness of being at one with everything in that hidden ground of Love for which there can be no explanations.'¹⁰ *Everything*, not *everyone*. Shannon elaborated that, 'Merton discovered God as the ground of his own being and in that same ground he found the rest of reality ... in a unity that was beyond separateness.'¹¹

Merton borrowed a second image from the French Catholic mystic Louis Massignon. For Merton this '*point vierge*', or *virginal point* 'at the center of our being', was 'a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and illusion' and 'belongs entirely to God'.¹² Significantly, he also applies the term to earthly rhythms: 'The first chirps of the waking day birds mark the "*point vierge*" of the dawn. ... They begin to speak to [the Father] ... with an awakening question that is their dawn state, their state at the "*point vierge*". Their condition asks if it is time for them to "be". He answers "yes".'¹³

During his final year, Merton especially displays his growing awareness of the need to reframe our hierarchical pyramid of species into a swirling community of creation. His reading of Roderick Nash's *Wilderness in the American Mind* introduced him to a stream of environmentalist thought, including Aldo Leopold's concept of the need for humans to develop an 'ecological consciousness'.¹⁴ He described his understanding of this ecological consciousness in a February 1968 letter to the futurist Barbara Hubbard, saying: 'We belong to a community of living beings and we owe our fellow members in this community the respect and honor due them. If we are to enter into a new era, well and good, but let's bring the rest of the living along with us.'¹⁵

Contemplation

Merton saw his practice of contemplation as a means of connecting with

this 'ground of love', or '*point vierge*', or 'ecological consciousness'. All three of these images convey a sense of immersion within or going deeper into material realities, rather than transcending or rising above them. He regularly associated contemplative practice with an experience of awakening from illusions constructed either by mass society or our own egos, illusions that obscure the ground of love *already* residing within our very being. In his essay 'Contemplation in a World of Action', Merton offers a view of God as 'immanent', one that 'sees God as directly and intimately present in the very ground of our being ... , [a view that] is actually much closer to the contemplative tradition ... [in which] we awaken not only to a realization of the immensity and majesty of God "out there", ... but also [to] a more intimate and wonderful perception of Him as directly and personally present in our own being.'¹⁶ Returning to his 1967 Chakravarty letter, Merton reflected on 'the reality that is present to us and in us. ... By being attentive ... we can find ourself engulfed in such happiness that it cannot be explained, the happiness of being at one with everything.'¹⁷

And in closing his book *New Seeds of Contemplation* he invokes yet another image, inviting us to:

Hear His call and follow him in His mysterious, cosmic dance. We do not have to go very far to catch the echoes of that game and of that dancing. When we are alone on a starlit night; when by chance we see the migrating birds in autumn descending on a grove of junipers to rest and eat; ... when we know love in our own hearts; or when ... we hear an old frog land in a quiet pond with a solitary splash — at such times the awakening ... the 'newness', the emptiness and the purity of vision that make themselves evident, provide a glimpse of the cosmic dance. ... The more we persist in misunderstanding the phenomena of life, the more we analyze them out into strange finalities and complex purposes of our own. ... We are invited to forget ourselves on purpose, cast away our awful solemnity to the winds and join in the general dance.¹⁸

Into this general cosmic dance of contemplation, Merton brought with him not just his engagement with the natural world but also his encounters with the human world: his voracious reading, his personal conversations, his voluminous correspondence. His contemplative experience would have been truncated and incomplete had it excluded

the fruits of these human encounters. This contemplative dance that wove together all levels of Merton's experience and interaction informed his public writings, infusing them with prescience and insight, helping to render them highly relevant for us today.

Merton has good company in considering contemplation as a means to connect with the community of creation. Elizabeth Johnson writes how:

In contemplation people [will] look on the natural world with affection rather than with an arrogant, utilitarian stare. ... Contemplation deepens human connection with the world, enfolding other species into our love and passionate care. ... A sensuous, earth-affirming asceticism leads people to live more simply not to make themselves suffer and not because they are anti-body, but to free themselves from enslavement to market practices that harm other living creatures.¹⁹

Thomas Berry writes of entering the arena of 'interior communion' in contrast to 'exterior manipulation or compulsion':

Nothing can be itself without being in communion with everything else. ... To understand this both intellectually and emotionally is the basic work of contemplation that would lead humankind to fulfill the next phase of the cosmic story [where humans] define themselves in relation to the earth, not primarily in relation to themselves.²⁰

Laudato si' somewhat echoes this theme as well:

[Ecological conversion] entails a loving awareness that we are not disconnected from the rest of creatures, but joined in a splendid universal communion. As believers, we do not look at the world from without but from within, conscious of the bonds with which the Father has linked us to all beings. ... Nature is filled with words of love, but how can we listen to them amid constant noise, interminable and nerve-racking distractions, or the cult of appearances? ... An integral ecology includes taking time to recover a serene harmony with creation, reflecting on our lifestyles and our ideals, and contemplating the Creator who lives among us and surrounds us, whose presence 'must not be contrived but found, uncovered.'²¹

For his part, rather than appeal to contemplation per se, Daniel Horan invokes Karl Rahner's idea of 'mysticism as the primordial experience of God in everyday life'.²² According to Rahner: "The devout Christian of the future will either be a "mystic", one who has "experienced" something, or he will cease to be anything at all."²³

Fruitful Action

Although contemplative connection with our common ground can awaken us to the urgency of dismantling those illusionary pyramids, for the bulk of humanity contemplation alone cannot be enough. Most of us must wed it to fruitful action. Merton laboured mightily with the dialectical tension between these two practices, and toward the end of his life he tended to diverge from some of his activist friends as he tried to reconcile those practices with his monastic vocation. Perhaps naming what we consider 'fruitful' illuminates much of that divergence. Merton consistently argued that measuring effectiveness using 'pragmatic' and empirical parameters valued by modern technological society — the society reflected in Elizabeth Johnson's pyramid of domination — was self-defeating, though most of humanity uses those very parameters to calculate and measure what is 'fruitful'. He remained sceptical of actions bound to ideological stances or objectification of others. Merton instead measured 'fruitfulness' based on cultivating personal conscience, human connection, and the actions and interactions that organically flow from them to engage specific, concrete human needs.

Merton increasingly faced this tension as he related to friends and correspondents. Catholic theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether, for example, vigorously questioned the modern relevance of his monastic life. She claimed it was 'no longer the eschatological sign and witness in the church'. Instead, it is immersion in 'the steaming ghetto of the big city, not the countryside' that leads to 'the radical overcoming of this world'. That was now the place 'where one renews creation ... and does hand to hand combat with the demons. [In this modern era,] withdrawal and solitude is not a life vocation, it is part of a larger rhythm of life.'²⁴ She rejected simply saying, "That is all right for you but not for me, but we are both equally good Christians." For her, 'salvation is precisely salvation *of* and not *from* the world.' Ruether maintained that "'The world" is not creation but the sphere of the powers and principalities. All monasticism rests on a mistaken confusion of creation with this world.'²⁵ Thus she could not regard monasticism as the true expression of a radical Christianity.

Merton stood firm, maintaining that, for him, his surrounding woods

served as 'the right battleground, ... a sort of guerilla-outpost type of thing', acknowledging that: "This kind of place is where I am finally reduced to my nothingness and have to depend on God."²⁶ He rejected becoming simply another 'anti-ascetic humanist', because for him:

The monastic life is in closer contact with God's good creation and is in many ways ... more human than life in the supposedly comfortable, pleasurable world. ... I live in the woods and according to a tempo of sun and moon and season in which it is naturally easy and possible to walk in God's light. ... All you do is breathe and look around and wash dishes, type, etc. Or just listen to the birds. ... To my mind the monk is one of those who not only saves the world in the theological sense, but saves it literally, protecting it against the destructiveness of the rampaging city of greed, war, etc. And this loving care for natural creatures becomes, in some sense, a warrant of his theological mission and ministry as a man of contemplation. I refuse in practice to accept any theory or method of contemplation that simply divides soul against body, interior against exterior, and then tries to transcend itself by pushing creatures out into the dark.²⁷

Merton also faced challenges to his contemplative vocation as both the Vietnam War and resistance to it escalated in the late sixties. Merton remained more focused on social transformation towards a culture of peace than on political intervention with the mechanics of the war and its draft. This comes through as his friends ramped up their overt resistance through public rallies and draft board raids. When Gethsemani's new abbot permitted Merton greater mobility in 1968, his close friend Dan Berrigan asked Merton to join the speaking circuit in support of their public work. Merton responded that, despite his relaxed restrictions, the abbot permitted only travel within a monastic context. He explained that his own stance 'against any form of public appearance' led him to decline, because:

It is not consistent with what my life has been and has become. I don't think I can do what God and the Gospel demand of me personally unless I maintain the special kind of conditions I have been chosen for. ... As regards peace movements etc.: my job continues to be putting it on paper as best I can, I think, and, by letter or otherwise, helping individual C.O.'s [Conscientious Objectors] with advice.²⁸

As Catholic draft board raids multiplied, Merton publicly stated his continued friendship and respect for those who participated in those raids and affirmed the integrity of their motivations, but he also expressed disagreement with their actions. Five days after the third of these draft board raids by a group known as the Milwaukee Fourteen, Merton vented in a conference with Alaskan nuns that he was 'mad at my friends who are going around burning draft records. I think they are nuts — they are ruining the peace movement, ... the thing they are trying to help.'²⁹

This comment highlights what Daniel Berrigan later described as their friendship's 'one path or one voyage branching into two'.³⁰ But rather than two separate voyages, perhaps it is better seen as a common voyage to a common destination sailing in complementary vessels. Both sought a world of peace and reconciliation. But the vessel chosen by Berrigan and Ruether focused primarily on direct engagement with and resistance to the mechanics of principalities and powers busily at work dominating the planet. Merton's vessel focused more on a deep connection with a 'common ground of being' as the primary resource to transform and overcome those powers. The former emphasized resisting behaviors, the latter emphasized transforming consciousness, but *each* approach *ultimately* sought the same end.

Conclusion

No doubt most would agree that we must both confront the Powers *and* connect with the Ground of Love. Many would resonate with Ruether's pursuit of 'rhythms' that both withdraw and engage. Most might also concur that few are, or can be, called to immersion in a fully contemplative life. Yet Ruether was undoubtedly incorrect that this latter vocation has become irrelevant to the 'salvation' of Earth. Especially as awareness of our existential crisis expands, we need those who remain immersed in contemplation as a connection with that hidden, common ground — those fully engaged with Creation's general dance. Even those who choose Ruether's rhythms of engagement and withdrawal continue to benefit from voices like Merton's, voices dedicated to contemplative experience that help us keep focused on what seasons of contemplative withdrawal are all about. 'Contemplation does not mean prescinding from present material reality for some other reality,' Merton instructed Gethsmani's monks in the summer of his final year. 'There is only one reality. ... It means *penetrating* the only reality we've got.'³¹

The need for a contemplative rhythm is not to reflect and rest and plan for better ways to dominate, even in the name of a noble cause or a

sound ideology. Neither is that rhythm limited to levelling pyramids of domination within human society. Rhythms of contemplation must ultimately immerse us in the general dance of wholeness that enables us to commune with our *connective* 'point vierge', our *common* ground of love. This dance integrates us not only with humanity, but with the plants and animals, landscapes and atmospheres of our shared presence on Earth. Only then might a truly transformed, *collective* 'ecological consciousness' emerge, one capable of communion with the whole of creation.

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Notes

1. 'Gaia' refers to James Lovelock's 'Gaia hypothesis', which portrays all of Earth's living and inorganic matter as one integrated, complex, and self-regulating system; named for Gaia, the Greek mythological Mother of all life.
2. Thomas Berry, 'Reinventing the Human', talk delivered in Chapel Hill, NC, June 1997. <https://www.ecozoicstudies.org/foundational-essays/> (accessed 2nd March, 2020).
3. Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 261.
4. Pope Francis, *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home* (Frederick, MD: Word Among Us Press, 2015), par. 89, 139.
5. This term, though rarely used any longer as a scientific designation, is still sometimes informally used to reference modern humanity (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homo_sapiens). Duplication of 'sapiens', meaning 'wise, sensible, discerning', betrays a conceit of humanity as beings at the apex of the natural order.
6. Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World.
7. Daniel P. Horan, OFM, *Catholicity and Emerging Personhood: A Contemporary Theological Anthropology*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2019), p. 119.
8. *Laudato Si'*, par. 146.
9. Robert Imperto, *Merton and Walsh on the Person* (Brookfield, WI: Liturgical Press, 1987), pp. 120, 125.
10. Merton to Anniya Chakravarty, 13 Apr. 1967, *The Hidden Ground of Love*, ed. William Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985), p. 115.
11. Shannon, *Hidden Ground of Love*, p. ix.
12. Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Doubleday [Image Edition], 1966), p. 158.
13. Merton, *Conjectures*, p. 131.

14. Merton's review of Nash's book was published as 'The Wild Places' in *Thomas Merton: Preview of the Asian Journey*, ed. Walter Capps (New York: Crossroad, 1989), pp. 95-107.
15. Merton to Barbara Hubbard, 16 Feb 1968, *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994), p. 74.
16. Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, 1971), p. 160.
17. Merton to Amiya Chakravarty, 13 Apr. 1967, *The Hidden Ground of Love*, p. 115.
18. *The Hidden Ground of Love*, pp. 296-97.
19. Johnson, pp. 282-83.
20. Berry, 'Contemplation and World Order' 1978, taken from <http://thomasberry.org/publications-and-media/contemplation-and-world-order> (accessed 2nd April, 2020).
21. *Laudato Si'*, par 220, 225, quoting *Evangelii Gsodium* (24 Nov 2013), p. 71.
22. Horan, 234, quoting Harvey D. Eagan in *Karl Rahner: Mystic of Everyday Life* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1998), p. 57.
23. Horan, p. 233.
24. Ruether to Merton, 20 Feb 1967, *At Home in the World: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Rosemary Radford Ruether*, ed. Mary Tardiff, OP (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), p. 20.
25. Ruether to Merton, Mid-March 1967, *Home in the World*, pp. 27-28.
26. Merton to Ruether, 14 Feb 1967, *Home in the World*, pp. 23-24.
27. Merton to Ruether, 9 Mar 1967, *Home in the World*, pp. 34-35.
28. Merton to D. Berrigan, 8 Feb 1968, *Hidden Ground of Love*, p. 100.
29. Recording: 'Retreat (Day of Recollection) given to the sisters at Anchorage, Alaska', tape 201-2-2, Thomas Merton Center. Bellarmine University. The comment was recorded on 29 Sep 1968; the Milwaukee 14 draft board raid, in which Jim Forest participated, occurred on 24 Sep 1968. Special thanks to Kathleen Tarr for pointing me to this unpublished excerpt.
30. Dan Berrigan interview, 16 Apr 2004, *The Merton Seasonal*, Fall 2016, 13-14. Berrigan's perception was based on reading Merton's 28 May 1968 journal entry, which predated Merton's statements on Catonsville. Berrigan offers another reflection on this phase of their relationship in *Portraits of Those I Love* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), pp. 13-14, where he shares uncertainty about how Merton viewed them in the absence of face-to-face interaction during 1968, though he intuited; 'He trusted us, but his trust was tested hard.'
31. Thomas Merton, 'Aesthetic and Contemplative Experience – James Joyce', recording at the Abbey of Gethsemani, summer 1968, transcribed by Paul Pearson, *The Merton Annual 27* (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2015), p. 41.

Gordon Oyer is the author of *Pursuing the Spiritual Roots of Protest* about the retreat of peace activists Merton hosted in 1964. He received his MA in history from the University of Illinois—Urbana. He currently lives in Louisville, Kentucky, USA.