Finding Hope in the 'Sacramental' Economics of Thomas Merton & Walter Weisskopf

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> *If we are to manage the havoc—ocean acidification, corporate malfeasance, endless war—we have to reimagine what it means to live lives that matter, or we will only continue to push the unwarranted hope that things will work out. We need to step deeper into a conversation about enchantment and agape. … It is more important to live for the possibilities that lie ahead than to die in despair over what has been lost.*
>
> Barry Lopez[1]

Thomas Merton is not known for his economic commentary; I am not aware of any essay or article that he devoted to the topic. At the same time, one rarely reads his works on social themes without encountering a comment or two about how wealth and affluence factor into our world's challenges. I have been curious for some time about what might coalesce if one combed through his journals, letters, and essays to gather those scattered bits of commentary. These reflections offer a brief and tentative foray toward that question by putting Merton into conversation both with his correspondent Walter Weisskopf and with historian Eugene McCarraher at Villanova University

The Enchantments of Mammon

McCarraher's book, *The Enchantments of Mammon: How Capitalism Became the Religion of Modernity*, explores both how modern economic assumptions became dominant and how certain forms of resistance to them emerged.[2] He revises the standard tale of how science and technology rose to 'disenchant' a world animated by mysterious life forces into a story of how those forces were instead conferred upon the magic of capitalism. Rather than '*dis*enchantment', he describes a '*mis*enchantment', where market-centered economic activity, animated by the productive power of capital and mechanization, now assumed the

divine mantel of regulating our world. This required us to re-envision the natural world not as a place of enchanted, shared abundance but as one of hostile scarcity that compels us to compete for resources and hoard our surpluses. For both Marxist and capitalist, that transferred mantel of enchantment became palpable in the movement of 'progress' expressed through 'unlimited economic growth and unlimited technological development'. Ultimately, after the Soviet collapse, *The Economist* magazine could assert that the 'broad church' of neoliberal capitalism had now inaugurated an 'empire without end', echoing Margaret Thatcher's prior claim that 'there is no alternative to capitalism.'[3]

McCarraher locates a thread of resistance to this misenchantment within a current of 'Romanticism' with a capital 'R', comprised of an eclectic subset of intellectuals, poets, novelists, and artists. Extending from Gerrard Winstanley and William Blake, through African-American slave religions and Gerard Manley Hopkins and on into the post-World War II era, they upheld 'imagination' as 'a form of vision, a mode of realism, an insight into the nature of things that was irreducible to, but not contradictory of, the knowledge provided by scientific investigation.' McCarraher considered this Romantic imagination a 'sacramental consciousness' which these writers and artists shared. Its 'sacramental' nature emerges from recognizing a 'primal unity of self and world' otherwise fragmented through modern alienation, and entails 'a capacity to … envision some reality that both transcended and pervaded the sensible world.' Or, as William Blake had put it: 'To see a world in a grain of sand, / And a Heaven in a Wild Flower.'[4]

Although their views might echo 'tribal and ancient' beliefs in 'an unseen presence' that 'knit together those who exchanged' material objects, these Romantic anticapitalists 'redefined rather than rejected "realism" and "progress".'[5] According to McCarraher:

> [They did not express] a nostalgic desire to return to the past, but [held] a view that much of what passed for 'progress' was in fact inimical to human flourishing: a specious productivity that required the acceptance of venality, injustice, and despoliation; a technological and organizational efficiency that entailed … the primacy of production of goods over the … nurturance of men and women. [They resisted] what William Blake called 'single vision'.[6]

This single vision reflected an 'inability to see the world as anything more than material resources for misenchanted exploitation. … Without faith in the sacramental nature of the world, we anchor ourselves in the illusory and … malevolent apparatus of domination.'[7]

McCarraher's final chapter explores the last wave of these anticapitalist visionaries, a postwar 'montage of poets, artists, writers, and religious figures [who] ... denounce[d] the ... disenchanted orthodoxy that consecrates the techno-capitalist imperium.'[8] And with this postwar montage of sacramental visionaries, enter Weisskopf and Merton.

Walter Weisskopf

Walter A. Weisskopf was born in 1904 in Vienna and emigrated to the U.S. in 1938 to avoid Austria's Nazi occupation. In 1945 he joined the founding faculty of Roosevelt University in Chicago to chair its economics department and serve on its board of trustees. He retired from Roosevelt in 1974 and died in 1991. Weisskopf was something of a rebel in his field, a 'generalist' who synthesized diverse perspectives into a coherent bigger picture rather than narrow specializations.

McCarraher failed to name Weisskopf in *The Enchantments of Mammon,* but in a similar vein to McCarraher, Weisskopf's second and final book, *Alienation and Economics*, surveys and critiques the rise of capitalism over the course of modernity.[9] Rather than deploying a lens of enchantment and the sacramental, however, Weisskopf, a secular Jew, incorporates philosophy and depth psychology with classic economic theory to tell his story. Like MaCarraher's, this story concludes that something had gone very wrong. He sees the progression of Western economic theory and practice radically reducing human experience from a 'multi-dimensional' balance of diverse human needs into a 'single-dimensional' obsession with maximizing economic production and growth as our measure of social health, what he called 'GNP-fetishism'.

Weisskopf asserts that the rise of modernity and its single-dimensional outlook skewed economic studies to focus the problem of 'scarcity' only on material goods. Actually, he contends, the ultimate 'scarcity' problem with which humans contend deals with our mortality, the limits imposed by a finite life and its finite human energy that prevent us from exploring the vast potential of diverse possible choices we face in life. The only way to navigate *this* scarcity requires humans to live within the parameters of ethical systems that guide those limited choices. Though not absolute, those socially constructed systems provide us with 'central world outlooks' and shared 'value attitudes' within which to make reasonable life choices in the face of limitations imposed by our mortality.

That same single-dimensional view also truncates an expansive view of human reason that once encompassed morality and ethics, as framed within a particular central world outlook. Reason now becomes mere

analytical reasoning that pursues increasingly efficient methods of production and use of resources, independent of any discerned greater social ends or aesthetic fulfillment. Further, our narrow pursuit of economic growth overwhelms any offsetting pursuit of economic equilibrium, where what we produce might actually satiate our material needs. It obliterates any sense of 'enough' and replaces it with a drive for 'more and more'. GNP (now GDP) metrics, along with stock market indices, now become our primary measure of well-being as we seek increased production simply for its own sake. In order to consume this ever-expanding production, we perpetually create new perceived needs through advertising, marketing, and planned obsolescence. Together these dynamics also spark a pace of change in our life experience that exceeds our human capacity to adequately incorporate into and adapt to our circumstances.

Weisskopf sees this one-dimensional growth-fetishism and skewed truncation of reason leading to civilizational self-destruction through nuclear war and environmental devastation. Our main hope to avoid those catastrophic self-corrections lies in greater 'existential balance' through freeing the 'repressed dimensions of human existence — inner experience, receptivity, contemplation, poetry, art, play, the unconscious, intuitive reason', and reintegrating them with the satisfaction of our material needs.[10] Weisskopf suggests that we look to Earth's biological rhythms for models rather than invent economic laws modelled on physical sciences. Those organic rhythms not only fail to reflect unlimited growth, they experience it as a cancerous disease. He invokes biologist C.H. Waddington's description of normal organic life as 'a well regulated harmonious process where all parts keep pace with one another.'[11] Weisskopf hoped that the era's pressures of labour automation and environmental destruction might break the mystique of growth-fetishism to open paths toward that multi-dimensional balance and harmony with our biosphere.[12]

Thomas Merton

Unlike Weisskopf, Thomas Merton is explicitly named within McCarraher's postwar montage. He devotes four pages to the monk, drawing on Merton's published works to highlight Merton's sacramental view of the material world and discomfort with modern capitalism. His comments on Merton's essay, 'Letters to a White Liberal', cover nearly a full page, perhaps capturing Merton's intuition that warped economic priorities shone especially clearly through American racism. A sampling

from that essay includes:

> What we are really interested in is not *persons*, but *profits*. Our society is organized first and foremost with a view to business, and wherever we run into a choice between the rights of a human person and the advantage of a profit-making organization, the rights of the person will have difficulty getting a hearing. …
>
> *It was only when money became involved that the Negro demonstrations finally impressed themselves upon the American mind as being real.*
>
> We claim to judge reality by the touchstone of Christian values such as freedom, reason, the spirit, faith, personalism, etc. In actual fact we judge them by commercial values: sales, money, prices, profits. It is not the life of the spirit that is real to us, but the vitality of the *market*.[13]

This sense also emerges in Merton's letters to African Americans, whom he advises against playing to aspirations imposed by an affluent white society. For example, he encourages classical singer Robert Lawrence Williams to 'resist the kind of mental domination exercised subtly by our affluent society … fighting the white man's values within your own soul.'[14] He urges Williams to cultivate his own values rather than those that the market compels, because 'the market does not know real quality, it just guesses sales value.'[15]

More evidence of Merton's economic sensibilities emerge in his journals. The two published volumes that span 1952 through 1963, for example, yield eighteen typed pages of relevant quotes; a brief sampling that pertains to this paper follows. The first, from December 1957, offers a lengthy and foundational reflection:

> Preparing notes on first epistle of St. John for the novice's conference.
>
> I ask myself, *is it possible, in a capitalist economy to live up to the doctrine of this epistle*?
>
> *He that hath the substance of the world and shall see his brother in need and shall shut up his bowels from him, how doth the charity of God abide in him?* [I John 3:17] …
>
> Certainly, there is no lack of good will and good intentions.
>
> [That] is not the fundamental problem. …
>
> In a world with a complicated economic structure like ours, it is no longer even a question of 'my brother' being a citizen in the same country. From the moment the economy of another country is subservient to the business interests of my country I am

> responsible to those of the other country who are 'in need'. In what does this responsibility consist? … Is Marx right in saying that the Capitalist world does not and *cannot* seek an honest answer? I am bound to agree with him.
>
> Hence the [frightfully difficult] problem of cooperation with those who exploit. …
>
> Hence – *my obligation to study questions of history, economics,* etc. in so far as I can.
>
> This obligation is by no means in conflict with my contemplative vocation.
>
> Until my 'contemplation' is liberated from the sterilizing artificial limitations under which it has so far existed … I cannot be a 'man of God' because I cannot live in the Truth which is the first essential for being a man of God. …
>
> In any time, social responsibility is the keystone of the Christian life. In no time has this been so urgent – and too poorly understood.[16]

This passage is significant on many levels. It describes a reality now even more entrenched and asks questions which are even more complex today. But what especially stands out is how so early in his so-called 'turning toward the world', he intertwines his economic questions with his contemplative vocation and names 'social responsibility' as 'the keystone of the Christian life'.

Other entries resonate with Weisskopf's themes regarding fetishized production, such as this reflection on his September 1958 visit to Louisville's General Electric plant:

> What struck me most was the immense seriousness of the place – as if at last I had found what America takes seriously. Not churches, not libraries. Not even movies, but THIS! This is it. The manufacture of refrigerators, of washing machines, of tape recorders, of light fixtures. This is the real thing. This is America.[17]

This May 1960 entry aired his concerns about the creation of needs to bolster consumption:

> [W]e are snowed under by useless goods, objects, foods, furnitures, clothes, things that keep in movement our absurd society of advertising and commerce. We consume and waste and throw away and everyone else in the world starves, and starves miserably. The best that can be said is that we don't *want* it to happen that way. But it does.[18]

Then, echoing McCarraher's theme of economic misenchantment, Merton notes in July 1962 that:

> Businesses are sects. They are little religions – at least in America. One believes in the product, and preaches it. Your belief is an essential constituent in its goodness.[19]

Merton and Weisskopf exchanged letters in early 1968.[20] Although their letters do not explicitly focus on economics, they capture a shared sense of 'the sacramental', couched in the language of 'existential balance', and they concur about our need to elevate human emotional, aesthetic, and contemplative experience. Separate from their dialogue, however, both remained skeptical of unlimited economic and technological growth as a primary measure of well-being.

Where Lies Hope?

At this point, you may wonder, where in the largely pessimistic outlook of these writers might we find hope? Three aspects of their works signal hope to me.

The first entails recognition of how human paradigms and worldviews shape norms and limit what we consider possible, what Yale historian Timothy Snyder calls our 'politics of inevitability'.[21] McCarraher's powers of 'enchantment', Weisskopf's 'central world outlooks' and shared 'value-attitudes', and Merton's mythdreams all recognize this power of our social frameworks. These worldviews, which rely on unquestioned and unconscious assumptions and presumptions, encourage us to construct a society based on what we consider important and to hold in place what we imagine as the limits of social possibility. This suggests that many of our supposedly concrete laws that seem to reflect 'just the way the world works' are really not immutable givens. Many are chosen features of a society which we have constructed, however unconsciously. This means that once we recognize this we can free our aspirations from those imagined social, political, and economic limits and laws.

Secondly, and closely related, once we begin to accept this freedom and open our imagination, we can widen our view to recognize possibilities from elsewhere, beyond our narrow learned norms and presumptions. We might pursue Weisskopf's multi-dimensional balance or the aesthetic human flourishing of McCarraher's sacramental visionaries. Or we might look to *non*-Western traditions, such as the Indigenous cultures that embrace reciprocal relationship rather than

competitive production to anchor their societies. Robin Wall Kimmerer, both a trained botanist and enrolled member of the native Potawatomi Nation, offers a helpful expression of this alternative economy. She tells of an anthropologist who asked an Indigenous rain forest hunter why he didn't store surplus meat from a large kill for his own future needs, but used it all for a feast among his community. He received the puzzled response: 'Store my meat? I store my meat in the belly of my brother.' Kimmerer continues:

> I cherish the notion … that we might back away from the grinding market economy that reduces everything to a commodity and leaves most of us bereft of … relationship and purpose and beauty and meaning … . I want to be part of a system in which wealth means having enough to share, and where the gratification of meeting your family needs is not poisoned by destroying that possibility for someone else. … I don't think market capitalism is going to disappear anytime soon … . But I don't think it's pie-in-the-sky to imagine that we can create incentives to nurture a gift economy [of reciprocity] that runs right alongside the market economy.[22]

A third glimpse of hope rests with Merton's and Weisskopf's shared embrace of contemplation and meditation as key aspects of regaining our 'existential balance', our 'true selves', perhaps our 'sacramental consciousness'. They hint that those practices might help empower us to disengage and detach from a fixation on production and consumption, affluence and acquisition, and refocus on 'enough' rather than 'more and more'. Such practices might liberate our imagination to see paths around and beyond assumed economic inevitabilities, and they might help us to regain the clear and multi-dimensional vision to recognize again our interdependent kinship with and immersion within the natural world. They can become the ground for signs of hope for the future, not only for ourselves but for the whole world. As Merton wrote, 'Upon our hope, therefore, depends the liberty of the whole universe. Because our hope is the pledge of a new heaven and a new earth, in which all things will be what they were meant to be.'[23]

Notes

1. Barry Lopez, 'Love in a Time of Terror', *Embrace Fearlessly the Burning World: Essays* (New York: Random House, 2022), p. 121.
2. Eugene McCarraher, *The Enchantments of Mammon: How Capitalism Became the Religion of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2019).

3. *The Enchantments of Mammon*, pp. 17, 665, 16.
4. *The Enchantments of Mammon*, pp. 16, 69, 69.
5. *The Enchantments of Mammon*, pp. 11-12, 17.
6. *The Enchantments of Mammon*, p. 17.
7. *The Enchantments of Mammon*, p. 12.
8. *The Enchantments of Mammon*, p. 669. Beyond Merton, this cohort includes figures such as Dorothy Day, Richard B. Gregg, Martin Buber, Paul Tillich, Paul Goodman, Mark Rothko, Henry Miller, Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, Kenneth Rexroth, Theodore Roszak, Lewis Mumford, and E. F. Schumacher.
9. Walter Weisskopf, *Alienation and Economics* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co. Inc, 1971).
10. Walter Weiskopf, 'Repression and the Dialectics of Industrial Civilization' in *Review of Social Economy* XXVIII:2 (Sep 1965), p. 126.
11. *Alienation and Economics*, p. 184.
12. Many of Weisskopf's ideas echo Herbert Marcuse's 1964 *The One-Dimensional Man* and anticipate both the 1972 Club of Rome's 'Limits to Growth' report and E. F. Schumacher's 1973 *Small is Beautiful*.
13. Thomas Merton, 'Letters to a White Liberal', *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1964), pp. 22-24.
14. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985), p. 605.
15. *The Hidden Ground of Love*, p. 606.
16. Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life. The Journals of Thomas Merton: Volume Three, 1952-1960.* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 150-51. Original emphasis.
17. *A Search for Solitude*, p. 219.
18. *A Search for Solitude*, p. 391.
19. Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years. The Journals of Thomas Merton: Volume Four, 1960-1963*. (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), p. 230.
20. The Merton Centre in Louisville holds a single letter from Weisskopf to Merton dated March 19, 1968, and Merton's reply dated April 4, 1968.
21. Discussed in Timothy Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2018).
22. Robin Wall Kimmerer, 'The Serviceberry: An Economy of Abundance', *Emergence Magazine*. Available at: https://emergencemagazine.org/essay/the-serviceberry/
23. Thomas Merton, Sentences on Hope', No Man is an Island (London: Hollis & Carter,1955), p. 16.

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