The Humble God of Thomas Merton: Christ, *Kenosis*, and Salvation in the General Dance

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Introduction

Echoing the great Christological insights of the New Testament epistolary and early Christian theology of St. Paul, the spirituality of Thomas Merton reflects a humble God, one who embraces not the opulence or ostentatiousness of human power and glory, but the self-emptying or *kenotic* modality of authentic creaturely existence. The final chapter in *New Seeds of Contemplation*, which is titled 'The General Dance', provides a substantial reflection on exactly this topic, particularly as it concerns the incarnation of God in Jesus of Nazareth.[1] The foundations of Merton's thought on the incarnation and the humility of God can be traced to both Orthodox Christian theology in the East and Franciscan theology in the West, especially the insight of Blessed John Duns Scotus, about whom Merton wrote with tremendous praise and credited the *Subtle Doctor* with helping to form his theological outlook.[2]

There are two texts of Merton's that illustrate the Scotist, Christocentric, and supralapsarian view of the Incarnation well. The first, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, is also the fecund location of Merton's engagement with Scotus's *haecceity* in his effort to elucidate what one's identity really is.[3] The second, *The New Man*,[4] is a text that is often overlooked by Merton scholars and enthusiasts, perhaps because some view it, as one scholar wrote, as 'a book mixing autobiographical soliloquy with pages of dry notes.'[5] One notable exception is Christopher Pramuk, who writes, '*The New Man* reflects Merton's masterful ability to weave together a theological vision from a dizzying range of sources.'[6]

The school of Christological thought that informs Merton's own thinking and which he contributes to in the mid-twentieth century is known in theological circles as 'supralapsarianism.' The term itself merely mean a theory of the incarnation that does not prioritise or centre sin in the story of God becoming human. Etymologically, the term means

'independent of' or 'apart from' (*supra*) 'the fall' (*lapsarian*). Although a minority tradition, especially when compared with the majority view of 'infralapsarianism', which means 'dependent' (*infra*) on 'the fall' (*lapsarian*), it can be traced back to the New Testament witness and early Christian theologians. As I've already mentioned, Merton encounters this authentic Christian tradition both in the Eastern Orthodox tradition as well as through the Franciscan thought of Scotus, further mediated by the great Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins.[7]

As I will show in what follows, God's plan for the incarnation—to not only enter, but also become part of creation—is motivated (what in Latin would be described as the *ratio* or 'logic') only by divine love. God is not compelled from without nor does God set up a context in which sin would have to be praised as the condition of the possibility for God becoming human (*pace* Augustine and the horrible *o felix culpa* of the Easter Exultet). Merton receives and develops this tradition for modern believers, poetically lifting up the divine *ratio* of love while also praising the humility of God.

I have organised my presentation in three parts. First, I will explore the supralapsarian Christological tradition of which Merton is a part and a contributor, arguing that God would have become human even if Adam had not sinned; second, with Christ at the centre of history, not as a 'plan b' but part of God's original plan, this paper shows how Merton's views of creation and salvation are really two sides of one divine coin and unveils the importance of God's self-emptying for humanity; and, finally, this paper invites the reader to consider the personal and ecclesial implications of Merton's 'Humble God' in terms of prayer, ministry, social and ecological justice, and how we understand church.

Merton's Supralapsarianism as Divine Humility

Early in the chapter 'The General Dance', Merton proclaims:

> The Lord made the world and made man in order that He Himself might descend into the world, that He Himself might become man. When He regarded the world He was about to make He saw His wisdom, as a man-child, 'playing in the world, playing before Him at all times.' And He reflected, 'my delights are to be with the children of men.' The world was not made as a prison for fallen spirits who were rejected by God: this is the Gnostic error. The world was made as a temple, a paradise, into which God Himself would descend to dwell familiarly with the spirits He had placed there to tend it for Him.[8]

Merton asserts that the Incarnation, God's own descent into the world to live as a human person, was part of the plan for creation from the beginning. The distinction might not at first be clear, but it is of notable importance that the starting point of Merton's reflection on the *reason* (*ratio*) for the Incarnation begins with God's intentionality in opposition to the much more popular supralapsarian view of previous centuries that relied on the question, 'What if Adam had not sinned?'[9] This is further emphasised by Merton's association of this assertion with a reflection on the Genesis accounts of humanity's creation. Merton sees in God's decision to create humanity in God's image and likeness an expression of the cosmic Christocentricity of creation as a whole. 'God creates things by seeing them in His own Logos,' Merton writes of the second person of the Trinity's place in the act of creation.[10] Here we recall the hymnic creation verse in the letter to the Colossians: 'He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible' (Col 1:15–16). Christ is the centre and the 'blueprint' for creation, through him and in whom all is created, from the beginning. Merton, citing the letter to the Colossians in part, explains, 'The Word of God Himself was the "firstborn of every creature." He "in Whom all things consist" was not only to walk with man in the breeze after noon, but would also become Man, and dwell with man as a brother.'[11]

Merton does not artificially separate creation from the fall of humanity in sin, thereby segregating the creative act of God from the redemptive and saving act of the Incarnation. Instead, they are intimately tied together as one and the same thing. Scotus maintained that it was God's predestination of all creation to glory (therefore, Christ preceding) in divine love that was the reason for the Incarnation. Likewise, Merton holds a similar view of the relationship between divine love in the predestination of all creation to glory and the reason for the Incarnation:

> The Lord would not only love His creation as Father, but He would enter into His creation, emptying Himself, hiding Himself, as if He were not God but a creature. Why should He do this? Because He loved His creatures, and because He could not bear that His creatures should merely adore Him as distant, remote, transcendent and all powerful.[12]

Love holds primacy in the cosmic Christology of Merton as it similarly does in Scotus's doctrine of the absolute predestination of Christ.

Merton sees in the kenotic and cosmically Christocentric dimensions of the Incarnation certain implications for every human person. In a wonderfully summarizing journal entry on March 25, 1960 (which happened to be the Feast of the Annunciation), about different approaches to a theology of the Incarnation, Merton wrote:

> One thing Christ has said: 'He who sees me sees the Father also.' In emptying Himself to come into the world, God has not simply kept in reserve, in a safe place, His reality and manifested a kind of shadow or symbol of Himself. He has emptied Himself and is *all* in Christ. *Invisibilis in suis; visibilis in nostris* [Invisible in his own; visible in ours]. Christ is not simply the tip of the little finger of the Godhead, moving in the world, easily withdrawn, never threatened, never really risking anything. God has acted and given Himself totally, without division, in the Incarnation. He has become not only one of us but even our very selves.[13]

Merton not only holds Christ as the true God-as-human but also sees in the very action of God's becoming human a key element of Christian faith, for it is through Christ that we are able to see God as God truly is—humble, loving, forgiving, and poor. To say 'Christ' is, at one and the same time, to say this is who God is and this is who *we are called to be*. For Merton, Christ is the centre of everything, a view he notes in his 1965 journal when he writes that 'Christ' is 'at the center and heart of all reality, as a source of grace and love.'[14] This Christocentrism in Merton's thought signals yet another aspect of the humble God in Merton's thought: divine *kenosis*, the self-emptying or literal *humbling* of God for us and our salvation.

The Humility of God as Self-Emptying

In addition to Scotus as a key Western Christian theological source, another major influence on Merton's vision of divine humility is the thirteenth century Franciscan theologian and doctor of the church St. Bonaventure. Bonaventure wrote in a treatise close to the end of his life, 'It is necessary to begin with the center, that is, with Christ. For He is the Mediator between God and humanity, holding the central position in all things, as will become clear.'[15] In his famous spiritual mediation, *The Journey of the Soul into God*, Bonaventure ties together the centrality of Christ, the humbling of God in the Incarnation, and the meaning this has for humanity in a way that anticipates Merton's own views. Bonaventure writes:

> When in Christ, the Son of God, who is by nature the image of the invisible God, our mind contemplates our humanity so wonderfully exalted and so ineffably united, and when it sees at one time in one Being the first and the last, the highest and the lowest, the circumference and the center, the Alpha and the Omega, the caused and the cause, the Creator and the creature, that is, the book written within and without, it reaches something perfect.[16]

Like Bonaventure who saw Christ as the key, the centerpiece of all reality and faith, Merton recognised the tremendous significance for him as an individual human being and member of creation, as well as for the whole human family. In a 1965 journal entry, Merton enthusiastically tied together the humility of God in the *kenosis* of the Incarnation with what it means to be truly, authentically human:

> The joy that I am *man*! This fact, that I am a man, is a theological truth and mystery. God became man in Christ. In becoming what I am He united me to Himself and made me His epiphany, so that now I am meant to reveal Him, and my very existence as true man depends on this, that by my freedom I obey His light, thus enabling Him to reveal Himself in me. And the first to see this revelation is my own self. I am His mission to myself and through myself to all men. How can I see Him or receive Him if I despise or fear what I am—man? How can I love what I am—man—if I hate man in others?[17]

George Kilcourse, in discussing Merton's 'turn to the kenotic Christ', summarises this type of Christological insight well: 'The achievement of Thomas Merton was his discovery in the humanity of Christ of a paradigm for our religious self-understanding.'[18]

There is, in passages such as those found in 'The General Dance' in *New Seeds*, an ethical tone to Merton's view that God's decision to become a human being necessarily says something about each and every human person and their inherent dignity and value. All ethical consideration arises from a realization that who God is in Christ is the model for authentic human living and that revelation is only made possible by God's free and humble decision to empty God's self to become one like us out of love. In this spirit, Merton wrote, 'And indeed, if Christ became Man, it is because He wanted to be any man and every [person]. If we believe in the Incarnation of the Son of God, there should be no one on earth in whom we are not prepared to see, in mystery, the presence of Christ.'[19] It should

come, then, as no surprise that this passage appears in *New Seeds* at the very end of the book, within Merton's closing reflection on the true self and the false self, which, as we know, is deeply indebted to Scotus's doctrine of *haecceitas*, which also inspired Hopkins's neologism 'inscape'.[20] That Merton's reflection on the *haecceity* of each person bears such close proximity to his supralapsarian consideration of the reason for the Incarnation in *New Seeds* is not likely a chance occurrence but instead another attestation of the influence of Scotus, Hopkins, and others on Merton's thought.

Merton's supralapsarian and Christocentric reflection on the motive for the Incarnation serves as the starting point for further consideration of the implications of the Incarnation in understanding the meaning of human existence and creation. This portion of Merton's Christological, and subsequently anthropological, engagement bears distinctively Pauline marks. Beyond the language of 'second Adam' in his book *The New Man*, Merton draws on texts such as Colossians 1:15–17, as he did in *New Seeds*, from which we again see his interest in connecting the event of the Incarnation with the act of creation. Christ, for Merton, is the exemplar, model, and centre of all creation. As such, Christ comes 'before Adam not only because He is more perfect, has a more exalted dignity, a greater power, but also because in Him Adam is created, like everything else in heaven and on earth.'[21] This cosmic Christology at the centre of Merton's reflection reveals, as Ilia Delio notes, 'a mystic who has plumbed the depth of divine mystery to enter the heart of humanity and the heart of the world.'[22] This mystical expression of Christological doctrine finds further elucidation in Merton's meditation on the character of creation in light of the Incarnation. He writes in *The New Man:*

> Creation is created and sustained in Him and by Him. And when He enters into it, He will simply make clear the fact that He is already, and has always been, the center and the life and the meaning of a universe that exists only by His will. To us no doubt, this all seems very strange, because all the Gospel narratives of the Incarnation suggest that God enters into His own world as a stranger and an alien. But that is because we have our own peculiar ideas of proprietorship and possession. The hiddenness, the unobtrusiveness, the simplicity of Christ as Man are simply another manifestation of the simplicity, the unobtrusiveness and hiddenness of God Himself, living and acting in the world.[23]

This mystical consideration of the cosmic Christ in and through whom creation comes into being reflects Scotus's primacy of Christ in a

particular way but also mirrors the more general Franciscan tradition of the humility of God, which is an influence in the kenotic impulse that Merton's Christology tends to emulate.[24]

Like those who preceded him in the Supralapsarian tradition, Merton does not dismiss or diminish the redemptive value of the Incarnation but instead subordinates it as an effect of the Incarnation and not the cause. Merton describes the reparation of the fall in terms of 'the reorientation of all human life' expressed in terms of the parable of the lost sheep:

> The Second Adam comes down to find man in the depths of confusion, in the moral chaos and disintegration into which he has been plunged by the sins of the first Adam and of all our other ancestors. Christ finds Adam, the 'human race' like the Lost Sheep and carries him back by the way he came in his wandering from the truth.[25]

Through the Incarnation, this reorientation of human living—from sin to truth and from death to life—is accomplished. It is accomplished through the very act of God's recapitulation, the return of all creation back to God in Christ, but also through the reminder of who *we are* in Christ. Creation and salvation are then not two separate realities, but for Merton two sides of the same cosmic coin. Merton maintains that the notion of the false self is closely linked to the concept of original sin or, to put it another way, original forgetfulness. We no longer recall who it is we really are; we have forgotten our true self. Like the lost sheep, we are on the wrong path. Therefore, our theology generally and Christology particularly becomes obfuscated, fractured, and solipsistic—we begin to project onto God a narrative of our own creation rather than the divine revelation disclosed to us in Christ. In God's very living, walking, and breathing among us, we are shown who it is we are by seeing and knowing who God is. In this way, an effect of the redemption that comes through the event of the Incarnation is, to return to the title of Merton's book, that we are made *new men* and *women*.

Conclusion

In closing, I invite the reader to consider the personal and ecclesial implications of Merton's 'Humble God' in terms of prayer, ministry, social and ecological justice, and how we understand church.

Prayer — Merton's supralapsarian understanding of the divine *ratio* or motive for the incarnation, which is centred on divine love rather than human sin, says something both about God and about humanity. God is

love, as the Letter of John reminds us (1 John 4:7-21), and that love both precedes and supersedes any human weakness, sin, or disobedience. As Paul writes to the Romans (Romans 8:38-39), nothing can separate us from the love of God, which is a fact that Merton takes seriously and affirmatively. About humanity, Merton's spirituality of supralapsarian Christology reminds us that salvation history is not about us, but about God's free and loving action in creation—both in the beginning and in the final end. Human sin, while real and consequential, nevertheless does not stand at the center of history; God's love does.

When it comes to prayer, Merton's spirituality of a 'humble God' invites us to re-imagine whom it is we are praying to and called into relationship with. Not a vengeful or angry God who is upset about having to restore order after we screw up creation through sin. Christ is not 'plan B,' but the firstborn of creation and the greatest sign of divine love for the created order. How might that affect our prayer? What influence might that have for our understanding of Christmas, of Holy Week, of the Resurrection, and of this Eastertide in which we find ourselves now?

Ministry — For those in Christian ministry, whether ordained or lay, we might ask ourselves what implications are found in Merton's Christology and spirituality for us. One area that might be better shaped by Merton's insights is our liturgical and popular preaching. How might scripture be better interpreted and applied through a lens of God's humility? In our ministries of healing, whether in pastoral counselling or sacramental reconciliation, how might a renewed understanding of divine love as the reason for the incarnation and the broader spirituality of the humility of God inform our pastoral outreach? When it comes to teaching and spiritual formation, what is the story of salvation we pass on? How do we talk about the incarnation, the 'reason for the season' of advent and Christmas, about the role of human sin in salvation history?

Social and Ecological Justice — Among the courses I am teaching this semester is a graduate course I teach every few years titled 'Justice and Spirituality.' One of the foundations of that class is an examination of how absolutely central the theme of justice is in scripture and the broader theological tradition of Christianity. Spirituality and justice are not antithetical subjects, nor is justice an ancillary theme or interest reserved for a select few, but right-relationship in the order of society and creation is an imperative revealed to us in the oracles of the prophets, the prayers of the wisdom literature, and the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. How does our understanding of God broadly and the incarnation particularly shape our consideration of and approaches to justice? For those already inspired to engage in justice work in the world,

what might Merton's spirituality offer?

How we understand Church — While there are many, many themes that could be explored through the lens of Merton's spirituality of the humility of God and theology of the incarnation, I will close with an invitation to reflect on what these insights offer us in terms of our ecclesial communities. Elsewhere I have written about how the failure to adequately believe in the role of the Holy Spirit has led to violence, pastoral malpractice, and distrust in the church as institution.[26] Likewise, misconceptions about who God is and how God acts as creator and incarnate word can distort our understandings of what the church is and does. So, how might our faith communities be renewed by an adoption of Merton's spirituality and understanding of divine love as motivating the incarnation? What could change about how we imagine ourselves as church and members of the body of Christ when we de-center sin and humanity and re-center love and God?

This paper was given by the author at the Thomas Merton Society's celebration, 'Come and Join the General Dance', at Rydal Hall in Cumbria on 5th April 2024.

Notes

1. See Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961).
2. See especially Daniel P. Horan, *The Franciscan Heart of Thomas Merton: A New Look at the Spiritual Inspiration of his Life, Thought, and Writing* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 2014). Some parts of what follows previously appeared in earlier form in *The Franciscan Heart of Thomas Merton* and have been adapted for this article. For more on Merton's Franciscan influences, see Daniel P. Horan, 'Thomas Merton's Vernacular Franciscan Theology', *The Merton Journal* 16 (Advent 2009), pp. 26-36; and Daniel P. Horan, 'Sparks of *Haecceitas*: A Scotist Reading of Thomas Merton', *The Merton Journal* 17 (Advent 2010), pp. 15-21.
3. Haecceity is a term from medieval scholastic philosophy which denotes that property or quality of a thing by virtue of which it is unique or describable as 'this (one)'.
4. See Thomas Merton, *The New Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1961).
5. George Kilcourse, *Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton's Christ* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), p. 28.
6. Christopher Pramuk, *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009), p. 179.
7. For more, see Michael W. Higgins, 'Thomas Merton and the Jesuit Poets', *ARC: The Journal of the Faculty of Religious Studies, McGill* 22 (1994), pp. 73-82.

8. *New Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 290.
9. George Kilcourse has also highlighted this distinction between asking a counterfactual question, in the spirit of Anselm of Canterbury and Rupert of Deutz, and presuming a positive approach to the divine *ratio* for the incarnation (see Kilcourse, *Ace of Freedoms*, pp. 31–32).
10. *New Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 291.
11. *New Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 292.
12. *New Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 292.
13. Thomas Merton, entry for March 25, 1960 in *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham, Journals of Thomas Merton 3, 1952–1960 (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), p. 381.
14. Thomas Merton, entry for June 26, 1965 in *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage*, ed. Robert Daggy, Journals of Thomas Merton 5, 1963–1965 (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), p. 259.
15. Bonaventure, *Collationes in Hexaemeron* 1.10, ed. Jose de Vinck (Paterson, NJ: St. Anthony Guild Press, 1970), pp. 5–6.
16. Bonaventure, *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum* 6.7, trans. Zachary Hayes in *Bonaventure: Mystical Writings* (Phoenix: Tau Publishing, 1999), p. 112.
17. Entry for August 13, 1965 in *Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 279.
18. Kilcourse, *Ace of Freedoms*, p. 5.
19. *New Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 296.
20. See Hywel Thomas, 'Gerard Manley Hopkins and John Duns Scotus,' *Religious Studies* 24 (1988), pp. 337-364.
21. *The New Man*, pp. 136–37.
22. Ilia Delio, *Christ in Evolution* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), p. 110.
23. *The New Man*, pp. 137–38.
24. This dimension of Franciscan spirituality finds its origin in Francis of Assisi's own writings and prayers. For more on this theme and its presence in the work of later Franciscan thinkers, see Ilia Delio, *The Humility of God: A Franciscan Perspective* (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2005).
25. *The New Man*, pp. 148–49.
26. Daniel P. Horan, 'The Church is Suffering from Holy Spirit Atheism,' *National Catholic Reporter* (March 20, 2019).

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