

Confronting the Myth of Human Progress: Thomas Merton and the Illusion of Privilege

Gordon Oyer

The idea of progress has shaped Western culture's worldview since it emerged from the Enlightenment era.¹ This idea asserts that advances in science and technology, along with modern political structures and expanding overall wealth, are destined to perpetually improve human experience. More recently, though, two world wars, the birth of nuclear weaponry, expanding climate crises and growing economic inequity have tarnished its credibility. Increasing skepticism toward it has led some to view this idea as mostly an "act of faith"² and reframe it as the *myth* of progress.³ In recent years, for example, journalist Chris Hedges enlists this imagery to help explain modern global crises. He notes the raw courage it takes to face the idea's mythic character and resist those who promote it to "feed the human addiction for illusions [and] peddle the fantasy of eternal material progress."⁴

Merton on Human Personhood and Alienated Illusion

Five decades before Hedges penned these thoughts, the pilgrimage of Thomas Merton beckoned him, also, to confront that myth and resist its illusions. Merton may not have invoked the phrase "myth of human progress," but his terms for modern experience, such as the "unspeakable void" that underlies our culture or the "abyss of mass man," resonate with it. Further, at a retreat of peacemakers, Merton named facing the social privilege granted to some by modern "mass society" as key to confronting the illusions that inspire violence and rob today's non-privileged of

1. Robert Nisbet, *The History of the Idea of Progress* (New York: Basic Books, 1980) 4.

2. J. B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress: An Inquiry into Its Origin and Growth* (London: Macmillan, 1920) 2.

3. Kirkpatrick Sale, "Five Facets of a Myth" (<http://www.primitivism.com/facets-myth.htm>) [accessed 29 May 2015].

4. Chris Hedges, *The World as It Is: Dispatches on the Myth of Human Progress* (New York: Nation Books, 2010); see also Chris Hedges, "The Myth of Human Progress and the Collapse of Complex Societies" (14 Jan. 2014) (http://www.truthdig.com/report/item/chris_hedges_jan_27_column_transcript_collapse_of_complex_societies_2014012) [accessed 28 Jan. 2014]; and Chris Hedges, "The Myth of Human Progress" (13 Jan. 2013) (http://www.truthdig.com/report/item/the_myth_of_human_progress_20130113) [accessed 22 Jan. 2015].

their personhood. His comments there reveal his grasp of the myth and his awareness that breaking its spell is needed to regain human integrity, both personally and socially.

It was not that Merton viewed human culture as starkly negative. He was a humanist who assigned humanity a transcendent role in God's creation and drew energy from human creativity, literature and art. But Merton also sought caution and balance when engaging society. He sharply distinguished between human potential as God intended and the actual destination toward which humanity seemed pointed. He sought to "love and serve the man of the modern world, but not simply to succumb, with him, to all his illusions about the world."⁵ In seeking this balance, he challenged the modern narrative that happiness flows from expanding material progress and meaning from uncritically following the latest version of that narrative's script. Like Hedges, descriptors such as illness, insanity and illusion often flowed from Merton's pen as he reflected on ways in which society is presumed to have "progressed."

In sorting through these illusions, Merton made a key distinction between the human *person* and the alienated *individual*. Whereas persons enjoy the dignity and freedom God intended, individuals remain captive to an external, socially constructed identity. Therefore Merton felt that "The person must be rescued from the individual,"⁶ and "The problem of the person and the social organization is . . . one of the most important . . . problem[s] of our century."⁷ Persons, for Merton, hold "a uniquely subsisting capacity to love . . . a radical ability to care for all beings" (*NSC* 53). They seek "a valid encounter with other persons, for intelligent cooperation and for communion in love" (*DQ* xi). They "live in the world as Christ did, in perfect liberty and with unlimited compassion and service."⁸ For a person, the world comprises the dynamic environment "of matter and men" with which we remain in contact within "the deepest ground of our being" (*L&L* 120). In contrast, the fragmented "individual" – Western culture's ideal – reflects a "flight from the obligation to *love*" (*DQ* x), who according to Kierkegaard defers to the leveling priorities

5. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage. Journals, vol. 5: 1963-1965*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 226 [4/7/1965]; subsequent references will be cited as "*DWL*" parenthetically in the text.

6. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 38; subsequent references will be cited as "*NSC*" parenthetically in the text.

7. Thomas Merton, *Disputed Questions* (New York, Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1960) ix; subsequent references will be cited as "*DQ*" parenthetically in the text.

8. Thomas Merton, *Love and Living*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone and Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979) 124; subsequent references will be cited as "*L&L*" parenthetically in the text.

imposed by mass society⁹ and remains “completely alienated from himself by economic individualism” (*DQ xi*). Merton felt this culture encourages easily fabricated identities (see *L&L* 122) that leave one “lost in the wheels of a social machine [oblivious to] human needs as a matter of personal responsibility” (*MSC* 53). It painlessly separates us from reality and offers a “peace not of love but of anesthesia” (*NSC* 56).

Merton describes this culture with various images: “the morass of mass-technological society” (*DQ xi*); the “abyss of confusion and absurdity” (*NSC* 38); “The Unspeakable,” which is “the void we encounter . . . underlying the announced programs, the good intentions, the unexampled and universal aspirations for the best of all possible worlds.”¹⁰ Such distinctions also inform his views on genuine humanism, grounded in love that prompts forgiveness and attends to specific humans in concrete situations. The humanism of individuals, in contrast, considers humanity only in the abstract and succumbs to a collective narcissism that “is essentially antihumanistic.” According to Merton, this narcissistic impulse reflects

a problem of enormous magnitude, especially in our highly developed modern technological culture, which abounds in its own hidden forms of magic thinking, superstition, ritualism. . . . [It manifests] in all the complex military and technological power structures with which millions of men are glad to identify themselves and to which they hand over, without murmur, all moral responsibility for the future of man or for his destruction. . . . Thus, it is not difficult for the abstract and scientific doctrines of modern humanism to become means by which the individual person is reduced to subjection to man in the abstract. . . . This explains, in part, why modern secular humanisms are so fair and optimistic in theory and so utterly merciless and inhuman in practice. (*L&L* 146-49)¹¹

And so, Merton’s ongoing critiques of a narcissistic humanism and the illusions of mass-technological society leave little doubt that he held his finger to the pulse of the myth of human progress. As he stated in *Raids on the Unspeakable*, “We must begin, indeed, in the social womb. There is a time for warmth in the collective myth. But there is also a time to be born, [to be] liberated from the enclosing womb of myth and prejudice

9. See Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1967) 264-65.

10. Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966) 4; subsequent references will be cited as “*RU*” parenthetically in the text.

11. See also Ross Labrie, “Christian Humanism and the Roots of Peace in Thomas Merton,” *Renascence* 59.4 (Summer 2007) 295-309.

... guided no longer . . . by the systems and processes designed to create artificial needs and then ‘satisfy’ them” (RU 17). Merton helps unveil for us, therefore, the same mystique that continues to anesthetize our twenty-first-century experience and alienate us from the *real* world that touches our “deepest ground of being.”

Confronting the Myth of Human Progress

Numerous other works by Merton, from poems like “Atlas and the Fat-man” (RU 91-107) to essays like “Gandhi and the One-Eyed Giant”¹² to books like *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*,¹³ also captured his distinctions between concrete, person-based humanism and abstract, narcissistic faith in human progress. Merton famously explored contemplation as a path to cultivate personhood and seek freedom from social illusions. But in addition to observation and contemplation, Merton also considered how to directly confront this myth and the violence it legitimizes when he hosted a retreat of peace and civil-rights activists in November 1964, focusing on the theme: “Spiritual Roots of Protest.”

In his only prepared presentation there, Merton explored two themes: technology and privilege, mostly addressing the latter. Though his presentation only touched on technology, he and his friend W. H. Ferry drove home its significance throughout retreat discussions. The myth of human progress gains much of its credibility through technological advances, and in mentioning it there, Merton recognized that meaningful protest against the evils empowered by mass society must address the technology it enshrines. Much has already been written on Merton’s ambivalence toward technology,¹⁴ but his choice of “privilege” as a core “spiritual root of protest” deserves greater exposure.

In outlining his thoughts on privilege for this occasion,¹⁵ Merton focused on what he called “the privileged collectivity.” This term is significant, since he viewed “collectivities” as the domain of alienated

12. Thomas Merton, *Gandhi on Non-Violence* (New York: New Directions, 1964) 3-31.

13. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966).

14. On this topic, see especially Paul Dekar, *Thomas Merton: Twentieth-Century Wisdom for Twenty-First-Century Living* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011) and Phillip M. Thompson, *Returning to Reality: Thomas Merton’s Wisdom for a Technological World* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012), as well as the essays gathered in *The Merton Annual* 24 (2011).

15. Unless separately noted, material in this section is taken from Gordon Oyer, *Pursuing the Spiritual Roots of Protest: Merton, Berrigan, Yoder, and Muste at the Gethsemani Abbey Peacemakers Retreat* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014) 113-22, 241-42, 247-49.

individuals and social constructs that further the illusions of “mass-man.” They contrast with “communities” of persons devoted to responsibility for others and compassionate forgiveness.¹⁶ Merton’s outline rested on three postures from which to consider privilege. The first involves a sense of *choseness* that accompanies privilege, which contrasts with the social exclusion or refusal of those not considered chosen. Merton felt the Bible associated the privileged collectivity’s sense of choseness with their “*avaricium*” or greed. According to one biblical scholar, Merton’s use of this word implies that he had in mind not so much the personal vice of greed, but the concrete and existential economic injustice that results from it, as reviled by Old Testament prophets.¹⁷ He also quoted from the Magnificat to remind his listeners that, in response, the Lord would “put down the mighty from their thrones.” Merton listed biblical examples of those who considered themselves chosen in relation to certain others, including Jews in relation to gentiles, Pharisees to sinners, Jews to Muslims (referencing the story of Abraham sending Hagar and Ishmael away into the desert), and gentiles to Jews (alluding to the later posture of dispersed Western Christianity). He also offered three contemporary examples of privileged relationships, now along economic, racial and technological, rather than religious, lines – the 6% holding (in 1964) more than half of U.S. income in relation to the other 94%, white to black, and the white to the “undeveloped,” or those who lack modernized structures of wealth and technology.

Merton then transitioned to explore certain dynamics of privilege and their consequences. He began by considering the nature of “hope and the deformation of hope,” referencing St. John of the Cross. He connected John’s despairing dark night of the soul, which results from loss

16. See *NSC* 53-55; *DQ* 178; William H. Shannon, “Person,” in William H. Shannon, Christine M. Bochen and Patrick F. O’Connell, *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002) 356-57.

17. David Rensberger email, 4 May 2015. According to Dr. Rensberger (former professor of New Testament at the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta): “In the digital editions of the Vulgate that I have, the term is always *avaritia* rather than *avaricium*, and that seems in fact to be the standard Latin word. Merton must have been working from memory here, and his memory was crossing Latin with French. But *avaritia* does function in very particular ways in the Latin Bible, especially the Old Testament. In the OT, it always translates the Hebrew word *betsa*, which means ‘profit, especially profit from injustice or oppression.’ . . . On the whole, I’d be pretty confident that Merton has Old Testament texts in mind, perhaps specifically some of those from the prophets. I have no idea what his habits of Bible-reading were, whether he just listened to the texts read in the office or went reading through the scriptures himself. But either way, his picking out of this word (which occurs at most 16 times in the Vulgate OT) shows a real alertness to themes of injustice.”

of hope in our own capacity to triumph, with those who lack privilege. When “pressed to the wall”¹⁸ by those who exercise privilege, the resulting despair of the non-privileged points them toward hope as their only recourse. Merton asked whether their hope will lead them to “seek an opening after the manner of power or of ‘water,’” which seeps unnoticed through cracks and crevices.

Merton next borrowed a concept introduced to him by Louis Massignon, a French Catholic mystic and scholar of Islam – the *point vierge*, or virginal point. Massignon had personally observed the encroachment of Western economic and technical power upon Muslim experience as it pressed Islam further against the wall until it “reached the virginal point, the center of the soul, where despair corners the heart.” At the peacemakers retreat, Merton related this generally to the force exerted by those with privilege and how the despair that pressure prompts within the non-privileged often pushes them toward reliance on little more than hope. He suggested, for example, that Western and Soviet pressure on China, which motivated pursuit of China’s own atomic arsenal, might offer another example of technical privilege pushing others toward despair. Merton also shared an Islamic belief that experiencing five “privations” – humanity, poverty, sickness, sleep, death – makes room for “the divine visitation.”¹⁹ Merton implies in these comments that the exercise of privilege alienates from God, whereas the resulting dereliction of the non-privileged pushes them toward potential encounters with God.

Merton also cautioned against “being a ‘Christian’ in Kierkegaard’s sense,” or one absorbed into the myths of mass society and the social privilege that comes from loyalty to those myths – a position counter to “obeying the Word and Spirit of God.” For Merton, as for Kierkegaard, the conventional “Christian” has also forfeited the right, and perhaps even the capacity, to protest against the excesses and delusions of mass society and of those who hold privilege within it.

Merton’s second key stance regarding privilege was a call to *reciprocity* between the privileged and the non-privileged. This must be a genuine reciprocity in the spirit, which yields mutual participation in the concrete personal lives of each. It is not to be confused with one-sided paternalism, nor can it follow rigid and doctrinaire legalisms or mechanisms. Instead,

18. The phrase “pushed to the wall” does not appear in Merton’s preparatory notes, but it appears in all three sets of surviving retreat participant notes taken on Merton’s presentation.

19. The “five privations” are listed in Merton’s speaking outline; for Massignon’s reference to them see Gabriel Marcel, *Tragic Wisdom and Beyond*, trans. Stephen Jolin and Peter McCormick (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973) 116.

genuine reciprocity is grounded in the freedom and liberty of each. It relies on “unplanned encounters,” on “risk,” on a “breakthrough given by God” rather than through calculated management by the holders of privilege. As a barrier to reciprocity, Merton explains, to have privilege is to be under judgment, and the judgment of privilege is that it “fossilizes.” It hardens. It blinds one to authentic relationship with others. It creates paternalistic assumptions that the privileged can only give and not also receive in genuine reciprocity. This blindness makes the privileged incapable of using their privilege to heal others. Quoting Massignon, Merton concluded that therefore, “We cannot rely on the witness of a privileged collectivity.”

Underlying this fossilized blindness is a failure to grasp the inverted nature of *true* spiritual privilege granted by God, who actually locates it in the stranger, the younger son, the one who “has not.” It is they who “come with the message and love of God.” The privilege that Abraham held was not located in any status granted from his visitation by angels. Rather, it was found in his persistent confidence that at least ten just men might be found amid the decadent and inhospitable populace of Sodom. To pursue genuine reciprocity, Merton calls for a readiness to abandon abstract theory in favor of real human experience, detach from reliance on privilege, and remain open to “meeting the ‘other’ who has an ‘answer’” from God to offer. In detaching from privilege, we can “recognize the higher value of sharing in the suffering and struggle of others *to heal the visible nihilism of which it is a symbol.*” Merton then names the “*real root*” of protest as “identification with the underprivileged” and “dedication to their ‘universe’ as ‘epiphany’” and “as an intercessory for us.” The integrity of our reliance on this spiritual root of protest is tested in our suffering and our refusal of privilege, in our desire to “protest against the arrogance and stupidity of the privileged,” and in placement of our “true hope in the spiritual privilege of the poor.” In contrast, roots of protest grounded in official policies of either church or political party or in our need to clearly identify with a particular group or in our “servility to [a particular political] orthodoxy” all prove inadequate.

Finally, Merton’s third key stance toward privilege leads beyond reciprocity toward transcendent *substitution*. In relinquishing one’s own sense of chosenness and seeking genuine reciprocity with the non-privileged, protest becomes an act of sacrificial substitution on behalf of *both* innocent victims *and* their oppressor-enemy. Such acts not only liberate the oppressed, they also seek the spiritual good of the oppressor who is confronted through protest. For Merton, the protester plays out the role of the ram substituted for Isaac; of the paschal lamb, Christ, within

whom evil was conveyed and recapitulated; of various saints who substituted themselves for prisoners and captives. From this posture, protest becomes a matter of “presenting oneself in the place of others before the judgment of God by taking upon oneself the consequences of their sin, [i.e.,] their anger and hate.”

And so, at this gathering of peacemakers, Merton portrays privilege as an illusory product of the mass society that distracts us from attending to the voice of God and realizing our personhood. If we accept that the myth of human progress reflects a core element of Merton’s mass society, his critique links privilege to this myth, which lauds technological power and ever-expanding wealth, and sees the poor and the racially marginalized and the “undeveloped” as an embarrassment and anathema. Merton’s antidote to the blinding and fossilizing power of privilege is to renounce it and engage in genuine reciprocity with the non-privileged, who carry an alternative message. Only then may we clearly confront *at its root* the evil anchored within our mass technological society and its narcissistic humanism – its myth of human progress.

A Voice Still Needed

Once Merton’s social critique is viewed through a lens of engaging the myth of human progress that drives our daily assumptions, his rejection of this myth becomes recognizable beyond matters of technology and privilege. One sees it in his nuanced views on the work and followers of Teilhard de Chardin,²⁰ in his qualified ambivalence toward cities – the womb of progressive, modern experience,²¹ in the “environmental vision”²² woven throughout his life’s work, and in his later reflections on

20. Compare Merton’s affirmation in “The Universe as Epiphany” (*L&L* 171-84) of Teilhard’s views on engaged human participation in the material world with his hesitation in “Teilhard’s Gamble” (*L&L* 185-91) to embrace Teilhard’s “blind faith in [the human species’] predetermined evolutionary success” as equivalent to “the theological hope of the Gospels” (190-91). See also Merton’s journal comments appreciating Teilhard’s “affirmation of the ‘holiness of matter’” and noting “opposition . . . to naïve Teilhardianism” [*DWL* 260 (6/23/1965)].

21. Merton’s indebtedness to the city’s dynamic and creative milieu must be balanced by his critique of how it can also deaden and crush human experience. See David Joseph Belcastro, “Praying the Questions: Merton of Times Square, Last of the Urban Hermits,” *The Merton Annual* 20 (2007) 123-50; Kathleen Deignan, CND, “Cosmopolitan: Thomas Merton’s Urbane Spirituality,” *The Merton Seasonal* 39.3 (Fall 2014) 15-21; Eric Anglada, “Cities of the Dead: Thomas Merton and the Crisis of Urban Civilization,” *The Merton Seasonal* 37.3 (Fall 2012) 35-42.

22. See especially Monica Weis, SSSJ, *The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011).

indigenous human experience.²³

Perhaps one of Merton's clearest expressions of ambivalence toward our myth of human progress, though, comes in a 1968 letter written just ten months before his death. Futurist Barbara Hubbard²⁴ had solicited Merton's opinion on humanity's "birth into space," or what Merton called the era's "space age mystique." In his measured response, Merton noted "two broad kinds of ethical consciousness" at play. The first, "a *millennial* consciousness," views the past as "provisional and preparatory" and anticipates instead "the new creation, the millennium, the coming of the Kingdom, the withering away of the State." It calls for "acts which destroy and repudiate the past" as well as "acts which open you up to the future." The second, "an *ecological* consciousness," cautions that in "preparing this great event you run the risk of forgetting . . . [w]e belong to a community of living beings and we owe our fellow members in this community the respect and honor due to them." It warns that we cannot betray this community "by careless and stupid exploitation for short-term commercial, military, or technological ends which will be paid for by irreparable loss in living species and natural resources."

This letter clearly shows Merton's priority for respectful engagement with all of life over its domination by humans. Were Merton giving his retreat presentation four years later, we suspect he may have included "human in relation to non-human" (as well as "male to female") in his list of privileged/non-privileged dichotomies. When we couple Merton's ecological consciousness with his understanding of personhood and the alienating role of privilege and its technological handmaidens, Merton's voice remains more relevant and needed than ever. Every day we read and hear of technological and social challenges to our sense of security, privacy and privilege. We realize with greater clarity that "irreparable" damage to our own human species may soon be added to the price of "careless and stupid exploitation for short-term . . . ends." We see the desperation and rage of the non-privileged spill into our city streets from Ferguson to Baltimore, across borders into Europe and North America, and onto desert battlefields from Iraq and Syria to Gaza as expressions of a despairing hope by those pressed to the wall.

Behind this din, Thomas Merton's voice still cautions against reac-

23. See for example Merton's *Ishi Means Man* (Greensboro, NC: Unicorn Press, 1976); *The Geography of Lograire* (New York: New Dimensions, 1969); "Cargo Cults of the South Pacific" (*L&L* 80-94).

24. February 16, 1968 letter to Barbara Hubbard in Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994) 73-75.

tionary, violent, fear-based responses that merely intensify the sacrifice of human persons in concrete experience for the sake of humanity in the abstract. Rather, as he advised peacemakers in 1964, Merton names confronting white, Western, modernized privilege (along with other expressions of it that we would include today) as fundamental to challenging these threats at their ultimate root and cultivating our own personhood. For those of us who hold such privilege, Merton suggests that the first step in confronting it requires squarely facing this privilege and then beginning to relinquish it. Or perhaps at the least, it requires an attempt to set it aside long enough to seek and hear the voice of God in the non-privileged – in those human and non-human beings whom the myth of human progress has pushed to the wall, marginalized and deemed expendable in its name.