

My own limited knowledge and experience related to these issues feed directly into my reaction to Dr. Cortis' suggestions. The language of high ideals must be retained – and not just as language but as reality. The education offered must be of high quality and delivered by men and women who are worthy mentors and role models. And every institution of higher learning will certainly appeal to its faith – faith in God, faith in its institutional goals, faith in its constituency, etc. This is only as it should be. But faith without works, we must remember, is dead.

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Thomas Merton's Allegory of Adam: Its Theology and Implications¹

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Few religious figures in the twentieth century were as influential (or eclectic) as Thomas Merton. Living in a small Cistercian monastery near Louisville, KY, Merton was a Trappist monk, a Christian spiritualist, a Zen Buddhist, a poet (in both English and French), a social critic, a literary critic, and an artist (posthumous treatments of his photography and painting have been published). Before his untimely death in December of 1968, he was in personal correspondence with some of the most influential people in the world. His theology has impacted several generations (most impressively, this one), and vigorous study of his writing still continues.

This brief essay has to do with the ways in which Merton read Scripture, specifically the second creation narrative (which I term the "Adam Narrative"²) in Genesis 2:4-3:24. Of particular focus is a book that Merton published nearly fifty years ago entitled *The New Man*³ because it is Merton's most thorough treatment of the Adam narrative. This essay generally introduces Merton's theology, outlining how Adam serves as Merton's primary allegory for establishing the function of existential unity with God. It concludes with several potential implications of this theology for the Stone-Campbell Movement as it considers questions of exegesis, prayer, and sacraments.

On the outset, it is important to introduce two of the theological tiers that comprise the very general scaffolding onto which Merton builds his theology. The first tier in Merton's theological scaffolding is the relationship between what he calls the "true self" and the "false self."⁴ Merton thought that each person has within him or her "war," of sorts, between reality (identification in and union with Christ) and unreality (the mental and spiritual state that sinfulness has created within humanity). Merton's understanding of this dualistic self is rooted in an expressly Pauline reading of Genesis 2-3.⁵

¹ An earlier version of this essay was presented at the Conference for the *Journal of Faith and the Academy* on February 19, 2010 at Faulkner University in Montgomery, AL.

² I use the overtly masculine phrase the "Adam Narrative" because Merton saw the narrative of Genesis 2-3 as having to do primarily with God and his relationship with Adam. Both of the other characters, Eve and the serpent, seem (in his mind) only to be present for purposes of reacting to Adam. This is, of course, a shame—especially in light of some of the more recent feminist readings that argue for the centrality of the Eve character.

³ Thomas Merton, *The New Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1961). It is now in its twentieth printing, the latest being from 1999.

⁴ For a helpful introduction to Merton's theology of self see: William H. Shannon, "Self," in *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia*, ed. William H. Shannon, Christine M. Bochen, and Patrick F. O'Connell (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 417-420; see also Anne E. Carr, *A Search for Wisdom and Spirit: Thomas Merton's Theology of the Self* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).

⁵ Bonnie Thurston, "Thomas Merton and St. Paul," *The Merton Seasonal* 34.1 (2009), 17: "The concept of the true and false self, so fundamental in Merton's spiritual anthropology, is based on a Pauline understanding of

Adam has actually played both representative roles: he is both a positive (pre-Fall) and negative (post-Fall) exemplar for Christian theology. It is this idea that Merton treats in *The New Man*, which is a book-length articulation of his theology of identity.⁶

The second tier in Merton's theological scaffolding is his understanding of contemplation. It is perhaps Merton's most well known point of discussion, and it is a topic about which he wrote frequently.⁷ Contemplation connotes a mystical⁸ experience for Merton; it is the term with which he labels an existential union with God. This union might take a number of forms, but most commonly it is attained through reflection, prayer, and meditation. The reality of contemplation impacts virtually all of Merton's theology.

Regarding the literary nature of the Adam narrative, Merton seems to presuppose the Documentary Hypothesis. On more than one occasion he mentions the various authors of Genesis (he even labels certain texts according to the use of the divine name *Elohim*⁹). Thus, Merton clearly does not hold to a literal "Adam" figure. Merton reads the Adam narrative theologically—more to the point, allegorically. Merton wrote in *New Seeds of Contemplation*,

The early chapters of Genesis (far from being a pseudo-scientific account of the way the world was supposed to have come into being) are precisely a poetic and symbolic revelation, a completely true, though not literal, revelation of God's view of the universe and of his intentions for man. The point of these beautiful chapters is that God made the world as a garden in which He himself took delight. He made man in His own image and likeness, as an artist, a worker, *homo faber*,

person as 'first and second Adam,' that is, of person as 'fallen' or 'unregenerate' before Christ and 'saved' or 'transformed' (the latter probably the better term anthropologically) in Christ."

⁶ *The New Man* is a progressive argument that begins with the "war within us," and concludes with Merton's theology of Easter, and Christ's victory over this war. The book treats, from a theological perspective, Merton's understanding of how one attains his or her true identity in Christ by becoming mystically (existentially) united with God.

⁷ See specifically Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) and *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Doubleday, 1966; reprint, New York: Image Books, 1989).

⁸ The term "mysticism" (and therefore the adjectives "mystic" and "mystical") is particularly difficult to define. Merton himself conceded this confusion in an oft-cited foreword he wrote to William Johnston's *The Mysticism of the Cloud of Unknowing* (New York: Desclée, 1967), vii: "mystical experience has been confused with every kind of emotional, pseudo-religious, aesthetic or supposedly extra-sensory perception." And, to complicate matters, Merton's understanding of the nature of mysticism shifted alongside his growing interests in Zen Buddhism. Merton often uses the terms "mysticism" and "contemplation" interchangeably, and so will I in this essay. My working definition of Merton's view of contemplation is, loosely, an existential experience with the divine in which God acts upon the mystic in a direct and guiding way. But Merton is quick to admit that mystical experiences are not common, and they involve a lifetime to engender and understand. See William H. Shannon, "Mysticism," in *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia*, 314-315. See also chapters 1-3 in Merton's *New Seeds of Contemplation*.

⁹ Merton, *The New Man*, 58.

as the gardener of paradise. He let man decide for himself how created things were to be interpreted, understood and used. . . .¹⁰

The Adam narrative is, therefore, a present reality in Merton's mind. Thus, Merton sees the Adam narrative as representative of the current relationship of God with humanity.

Adam in *The New Man*

The Adam narrative is Merton's primary allegory, representing not only his complex anthropology, but also his theology of identity. These assumptions certainly do not play out only in *The New Man*; they are present in almost all of his major theological writings. This allegory serves as the basis for a number of his other ideologies.

Merton sees Adam as simultaneously being a representation of all humanity and a type pointing to Christ. This dualistic function accomplishes not only a high anthropology, but also a Christology built on that anthropology. Adam is the image of that anthropology. For Merton, Adam is every person. He argues:

All men were united in Adam. All were 'one image' of God in Adam. 'Adam is in us all.' We all sinned in Adam. Adam is saved and redeemed in us all. What does all this mean? It means simply, as St. Bernard says, that man's creation in the image of God (*ad imaginem*) constituted all men as created 'copies' of the Word Who is the eternal and uncreated Image of the Father. . . .¹¹

With the phrase, "image of God," Merton references Genesis 1:27—an interesting focal image given that it comes from the first creation narrative (Genesis 1:1-2:3).¹² Merton spends a good deal of time in *The New Man* interpreting the Adam narrative through the lens of "image and likeness."¹³

¹⁰ Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 290-1.

¹¹ Merton, *The New Man*, 133.

¹² One would have expected Merton to use one of the images from the second creation narrative ("breath of life," etc.). Merton's exegetical method was sporadic, at best. Although Merton dealt extensively with the Bible, most notably Paul, he never articulated a clear hermeneutical lens through which he read Scripture. Perhaps the closest he comes would be his *Opening the Bible* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1970). As the previous quotation illustrates, however, the Cistercian fathers (St. Bernard) were clearly an influence in his reading. To complicate matters, there has been surprisingly little written on the subject of Merton's use of Scripture. See also Bonnie Thurston, "Thomas Merton and St. Paul," 14.

¹³ See specifically the chapters entitled "Image and Likeness" and "Free Speech [Parrhesia]."

Merton argues here for the presence of God's image within humanity—a theme that he frequently intermingled with several of his other ideologies. He thought that God places his image within all people, which they either acknowledge or reject based on their identification (or not) with Christ. This acknowledgement or rejection is what defines the true and false selves. While at times Adam plays the role of positive exemplar in Merton's mind, in this context Merton sees Adam representing the false self, and Christ representing the true self.

Merton centers his theology of redemption on the idea of unification as it is presented in Adam's state before the Fall. This unification takes two forms: unification between people, and unification between God and humanity.¹⁴ He argues that the unity with which Adam interacted with Eve and God in the garden is an example of mysticism. He even goes so far as to say that "Adam was first of all a contemplative..."¹⁵ Merton's main end is, therefore, the existential union of humanity and God with humanity. In fact, the original title to *The New Man* was "*Existential Communion*."¹⁶

Merton laments the existential division that occurred in the Fall, the obvious byproduct of which is the indictment of original sin¹⁷ that Merton sees plaguing humanity. God created humanity with his own image, and it is that image that original sin has suppressed. When Adam sinned, he brought falsehood ("unreality") to the forefront of the minds of people—at which point they began to live as if God had not made them in his image. For Merton, nothing could be more serious than this introduction of "unreality" because it signals a division between God (who is intrinsically "Real") and humanity. In fact, it is this division that crystallizes the effects of the Fall in Merton's mind.¹⁸

But this carries with it an alternate reality: it is this image that opens the door to God anew through contemplation. Following Paul's lead in Romans 5, Merton looks to the Christ (the Second Adam) to redeem the actions of the first. Adam is not only the representative of humanity; he is also a type of Christ. Just as all of humanity was united under Adam in sin, humanity has its new identity in Christ. Continuing the previous quote,

Therefore Adam, who contains all human nature in himself, and is therefore 'humanity,' is created in the image of the Image of God, Who has already decided, from all eternity, to become man in Jesus Christ.

Hence in his very creation, Adam is a representation of Christ Who is to come, And we too, from the very moment we come into existence, are potential representations of Christ simply because we possess the human nature which was created in Him and was assumed by Him in the Incarnation, saved by Him on the Cross and glorified by Him in His Ascension.¹⁹

This complex ideology carries with it an important soteriological and mystical byproduct. Despite the effects of sin within humanity, Merton sees the unity that Adam had with God as the model for attainable existential unity with God here and now in the form of contemplation. In addition to the anthropological implications of Merton's reading of the Adam narrative, he sees it as an allegory for contemporary mysticism. The quest of the narrative is the unification of God with humanity. He argues,

Although there is no 'natural' bridge between the natural and the supernatural, the concrete situation in which man finds himself, as a nature created for a supernatural end, makes anguish inevitable. He cannot rest unless he rests in God: not merely the God of nature, but the living God, not the God that can be objectified in a few abstract notions, but the God Who is above all concept. Not the God of a mere notional or moral union, but the God Who becomes one Spirit with our own soul! This alone is the reality for which we are made. . . . The spiritual anguish of man has no cure but mysticism.²⁰

Merton argues, therefore, for a realized soteriology. He sees the redemptive process as accomplishing the purpose of mystical union between God and humanity through contemplation. Continuing that thought, Merton writes,

If we would return to God, and find ourselves in Him, we must reverse Adam's journey, we must go back by the way he came. The path lies through the center of our own soul. Adam withdrew into himself from God and then passed through himself and went forth into creation. We must withdraw ourselves (in the right Christian sense) from exterior things, and pass through the center of our souls to find God.²¹

¹⁴ Patrick F. O'Connell, "Redemption," in *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia*, 381-384.

¹⁵ Merton, *The New Man*, 77.

¹⁶ William H. Shannon, "New Man, The" in *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia*, 322.

¹⁷ Merton deals extensively with the implications of original sin in *The New Man*. See specifically the chapters entitled "Promethean Theology" and "Spirit in Bondage."

¹⁸ Patrick F. O'Connell, "Fall," in *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia*, 153-154.

¹⁹ Merton, *The New Man*, 133-134. The grammatical errors in this quotation were original to Merton's text.

²⁰ Merton, *The New Man*, 113-4.

²¹ Merton, *The New Man*, 118.

In Merton's reading, Christ's resurrection not only unites us with God in the *eschaton*; it does so in the here and now through contemplation. In contemplation, therefore, humanity attains the same existential union with God that Adam had before the fall.²² Merton terms this "free speech." He argues that, "The Second Adam . . . reintegrated man into the reality of the spiritual order. He restored man to his original existential communion with God, the source of life, and thus opened again to him the closed gate of Paradise."²³

Contemplation (mystical unity) signifies, therefore, a further identity than simply seeing humanity as Adam. In a climactic monologue Merton argues that,

The great work of uniting the souls of the elect with their Head in one Mystical Body is the true task of the New Adam. The old Adam without any effort on his part, came into being and found in himself all mankind, the whole of human nature...The New Adam creates himself, not only by the work and suffering and triumph of the Head, Jesus Christ, but also by the labors and sufferings and cooperation of each one of the members. . . . Each one of us has his part in this labor, for we, in fact, are all the New Adam.²⁴

The contemplative becomes the Second Adam, Christ. Mysticism accomplishes a redemptive function as it embraces within the contemplative his or her image of God—the true self.

Potential Implications for the Stone-Campbell Movement

In keeping with the theme of this journal,²⁵ I conclude by considering a few implications that Merton's thought might have on the relationship between faith and the academy, and what these implications might say to the Stone-Campbell Movement. Merton speaks specifically to the relationship between mysticism and the academy. In *New Seeds of Contemplation* he argues that,

Contemplation, far from being opposed to theology, is in fact the normal perfection of theology. We must not separate intellectual study of divinely revealed truth and contemplative experience of that truth as

if they could never have anything to do with one another. On the contrary they are simply two aspects of the same thing. Dogmatic and mystical theology, or theology and "spirituality" are not to be set apart in mutually exclusive categories, as if mysticism were for saintly women and theological study were for practical but, alas, unsaintly men. This fallacious division perhaps explains much that is actually lacking in both theology and spirituality. But the two belong together, just as body and soul belong together. Unless the two are united, there is no fervor, no life and no spiritual value in theology, no substance, no meaning and no sure orientation in the contemplative life.²⁶

The first implication is the need to consider a new relationship between mysticism and the Protestant, Christian academy. Long has there been an unfortunate disconnect between these two entities. The Stone-Campbell tradition—a fellowship that seems to place so much emphasis on a cognitive understanding of God (especially within Churches of Christ)—has certainly felt this disconnect. James Thompson argued that,

A commitment to rational inquiry has been a distinguishing feature of the movement. Intellectual leaders did not speak of the illumination by the Spirit that occurs in the communal reading of Scripture, but employed rational inquiry with the tools of logic and linguistics. . . .²⁷

So what might it look like for Merton to speak to the Stone-Campbell Movement? Perhaps he would, as Thompson insinuated in the above quote, speak to the Holy Spirit's guiding role as the church hears Scripture. Merton would certainly argue for the formative nature of *Lectio Divina*. Other potential influences might have to do with prayer and exegesis. Merton's concept of "free speech" might serve as a helpful metaphor (or conversation starter) for a discussion of the theological nature of prayer. Especially beneficial might be the concept of "centering prayer," which Merton (among many other contemplatives) references quite frequently.²⁸ With regard to exegesis, Merton's allegorical method could renew conversations about this ancient method of reading Scripture—welcoming new ways to bring Scripture to life.

Also the highly sacramental nature of Merton's theology makes him a comfortable conversation partner for the Stone-Campbell Movement, which is

²² Merton, *The New Man*, 150, says, "The creation of the world, of Adam and of Paradise is therefore simply a shadow of that substantial reality which is to be actualized in Christ, and His Mystical Body."

²³ Merton, *The New Man*, 151.

²⁴ Merton, *The New Man*, 155.

²⁵ I refer the reader to the inside cover of this issue for a detailed description of the purpose of the *Journal of Faith and the Academy*.

²⁶ Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 254-5.

²⁷ James Thompson, "What is Church of Christ Scholarship?" *Restoration Quarterly* (2004), 37.

²⁸ For a practical introduction, see *Centering Prayer in Daily Life and Ministry*, ed. Gustave Reininger (New York: Continuum, 2006).

indeed a sacramental fellowship.²⁹ Although there are certainly differences in the Stone-Campbell and Roman Catholic understandings of sacrament, there are still a number of points of consistency. For example, the penultimate chapter of *The New Man* (entitled "Sacramental Illumination") is Merton's theology of baptism. It would certainly find an appreciative readership in many Stone-Campbell circles given the high priority that Merton places on baptism as part of the process of redemption. Conversations with Catholic tradition could not only deepen our appreciation for the sacraments, but they could also restore the proper "theocentric"³⁰ understanding of them—reframing them as a means by which God bestows grace upon humanity. And perhaps most beneficially, a discussion with Catholic tradition could engender a more ecumenical dimension to our studies. At a time when the issue of ecumenism is on the minds of many in the Stone-Campbell Movement, perhaps it is fitting to consider writers as diverse as Thomas Merton.

Merton's reading of the Adam narrative could also be a meaningful conversation partner as the Stone-Campbell Movement considers soteriology and eschatology. And given that he sees community as a fundamental aspect of redemption, it may strengthen our already high ecclesiology. Within our tradition, Merton's concept of contemplation could raise questions as to the possible integration of mysticism into decision-making, discipleship, etc. Perhaps in the future it could be the offering of the Stone-Campbell Movement to integrate a mystical element, a mysterious humility, to the study of religion, Scripture, and spirituality.

The second, and final, implication of reading Merton's allegory has to do with the function of exemplars (those who take the relationship between faith and the academy seriously). A list of possible exemplars is limited only by the imaginations of scholars ready to investigate them, but Thomas Merton must surely be included.

There are a number of aspects to Merton that put him in a uniquely beneficial role as one such exemplar.³¹ First, and perhaps most generally, the constantly evolving nature of Merton's theology shows his open-mindedness—something for which we should all strive as those who take both spirituality and academic study seriously. Second, Merton's wide-ranging interests and abilities make him a deep and interdisciplinary subject with many areas for

investigation. Merton did not treat theology only in essay and book form. He also wrote letters, prayers, fiction, and poetry as he developed his theology. Third (and finally), it is also important to remember that Merton was a monk, not merely an academic theologian. In his mind, theology belongs in both the academy *and* the church. Although he held a graduate degree and teaching positions at the university level, Merton wrote theology for both contemplatives and the lay reader—a helpful balance that encouraged good writing. In this respect, Merton, like Bonhoeffer, is approachable to various levels of reader.

Conclusion

Rooted both in the depths of his tradition and the rich language and imagery of Scripture, Thomas Merton articulated his mystical theology from an allegorical reading of the Adam narrative in Genesis 2:4-3:24. His reading is at once challenging and graceful. In his mind, Adam not only points to all of humanity, but also Christ. Adam also models a unity with God that transcends human relationships. This unity exemplifies the various potentialities of mysticism for the contemplative life. Through contemplation, redemption becomes a contemporary ideal wherein humanity finds its identity in Christ.

As a contemplative himself, Merton was sensitive to mystical elements within theology that tend to be overlooked in the Stone-Campbell Movement. Perhaps his allegory could speak to Stone-Campbell theology. Perhaps Merton could serve as an exemplar of alternative ways of articulating theology. If nothing else, perhaps it is time for a careful interaction with this man who serves as an important witness to the possibilities of faith within academic discourse.

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²⁹ The term "sacrament" is often an uncomfortable one for those in the Stone-Campbell Movement, especially in Churches of Christ. See here John Mark Hicks, "Stone-Campbell Sacramental Theology," *Restoration Quarterly* 50 (2008), 35-48. In this helpful article, Hicks argues that three particular sacraments (baptism, the Eucharist, and the "Lord's day") are fundamental in the theological conscience of the Stone-Campbell Movement.

³⁰ To use Hicks's term. See his "Stone-Campbell Sacramental Theology," 36.

³¹ A good starting point would be *The New Man*. It has received surprisingly little scholarly attention in comparison to some of his other books and essays.