

# The Flowering of Natural Contemplation: Some Notes on *Theoria Physike* in Thomas Merton's Unpublished *An Introduction to Christian Mysticism*

By Donald P. St. John

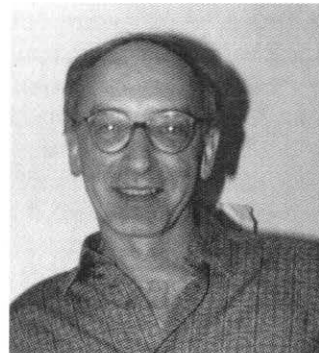
Several years ago I was researching Merton's ideas on nature and place at the Merton Center. Realizing that some of the material I had access to had not been published or even widely alluded to elsewhere, I decided to prepare a short synopsis of one of my "finds." Merton offered a course in mysticism to the novices at Gethsemani in the early 1960s. His lecture notes for this course bear the title *An Introduction to Christian Mysticism*. Section 8 is called "Contemplation and the Cosmos." While in this section Merton's exposition of the notion of *theoria physike* primarily relies upon Maximus the Confessor, he also draws on his studies of Gregory of Nyssa and Evagrius Ponticus. Naturally, my research interests at the time influenced what I took from this section.

Near the beginning of the section Merton expresses his concern that, among the monks of his day, the lack of a capacity for "natural contemplation" or *theoria physike* contributes to a "stunting" of their spiritual growth. He contends that it is only with the flowering of contemplation on the level of symbols, types, and *logoi* that a person can be "fully and integrally prepared for *theologia* without forms, beyond all ideas and symbols."<sup>1</sup> Merton elaborates on this central thesis, both drawing upon Maximus and creatively engaging this ancient figure in a dialogue with modernity. Thereby, Merton expands on and offers fresh insight into the Patristic notion of *theoria physike*.<sup>2</sup>

What is natural contemplation? Merton claims that it is a contemplation (*theoria*) according to nature (*physis*) and a knowledge (*gnosis*) of the divine as present "in and through nature" and "in history." It is a human wisdom (*multiformis sapentia*) whereby one grasps directly the wisdom of God as Creator and Redeemer (56). Natural contemplation is necessary for both the completion of our moral transformation and the entrance into the life of contemplation. As a spiritual contemplation it proceeds from love and is only available to those whose minds and hearts are "pure." In this it differs from the scientific understanding of nature which "is only intellectual and accessible to the impure as well as to the pure." *Theoria physike* cannot be characterized simplistically either as mystical, passive, and supernatural or as intellectual, active, and natural. Merton calls its operation a manifestation of a "synergy" between the divine and human, faith and nature (57).

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When Merton contends that natural contemplation is “natural” for humans, he means that it is a mode of awareness intended for humans by God. It is “proper” to humans as children of God and was theirs in paradise. This implies that before aspiring to *theologia*, or the highest level of contemplation, one must become fully human, which means being “restored first of all to this ‘natural’ contemplation of the cosmos” (58).

Natural contemplation, then, is the recovery of the Edenic mode of consciousness-and-being in which no radical separation exists between God, humanity, and nature. The universe is meant to be diaphanous. According to Maximus, the seventh-century “Father of Byzantine mystics,” original sin did not damage “this unique masterpiece which is this visible world in which God manifests Himself by a silent revelation,” notes Merton (57). Although original sin did lead to a “loss” of this Edenic consciousness in humans, those who are pure in heart recover something of this “natural contemplation,” being oriented towards the knowledge of God present in nature.

In the light of this knowledge, all creatures “are good and pure,” says Merton. Maximus defended his Edenic view of nature by pointing to the vision of St. Peter wherein God revealed to Peter that there are no unclean animals. However, this “external” vision depends upon an internal, active detachment. But this detachment should not be mistaken for indifference, says Merton. The biblical understanding of the inherent goodness and purity of creatures does not permit a “negative indifference” towards them on our part, but demands “a positive awareness, by love, of the value of creatures, divinely given to them” (61). The *logoi* of things are internally orienting them to unity in God’s love (60). The *logoi* of things are the *Logos* (Christ as Word) present in them.

Merton expands on these ideas and claims that natural contemplation “is demanded by the cosmos itself and by history.” Why is this so? Because, if we cannot “know creatures by this spiritual *gnosis* they will be frustrated of their end” (57). Natural contemplation, therefore, is of central importance to the human “spiritualization and restoration of the cosmos.” This becomes more clear when we realize that this mode of knowledge cannot be separated from love or from our behavior. Merton emphasizes that “*the right use of creatures* is essential to the proper understanding of them” (61). In short, *theoria* is incomplete without *praxis*.

Furthermore, as a vision of the cosmos, natural contemplation “is essentially *sophianic*,” uniting “the hidden wisdom of God in things with the hidden light of wisdom” in ourselves. The result is a “*resplendent clarity*” which is “the presence of the Divine Wisdom” both “fully recognized and active.” Merton again reminds us that natural contemplation goes beyond intellectual awareness and exercises “a spiritualizing influence in the world” through the work of our hands. But our work must itself be “in accord with the *creative wisdom of God* in things and in history” (59).

This *sophianic* and contemplative orientation should free the monk from any “negative” attitude towards nature and history. The world “is no longer seen as merely material, hence as an obstacle that has to be grudgingly put up with. It is spiritual through and through.” But the destiny of this “spiritual” dimension is not simply given. Its future condition depends upon human spirituality. We ourselves must be “purified” if this spiritual movement in things is to be furthered “by our knowledge and love in our use of them” (59).

To attain “full maturity and integrity in the spiritual life,” each of us must unite *theoria* and *praxis*. But such an act is impossible if its referent is simply our interior state. Rather, our *praxis* must be in accord with the *logoi* of “external” realities. Merton reminds his monks that the *logoi* must be understood in the context of modern thought where both creation and history are perceived as dy-

dynamic and changing. We no longer exist in a static universe and should not understand the *logoi* within that model. This dynamic process manifests the action of the *Logos*, which, present in the *logoi*, imparts to things a direction and purpose, i.e., a *telos*.

The Christian interprets this *telos* in the context of Christ's Spirit having entered the dynamics of creation and human history. The *logoi* of things are now ordered toward their spiritualization and ultimate restoration in Christ. Things have come from God and are now returning to God. The old creation is being made new.

The Christian is called upon to participate in the spiritualization of all facets of life, including the political, artistic, and religious, notes Merton. The artist has a special vocation in relation to the *logoi* of things. He or she must be in tune with things both in their deepest center and in their mode of action, that is, in their *logoi* and their *tropoi*. Things have an inner logic placed there by their Creator. The artist must be sensitive to the unique voice or vocation of each being and must vigorously protest when things are being prevented from attaining their spiritual end by individual or societal misuse. Society must be held accountable for its "systematic obscuring and desecration of the *logoi* of things and of their sacred meaning" (63).

The artist's use of things depends upon and is sustained by his or her vision. That is, the technical gift of the maker is sustained by the spiritual gift of the seer. The artist grasps the inner *logos* of a being and manifests it in the form he or she gives to the work of art. Merton points to Shaker furniture, handicrafts, and buildings as examples of this fusing of spirit and technic, *theoria* and *praxis*. Even in the siting of their buildings, the Shakers evinced a sensitivity to the *logos* of a place. The Shaker barn is so tied to place and so fits into place that it "grasps and expresses the hidden *logos* of the valley or hillside...which forms its site." Such sensitivity was also found among Cistercians of the twelfth century, claims Merton (64). "Primitive" peoples, according to Merton, could also grasp their world and respond to it in this way. In fact, the works of the primitivist painter Le Douanier Rousseau are at least "an *analogy* of that *theoria* to which primitives are well disposed" (64).

Merton calls *theoria physike* a creative "synergy" that can occur on many levels, overcoming old oppositions: sense and spirit, seeing and doing, human activity and divine grace. For example, as sense, when subordinate to spirit, "attains the material object, the spirit attains to the spiritual *logos* of that object and the sense pleasure is forgotten" (65). The work of one's hands, the love of one's heart, and the clarity of one's mind combine in a human wisdom that itself is joined to the creative wisdom of God at work in nature and history.

Religious ritual is an example of and a model for the synthesis of creative and salvific forces. Therein, certain created realities through incorporation into a sacramental action participate in the mystery of salvation. Thus do they represent all creatures who groan for redemption by the children of God and who already "directly or indirectly with us" enter into the mystery of Christ. Merton points out that in our age, unfortunately, this groaning and expectation of creatures and created things are too often frustrated because our knowledge and use of them are not sophianic and truly soteriological (62).

The technological mind does not attend to "what" a thing is in itself, much less to its divine *telos*, but attends only to what a thing can become or how it can be used in the system of production. Modern technology exploits and manipulates things in accordance with a value system that is quantitative, pragmatic, and impersonal. This has created the great problem of our times, says Merton. Natural contemplation and proper use are being replaced by a demonic and pseudo-contemplative

mystique of technics and production. Change and “exchange” become ends in themselves, and all created beings including humans must serve them. Merton abhors the “centrality of destruction in this process” (62).

Merton goes on to claim that “the chief effort of Teilhard de Chardin in our time has been a noble striving to recover a view of the scientific world, the cosmos of the physicist, the geologist, the engineer, with interest centered on the *logos* of creation, and on *value, spirit*. An effort to convert the scientific view of the cosmos into a *wisdom*, without sacrificing anything of scientific objectivity or technological utility” (62). Teilhard, like Gregory of Nyssa, had a sense for the *theoteles logos*, which Merton defined as “that in the thing which comes from God and goes to God” (62).

Merton certainly had his differences with some followers of Teilhard who were too eager to baptize a technology that was destroying the earth. But Merton places Teilhard himself within a long line of natural and mystical theologians. By linking Teilhard’s sensitivity to nature with more ecologically benign technics, such as those of the Shakers, Merton suggests an alternative way to implement Teilhard’s vision. In doing so he seeks a reconciliation between contemplation and action, between personal spiritual development and the wise use of nature. The historical project, Merton implies, must simultaneously nurture the spiritual development of persons and serve the dynamic unfolding of a spiritual universe. Such a task demands the recovery of an old way of seeing both humanity and nature that under Merton’s pen becomes startlingly new.

Yet, this was Merton’s special genius. One sees it at work in these notes. His intuitive apprehension of a way to reconcile the values of Teilhard operating out of a contemporary cosmology and the values of a contemplative tradition often operating out of a static universe has, in fact, proven prophetic. One needs only think of the work of Thomas Berry who, while heavily indebted to Teilhard, emphasizes an ecological spirituality that combines a deep appreciation for the scientific narrative of creation with a sensitivity to the spiritual dimension of the earth and universe. Nor is it surprising that today, as Christians seek a more ecological theology, they show a renewed interest in theologians such as Maximus the Confessor and Gregory of Nyssa. Merton over thirty-five years ago struggled with some of these issues and found the rich seeds that have led to a contemporary flowering of *theoria physike*.

### Notes

1. Thomas Merton, *An Introduction to Christian Mysticism*, unpublished ts., Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine College, Louisville, 56; subsequent page references to this source are included parenthetically in the text.
2. In direct quotations from Merton’s notes I am following the accepted standards for italicizing Greek and Latin words and terms. Understandably, Merton was not concerned with consistency in these notes.