THOMAS MERTON: REFLECTIONS ON THE WAY OF PRAYER

In the Acts of the Apostles, the community of believers was at first known as "The Way". For example, we are told that Saint Paul obtained letters from the high priest "that would authorize him to arrest and take to Jerusalem any followers of the Way he could find, men or women" (9:2). Paul broke with the synagogue, Saint Luke tells us, "soon as they (the hardened unbelievers) began attacking the Way in front of others" (19:9). The practices of faith in Jesus resulted in a manner of life distinctive enough to be recognized by traditional Jews as forming an identifiable group of adherents within the Jewish community at first. The name Way continued to be used even after the break with the Synagogue. To believe in Christ Jesus marked off adherents to his teaching and so caused the early Christian body to live in a manner that represented a certain degree of separation from the world. Some three centuries later, after the belief in Christ was recognized by the Roman Empire, there arose a movement that came to be known as "anachoresis", 'separation,' a name that designates what we call today monastic life.

To live as a Christian meant to be separated from the ways of society, not only interiorly from its values and beliefs but also, in certain respects, from the lifestyle characteristic of those values. Jesus had set the pattern for his followers, leaving home, seeking solitude for the sake of more intense prayer, and traveling from place to place. Above all, the early Christians prayed in a manner that distinguished them from their neighbors. Although their prayer included the psalms and readings of the Synagogue, and was addressed to the same God, yet there was a distinguishing feature: they approached God as Father through his beloved Son Jesus, whom they invoked as Savior, 'Soter.' The prayer of Stephen as he fell under the stones of his executioners is instructive in this connection: "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit . . . . Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (Acts 7:59).

We find this early history of the Catholic Church recapitulated in the life of Thomas Merton. After baptism at first he remained in close contact with his familiar society. He soon discovered that in spite of good intentions, he fell back into ways incompatible with his newly chosen faith. He began to change his contacts. He moved in new circles. Leaving New York and life in the City he moved to the rural surroundings of Upstate. After a time, he felt the need to pray in a different manner and began, while still a layman, to make the prayer of the daily *Officium* his own. Before long he experienced the call to separate himself more radically from the society he had known and entered Gethsemane in rural Kentucky.

Prayer is more than one practice among others for the follower of Christ: it is a Way of life. Prayer is an activation of faith in the Lord Jesus that seeks his aid in response to his coming to seek our heart. Stephens prayer was made in confidence that the Lord would receive his spirit. This movement of the deepest self toward God is based on a confidence that in Jesus God takes an initiative that allows us to engage our most intimate self in a relation with him that leads to a new state of being. Prayer prepares us for living in the new creation, the foundations of which are already laid in the form of the Church. This society of believers is a sign as well as a reality. It is the promise of the New Jerusalem that descends from God himself. The building will be completed only at the end of time, when the whole of the cosmos will be transformed and taken up into the presence of God that is its true, eternal life. This is the vision of The Way as received and lived in the early Church. This vision has been obscured at certain periods of history and in particular cultures in the course of history. For the large majority of our times it had been all but obliterated. Thomas Merton contributed markedly to recover this concept of prayer as the true Christian Way. This conference will reflect

upon perspectives opened by Merton on the way of prayer; rather than outline the details of his teaching, that are readily discovered in his writings, we shall attempt to elaborate his views and indicate some of their major implications and presuppositions.

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TODAY ON THE ELEVENTH ANNIVERSARY OF MY BAPTISM I BEGAN TEACHING THEOLOGY...- SCRIPTURE AND MYSTICAL THEOLOGY. ON MONDAY I BEGAN A SERIES OF ORIENTATION CLASSES FOR THE NOVICES.[1] The date of this entry in Merton's journal was November 16, 1949. The year before he had published the work that made him one of the best-known writers in the United States, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, the story of his conversion to the Catholic Church and of his monastic vocation. He had been ordained a priest only six months before, in May, an event that, as he describes in detail, had a profound influence on his life of prayer. As experiencing Christ, the Savior and priest of all humanity, taking over his very self, he became intensely conscious of having a special responsibility for the whole of humanity, as he noted in his journal:

> I am left with the feeling not only that I have been transformed, but that a new world has somehow been brought into being through the labor and happiness of these three most exhausting days... for three days we have been full of the Holy Ghost and the Spirit of God seemed to be taking greater and greater possession of all our soul through the first three Masses of my life, my three greatest graces.... there will be no end to what God will pour out upon me, not for myself alone, but for the whole world... is it a fulfillment I do not understand?[2]

This understanding given at ordination altered his way of experiencing the solitude that had such a fundamental bearing upon the whole of his monastic life, to the very end. "Day after day I am more and more aware how little I am my everyday self at the altar: this consciousness of innocence is really a sense of replacement. Another has taken over my identity. . . . It is here, by the way, deepest in solitude and at the same time means something to the rest of the universe.[3]

Merton's work for the Cistercian Order and for monastic life in all its forms must be appreciated against this background of his broader consciousness of being in relation to the whole of creation and to all of mankind, the past generations as well as the people of his own time. The graces associated with the priesthood stood behind his contributions to the reform of monastic formation and studies, to the renewal of the Order, and gave impulse to the interior life of prayer to many lay persons. After all, even prior to ordination he had suddenly become the most widely read spiritual writer in the United States so that he had a general sense that his writings and the meditations, which were the source of his written works, would have an impact not only on the monks for whom they were more immediately intended, but also for many others who were not monks, some, indeed, who were not Catholic or even Christian. He came to feel related to the whole of humanity, and, as he states in the text cited above, even to the whole of creation. This includes the past ages of our human history and the future generations who would look back on our times for understanding of our age that gave rise to theirs. "I feel closer to the desert fathers than to the people in Louisville," he noted on one occasion. Later, in his hermitage, he would have a sharper consciousness that "the universe is my home and I

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[1] *The Intimate Merton*, 73.
[2] *The Intimate Merton*, 63–64.
[3] *The Intimate Merton*, 65.

am nothing if not part of it."[4] Events as they developed later in his life and since his death have vindicated this universalist perspective that characterizes his work, especially following upon priestly ordination.

Father Louis understood with sharper awareness after some years of pastoral service as *Magister Spiritus* to the young monks that our Cistercian way of life was but one way of living the Christian life fully. He wrote *Seeds of Contemplation* for all who seek God, whether in modern society as laypersons or as monks in the cloister. We all have the same goal. During this period and his subsequent appointment as novice master, he continued to study the early fathers, notably John Cassian, in connection with his teaching office. His notes for these conferences were recently published as the first volume of the Monastic Wisdom Series.[5] Cassian led him to the writings of Evagrius Ponticus, who formulated the first coherent and detailed system of contemplative prayer. Evagrius's description of the spiritual journey from its early beginnings to its consummation in a contemplative union with God was eventually adopted by such influential mystics as the seventh century monk, Maximus the Confessor. Through reading in this tradition and by virtue of his own experience, Merton became convinced that the Cistercian way required more than adaptation to the practices and life style of a monastic community.

Merton came to see that no less than the monk, the Christian in the world is called not merely to adapt to a Christian way of living in a disciplined manner, but is to enter upon the interior journey that gives meaning to one's way of life at the most personal level. However essential are the disciplines of duty and conscientious fidelity to obligations, unless one's various activities are undertaken in such a way as to bring about an interior transformation that prepares one for intimate union with the persons of the Blessed Trinity, the immediate purpose of monastic, and, indeed, of Christian life, that Cassian designates as *puritas cordis,* 'purity of heart,' will not be realized. Discernment and formation require a concrete and detailed understanding of the process of this restructuring of the inner self. So radical is this process that it constitutes a metamorphosis of the faculties of the soul and makes possible living out the requirements of the New Man, the creation of grace that Saint Paul repeatedly writes of. Presupposed as well is an explicit grasp of the ultimate goal which Jesus defined at the Last Supper as a loving knowledge of the Father and of his own person: "This is eternal life, to know you, the true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (John 17.3). Monastic formation is training in the loving knowledge of God that is the beginning of eternal life in the community of all who belong to the Blessed Trinity.

As direct and simple as this statement is, rightly to apply it presents us with a daunting challenge. Indeed, the simplest realities frequently conceal the most mysterious of truths under cover of words that in German are designated as *Urwörter*. There are several such *Urwörter* in this statement of Jesus, that is to say, words that point to realities that lie beyond our ability sharply to define them. Chesterton spoke of such primary facts, as he terms them. He points out that "indefinable" does not mean "vague" though we often confuse the two. "The man next door", he points out, "is indefinable, because he is too actual to be defined" (*Chesterton on Dickens*, 39). Who has been able adequately to define the nature of God? What does it mean that the one sent by God, Jesus Christ, is both God and man? Just what is meant by knowing? How do you define life? Not only eternal life is impossible to define, life on this earth in any of its myriad forms, evades all attempts at definition. The

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[4] March 2, 1965, *The Intimate Merton*, 239.
[5] *Cassian and the Fathers: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition,* ed. Patrick F. O'Connell, MW 1 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian, 2005).

various life sciences, though describing in abundant detail the structures and functioning of living organisms, including humans, do not agree on the essential nature of life itself.[6]

Unexpressed in Jesus' statement is the fundamental question concerning the subject to whom these words are addressed: What is man? Certainly, an adequate grasp of what is involved in this question is essential for the life of prayer. The question can rightly be considered only when viewed within the horizon of a living faith. Only by faith can any one penetrate to that place within the human heart where God abides and speaks. Prayer is a response to his word heard with the ear attuned by faith to his voice. Accordingly, in this conference as we reflect on the question "What is man?", so essential to advancing in the way of prayer, we shall consider the spiritual senses that are integral to discernment and to living the contemplative life of monks and nuns.

The Psalmist had already raised this question and expressed it with wonderment in a prayer directed to God: *What is man that you should keep him in mind, mortal man that you should visit him?* This line from Psalm 8 expresses sensitivity to the nature of man viewed in the context of the cosmos. Even more strikingly, it is an exclamation of wonder before the creator of nature and of the human race itself. Wonder and insight into mystery give rise to a question directed to the God that is intended not to obtain a direct answer, but rather as an act of praise. This utterance, in fact, is less a question arising from curiosity than an acknowledgment at once of God's great condescension on bestowing such dignity as places humans above all visible creation, establishing them only a little less than the powerful and holy angelic spirits. As we shall see, one cannot understand our human nature apart from this sense of wonder that is the fruit of spiritual enlightenment. Science, based as it is on reason and observation can never account for the whole that is the living person.

These words from the Psalter, then, give expression to sentiments strongly at variance with those of the gifted French painter, Paul Gaugin, however similar they might appear at first glance,. on a superficial reading. Toward the end of the 19th century he decided to give a striking title to what he thought would be his last painting, a title that would express his own perplexed state of mind, even sum up the confusion that haunted him in the last decades of his life. The title he gave to this painting consists of three questions: "Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?" Gaugin is representative of the many who ask these same questions concerning their own self. The felt need to form some satisfactory concept of the nature of the world, of the cosmos, the purpose of life, the true identity of the human person has given rise to a variety of attempts and to answers hardly less numerous. The questions do not do away; they are insistent and at times grow too loud to be put off. Gertrude Stein, on her death bed, put it poignantly to the friend at her bedside. "Tell me, what is the answer?" Her friend replied, attempting to soothe her last hour: "There is no answer." Gertrude responded: "Yes there is, because there is the question." The question arises at the deepest level of the spirit; the human person becomes conscious of self within a world the background of which transcends the whole of the material cosmos. Consciousness and intellect are ordered to an ultimate and definitive Being who is infinite and is himself knowing and conscious; we give to this personal transcendent being the name of God. Revelation discloses to faith that this God is one, unique while subsisting in three Persons, one in love.

This question concerning our true nature is posed to each of us. Thoughtful persons confront it, as Merton himself did, repeatedly throughout life, though many fail to attend to it in any adequate manner. Those who do confront it soon discover that the attempt to examine it raises large and disturbing issues not easy of solution.

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[6] See Encyclopedia Britanica, (2007) s. v. *Life.* The article lists five fields of science that study life and notes that there is no agreement concerning what it is they are examining.

For the question concerning the nature of man is intimately related to the other questions that Gaugin poses. We cannot answer this question without careful consideration of where we come from, how we relate to the cosmos, why we live and where we are going. It is instructive to look into the various answers given by persons from different periods of history and from different cultures. From antiquity, the great minds have reflected on this topic and examined their own self with its desires and aspirations. As they expended much energy in a consideration marked by a sensitiveness to diverse features of human life, they discovered subtle shades of inner experience that escape the notice of less sensitive and perceptive persons and which transcend those concerns that occupy the generality of men. One such thinker left on the first page of the Bible a record of his inspired reflections on the theme. He answered the question "What is Man?" in the broadest of contexts, that of cosmic creation and presents the appearance of the first man as taking place on the final day of creative activity: "God said: 'Let us make man in our own image, in the likeness of ourselves'" (Genesis 1:26). The interpretation of this teaching on the human person are so multiple and various that this view has served as the basis of a number of schools of spirituality over the centuries. Precisely in what that image and likeness consists proved to be a divisive issue, even giving rise to a conflict that seriously disturbed the life of the early Egyptian monks. Our Cistercian fathers, who had such a strong influence on Merton, found an answer to this question that became the foundation upon which they constructed their way of applying the monastic practices in daily life. We shall consider their teaching subsequently. They had learned from St. Augustine how fundamental this question is for it examines one's very self and reveals the scope of our human potential and suggests the possibilities for living as it discloses how vast, even infinite, are the longings of the heart. Here are Augustine's reflections as he examines his inner life and the powers of his soul.

> Great is the power of memory, exceedingly great, O my god, a spreading limitless room within me. Who can reach its uttermost depth? Yet it is a faculty of my soul and belongs to my nature. In fact I cannot grasp totally all that I am. Thus the mind is not large enough to contain itself: but . . . how can it not contain itself? How can there be any of itself that is not in itself? As this question struck me, I was overcome with wonder and almost with stupor (Confessions 10.8).

Augustine himself had learned something about this search from the philosopher Plotinus who wrote: "We are, each of us, the spiritual world" (Enneads III.4.3). But he breaks with the Greek philosopher as he elaborates greatly his insights, being enlightened by the Scriptures and the graces of Jesus' Spirit. Augustine goes on to say: "But the true Mediator, whom in the secret of Your mercy You have shown to men and sent to men, that by His example they might learn humility, the Mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus, appeared between sinful mortals and the immortal Just One.(10.43)"
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To answer the question "What is man?" requires first that we hear it as addressed to our own self, and sense its mystery. No one can consider our nature without being personally involved in the answer. Sooner or later this question leads to another: "Who am I?" How do I define my own meaning? What am I here for? Where will I be when my course is run? As I examine these issues I discover multiple layers of my being so that the answers I give depend on the level of my existence from which I speak. For one thing I soon become aware that I have a sense of identity determined by my own past history and, on the other, that there is some reality at the core of my being which cannot be defined by any event, thought or word. It is a given reality that escapes enclosure within any category, social or psychological; this is the transcendent self that not even the whole cosmos can limit. It is a reflection of God, and God alone is its full measure. Merton wrote extensively of this true self and spoke of its fundamental role in the life of contemplation.

The relation between our sense of identity and the self is a very subtle one; many fail to recognize the self for what it is and so give an answer to our question that, however true and helpful on the level of physiology, the emotions, or of social interaction, yet remains truncated. This is especially true of the sciences that take as their study the measurable dimensions of man and human activity. We shall examine subsequently in some detail the contribution and limits of the sciences that are today concerned with redefining what it means to be human. John Haught recognizes the legitimate contribution made by the findings of various modern sciences in forming our concept of identity: "We now realize that, in telling our own stories, we can no longer leave out the captivating preamble that geology, evolutionary biology and astrophysics have jointly assembled. Human life, biological evolution and cosmic process now constitute one continuous unfolding (of the cosmic story)." (*Deeper Than Darwin,* 155)

Haught here refers to the recent revival of the word 'consilience' when he notes how these sciences have jointly assembeled. *Consilience* is a rare word in English. J.S. Mill had employed it in 1861. It was already at hand, having been coined some 20 years earlier by the philosopher Whewell. It has been brought back into modern use as a title of a book in 1999 by E. O. Wilson, a prominent zoologist who has enjoyed a remarkable prominence through his writings on human nature and religion. A significant number of influential writers in the last two decades point out that the life sciences of molecular biology, genetics, and neuroscience that includes the biochemistry and physiology of the brain, have 'jumped together' (the root meaning of *consilience*) in harmonious agreement. The resulting data, they claim, qualify to redefine human nature.

The sub-title of Wilson's work is *The Unity of Knowledge,* implying that science now replaces philosophy and theology in defining human nature. Not all scientists agree. Perhaps the best description of the connotation of this term is provided by witnesses who write in favor of religious belief by way of rebuttal of its materialist enemies. Some of the best, such as Dr. Francis Collins, discern in the findings of the biochemical processes of life evidence pointing to the wisdom, beauty and intelligence of God. The title of his book, *The Language of God* is a reference to the human genome, the detailed description of which is the fruit of the research team he organized and headed and which identified the 3.1 billion nucleotides that constitute the complete genetic content of the 46 chromosomes found in the nucleus of each somatic cell of the human body.

Thus it is evident that to gain a true self-knowledge in adequate measure is considerably more exacting than we are inclined to believe in the beginning of our journey in the spirit. One reason for this, as Karl Rahner has underlined, is the fact that human knowledge is multi-layered; something can be known and not known at the same time. There is a transcendental, unreflected knowledge attached to subjective consciousness, a basic awareness that is not knowledge of an object and which is prior to all self-reflection. This unconscious nescience is positive in some respects; it renders possible the free act and so is a condition for the self-realization of the finite person.[7]

Another of the major influences on the development and nature of the sense of identity and its relation to the self is language. Words play a prominent role in mediating those outward events that contribute to form our idea of who we are, and contribute to its formation. A thorough examination of the history of the vocabulary of a personal identity is a fascinating study that yields results quite unexpected by modern individuals so accustomed to the concept of the autonomous self, aware of being the free subject of its life choices. In mythical antiquity there is no clear distinction made between 'myself' and all other selves; nor is there a

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[7] Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations* 5, p. 200ff.

definite boundary separating the self from the world, the observer and the observed. Children were considered implicated in the sins of their parents and treated accordingly, as we find in the earlier sections of the Bible. It came as a prophetic revelation, recorded by Ezechiel 18:1-5, that each would be treated as a free individual, responsible for personal choices. Plato and other Greek philosophers had but a partial grasp of the concept of the self as we know it. Although the first glimmerings of the modern self appear in the high Middle Ages under the form of such words as *the individual* and *the person* yet it functions under many occult influences. It is only after the Reformation and especially at the end of the sixteenth century that such a series of words as *self-consciousness, self-conceit, self-love, self-liking, self-command, self-esteem, self-knowledge* and other hyphenated forms of self appear. Descartes, in 1664, made the thinking self the source of knowledge and most philosophers since his time have assumed the same stance. It was shortly before this date that Locke had adopted the new word ‘consciousness’ and defined it as “perception of what passes in a man’s own mind”. Coleridge was the first to use the term “self-conscious”.[8]

As the center of gravity shifted from the surrounding world to the person with the accompanying increased consciousness of interiority, there arose a new sense of freedom. The person was felt to be the source of events and destiny. A new word, *spontaneous*, appeared in English, coined by Hobbes in 1656, to characterize the impulses of this personal center of initiative. At the same time the influences of nature grew feebler; it was subject to a system of *law*, used for the first time in relation to the operations of nature by Francis Bacon, the man who introduced the term progressive as descriptive of historical age during this same period. (Barfield, 148 and 150). A broad series of fresh terms emerged in the 18th century to give expression to inner states hitherto ill-defined. Barfield (175) gives a list of some twelve words used in a modern sense that were unknown earlier, among them charming, boring, entrancing, affecting, sentimental . These words, so common in modern speech, unconsciously form the way we conceive of our own person and that of those we daily encounter. Barfield sums up the matter after a mastery study of the history of words that aptly describes the constantly changing meaning of these tools of speech. ”We think by means of words, and we have to use the same ones for so many different thoughts that, as soon as new meanings have entered into one set, they creep into all our theories and begin to mold our whole cosmos; and from the theories they pass into more words, and so into our lives and institutions.” (189) We readily observe this phenomenon taking place in our own times: once the word ‘computer’ entered our language to designate a type of machine, it began to be used in relation to other even quite different realities such as the human brain which is described currently as functioning computationally.

In the nineteenth century, the Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard addressed the question “What is Man?” in one of his most important works, *The Sickness unto Death.* He comments on the nature of this sickness saying that it is universal and persists through the ages unto eternity. It abides in the self and consists in “the despairing ignorance of having a self; while knowing one has a self, yet to live in despair not to want to be oneself or in despair to want to be oneself.” He elaborates on the topic in .the following passage in which he defines a human being.

> A human being is a spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation that relates itself to itself . . . A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the

[8] Barfield, 169–71 for this review of the vocabulary of ‘self’.)

> temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short, a synthesis. A synthesis is a relation between two terms. Considered in this way, a human being is not yet a self.[9]

The sickness that is the theme of Kirkegaard's book is this desire to be anything but the self one is created to be. Said in another way, man desires to live in the senses rather that in the spirit. It is this desire that is the mortal sickness referred to in the title of this work. The remedy for such despair, the author begins to suspect, is to gain a truer knowledge of God, who is holy, not a doting, indulgent father, and in that light to confront the very concrete inner shadows that one fears and so come to know oneself. In this work he only begins to envisage this austere way to the true self.

Gordon Kane, a theoretical physicist, uses the title of Gaugin's painting as the heading of the first chapter of his book *Supersymmetry* (Cambridge, MA 2000): "Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?" He gives the reason: it reminds him "of where scientists are today in the search for a complete understanding of our universe." It is of interest that this painting has proved to hold a particular fascination for modern physicists, a number of whom have expressed a fascination with the tableau, attracted by its title. This modern, scientific approach to the study of man and his relation to the world is new only in its methods and techniques and the ability of the data resulting from the researches to explain a great deal of the operations of human behavior and experience. Ramon y Cajal (1852), the founder of modern neurobiology, who determined that the brain consists of millions of distinct neurons that communicate among themselves which functioning as whole units, commented on the significance his findings have for understanding human nature to the following effect.

> Can it be that within our organic edifice there dwell innumerable inhabitants which palpitate feverishly with impulses of spontaneous activity witout our taking any notice of them? And our much talked of psychological unity? What has become of thought and consciousness in this audacious transformation of man into a colony of polyps? . . . Man feels and thinks by means of his nerve cells and the *not I*, the true external world begins for him at the frontiers of the cerebral convolutions.[10]

More recently, as further investigation led to greatly expanded data, the prominent neurobiologist and Noble prize laureate, Eric Kandel, points out that the results of these findings bear upon the idea we form of ourselves:

> In the past few years, scientists working in many different sub-disciplines of biology, from evolution and genetics to immunology, biochemistry, and cellular neurobiology, have made discoveries that have revolutionized our understanding of mental processes and therefore our understanding of ourselves.[11]

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[9] Joakim Garff, *Soren Kierkegaard: A Biography,*" 541.

[10] See J. Allan Hobson, *The Dreaming Brain*, New York: Basic Books (1988) 98.

[11] "Of Learning, Memory, and Genetic Switches." *States of Mind*, ed., Roberta Conlan New York: (1999).

He adds that some of the most illuminating and profound insights into the mind came not from philosophy, literature or the arts, nor even from psychoanalysis or psychology but from biology. This was made possible by understanding the genetic structure and functions as well as its regulation. Identification of specific genes and the proteins they encode has revealed the unanticipated similarity among proteins encountered in different species and in different cellular contexts. Accordingly, these discoveries make evident that at the molecular level the human body is related to the world of living creatures. True enough, but is man reduced to the material of which the body is made?

The majority of the more prominent scientists- physicists, molecular biologists, neuro-scientists, and cognitive psychologists, hold it as a matter of faith that eventually science will provide full answers to the question concerning the nature of man by determining the mind-brain relation, the processes by which consciousness arises and the issues related to these. The data so far does not allow for an explanation of these human features, but many interpret what is known as evidence that the soul is a superfluous concept. Such a position is not science but a venture into philosophy that indicates a materialist bias that is based, not on scientific findings, but rather on a choice, conscious or unconscious, that is posed to every human person.

To believe in the reality of the transcendent self and in the absolute mystery who is God, or, on the other hand, to reject that mystery which is at the horizon of every human consciousness offering itself to belief is a choice. Pope Benedict puts the matter in forceful terms when, speaking of evolution, he observes that to believe that man is created by God and not the result of chance mutations of genetic drift is quite simply a choice we make. Indeed, one can use the same data as strong indications of the existence of the living, infinite God.

Karl Rahner has reflected at length on the concept of man. He too, in various contexts, asks this same question posed by certain scientists, “What is Man?” In connection with “The Concept of Mystery in Catholic Theology” he comments that “Man is he who is always confronted with the holy mystery, even when he is dealing with what is within hand’s reach, comprehensible and amenable to a conceptual framework. ... Man always lives by the holy mystery, even where he is not conscious of it. The lucidity of is consciousness derives from the incomprehensibility of this mystery.”[12] In another context, he notes that

> of course we know a lot about man. Every day the most diverse sciences makes assertions about him, and all arts speak, each in their own way, about his inexhaustible theme. But has man been yet ‘defined’ by all this? ... We omit the question as to whether a definition in the strict sense is ever possible... At any rate, it is impossible for man. Man is, one might say in way of definition, an indefinability come to consciousness of itself. Much *about* him can be defined, at least to some extent he can also be called *zoon logikon, animal rationale*. But before one can rejoice at the simple clarity of this ‘definition’, one should ask oneself what *logikon* really means but then one launches into an ocean which is literally boundless... Man is therefore mystery in his essence, his nature. ... He is mystery in his real being and in his ultimate reason, in his nature, which is the humble, conscious state of being referred to the fullness, the form of the mystery which we ourselves are.[13]

[12] Karl Rahner, Theological Investigations 4:53B54.

[13] Karl Rahner “On the Theology of the Incarnation,” Th Inv 4:107B 08.

Like Pope Benedict, Rahner makes it clear that understanding this truth is the fruit of a choice. "But this reference, which is our nature, can only be conceived and understood when we allow ourselves to be freely grasped by he incomprehensible...Our whole existence is the acceptance or rejection of the mystery which we are . . . ." Prayer follows upon the acceptance of this mystery.

The prominent role of anthropology in Cistercian spirituality reflects in the twelfth century that same readiness manifested by the fourth century Church Fathers and their successor, Gregory the Great, to confront the mystery of their full humanity rather than evade the implications that pose serious problems for the one seeking God. This willingness to face and take responsibility for the whole person, including the disordered appetites of body and mind, from gluttony to curiosity, from avarice to pride, is a fundamental feature of Cistercian spirituality at its best. On the more spiritual side, the early Cistercians gave their attention to the nature of man and, using such information as was available in their time, constructed a spirituality based on the anthropology their arrived at. The doctrine of the image and likeness of God that is man was central to their teaching. They had found it in the Fathers, notably in the two whom they took for their spiritual masters, St. Augustine and St. Gregory the Great. Gregory in his Commentary on the Canticle echoes Augustine whose teachings he had thoroughly studied and assimilated. He wrote: "Every Soul should care for nothing more than that she knows herself. She who knows herself knows that she is made to the image of God."[14] That we are the image of God means that we can know our self only in relation to the great mystery that is the Blessed Trinity. We can attain to some measure of this knowledge, then, only to the extent we are sensitive to the Spirit of God. This consideration leads to reflect on the spiritual senses by which we perceive divine realities.

Asceticism is much more than simply a disciplined practice that assures self-control and obedience to the commandments. That is its initial aim and an essential attainment. In the novitiate, training of this kind is basic, and Merton, having been formed by the stringent ascetic life, taught its necessity for contemplative prayer. However, one must keep in mind that it has a more positive and higher function, namely, to contribute to the transformation of our being. This includes not only the control of the body and the passions, but also the integration of the emotions in the service of the spirit. The ordering of the various feelings, images, and thoughts that are bound up with the chemistry of the body cannot be achieved without that purification and elevation of the interior senses, to which certain of the Fathers so often refer, from the early centuries in the life of the Church. Thus even in the first stage of the spiritual life the influence of some sense of God's action in the soul is operative in a more or less obscure manner.

While the immediate aim of monastic life is, as Cassian had pointed out in his first Conference, purity of heart, which requires a restructuring not only of habit and behavior, but of feeling, disposition and manner of being, it is itself ordered to a final, definitive goal. The final goal of monastic spirituality, he adds, is the kingdom of God. This kingdom is nothing other than the presence of God himself, the reflection of his glory so that he who would enter there must be sufficiently like God to be able to sustain the brilliant vision of his glory. The process by which this transformation is achieved was named 2ΞTΦ4H by the Greek Fathers and *deificatio* by the Latins. This transformation represents the undoing of the effects of original sin and the full realization of human potential under the elevating influence of divine favor. In God's plan, we are capable, by virtue of our being created in his image and likeness, of receiving the graces needed to be in some real but qualified manner raised above nature and become like God; in short, we are destined to be deified.

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[14] Gregoire le Grand, *Commentaire sur le Cantique des Cantiques*, 44, SC 114 (1984) 134.

St. Benedict makes it clear already in his prologue that he envisages the spiritual life precisely in this perspective of a dynamic transforming of the basic dispositions of the monk. He speaks of beholding the light that deifies *deificum lumen* (Prol. 9). He reinforces this manner of viewing the monastic life at a number of points in the course of his Rule. The novice is told in the prologue that to enter the monastery is to set out on the interior path that represents a return journey to the Father's house. He is not to consider that he has only to adapt to the requirements of some earthly community, marked by stability and its own customs. Later on the monk is reminded that this journey is to be characterized by a transformation of fear and constraint into the freedom of love with its expansion of the heart. There will be periods when he may be tempted to leave the monastery because the weight of its discipline seems too heavy to bear, but by perseverance if he enters into the monastic practices from the heart he will come to find joy in the very activities that are early on a source of stress. In sum, living the Rule is to effect an inner restructuring of the character the dispositions and the tastes that in practice motivate the monk's choices and actions.

As Merton taught early in his role as Father Master, the rebirth and inner transformation envisaged by the Rule and the monastic tradition as it evolved, constitute the aim of monastic formation that must be kept in mind throughout the period of discernment and formation. This broad perspective distinguishes formation from a number of forms of counseling and therapy whose aim is confined to adaptation to a given situation in life such as work, marriage or even religious life. Freedom from symptoms, avoidance of behavior that interferes with performance, and acceptance of the limits imposed by character or circumstances are the legitimate if limited goals set often in psychotherapy. The aim of purity of heart and the goal of union with God in the kingdom require nothing less than a radical transformation that amounts to a rebirth. The operations of the bodily senses come under the discipline of monastic practice from the beginning of monastic life. As the novice submits to the demands of this discipline there occurs a corresponding modification of the inner, spiritual senses, very gradual at first, unnoticed for the most part, but nonetheless real. In proportion as the monk advances in the way of active virtue the receptive powers of the senses are brought into a state of greater tonus; they begin to be energized by the more hidden, spiritual realities to which they were earlier insensitive. With continuing progress in the acquisition of virtue and especially as a more contemplative prayer develops, the inner senses function with heightened effect.

In the book he wrote while novice master, *The Mirror of Charity*, St. Aelred, was alert to the importance of this interconnection between the various levels of the inner person. In his discussion of the three loves that are involved in the Christian life, love of self, of neighbor and of God, he observes that "these three loves are engendered by one another, nourished by one another, and fanned into flame by one another. They are brought to perfection together."[15] He is concerned to analyze in fastidious detail the interactions involved as love is purified and elevated rather than examine the effect this process has on the spiritual senses by means of which these loves operate, as some of the other Cistercian authors did, including his fellow Englishman, Baldwin of Ford. Aelred's analysis takes as its object the manner in which reason acts upon choice which he considers to be the proper act of love. "To be sure, love always has reason as a companion; not that the soul always loves in a reasonable way by means of it, but that by it, with alert circumspection, it distinguishes what it chooses

[15] Aelred of Rievaulx, *The Mirror of Charity*, trans. Elizabeth Connor, CF17 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian,1990) 3.4, p. 224.

from what it rejects. . . . It is, however, for love to choose what it wants for its enjoyment. This choice, then, is called love and is an act of the soul."[16]

Aelred deals with the role of contemplative meditation and prayer on this process as well, and shows in particular the effects of the various mysteries of Christ on the three loves.[17] It is in the light of the mysteries of Christ that discernment takes form and demonstrates what our immediate, concrete task consists in. This contemplative activity must supplement the analysis of our character and the affections and passions of the psyche. Discovering latent gifts of nature as well as recognizing the gifts of the Spirit offered to us are both essential to the attainment of such purity as leads to full union with God. Achieving such a high goal entails frequent changes for the better, changes that are so deeply rooted in the character as to represent a real remaking, a transformation of the subject. I indicated in the last conference such radical transformation is in good part dependent on the renewal of the words that are available to the subject, words attended by the tension and dynamism of life and which in such large measure determine the nature of his thoughts, prayers and conversations with God and with his fellow creatures. It is no mere coincidence that the outstanding teachers of the mystical theology that was incorporated into our Cistercian tradition such as Saints Augustine, Gregory the Great and Bernard of Clairvaux, were masters of the word as well as of theology. They also gave much consideration to their concept of man for they realized this need to which I just referred of being aware of the specific endowments of nature that must be brought into play for the inner life to attain its full expansion.

Preaching long before Paul and our Lord, and known well to both, Jeremias had intimated the existence of the tension between the body with its senses and the inner self with its senses, responsive to the presence and activity of the Spirit. The prophet, made aware of the coming afflictions to be visited upon his people had exclaimed: "My bowels, my bowels give me pain, and the senses of my heart! My soul quivers with passion, my heart is torn" (LXX 4:19). The Septuagint translation, known to Origen and all the Greek Fathers, laid the basis for the unfolding of the doctrine of the spiritual senses, suggesting such a teaching by interpreting the Hebrew kiroth by aistheteria tes kardias, that is, senses of the heart. Some of the more influential mystics and

[16] Aelred Mirror 3.8. 22–23, p. 235–36.
[17] Aelred Mirror 3,5,13–15, p. 230–31.

thinkers of the early Church, with great refinement of observation, came to appreciate that among the faculties of the soul that assume an increasingly significant function as one advances in the way of the spirit are the spiritual senses. The earliest of these writers, and the most creative, would seem to have been Origen. While he was not himself a monk, few thinkers have been more influential in the impact of their writings on monastic spirituality and our Cistercian fathers in particular. He was the first to articulate a formal doctrine of the whole of the five spiritual senses as such. In a recently rediscovered work, he elaborated a very broad theory of the correspondences between the inner and the outer man that prepared the ground for his views on the inner senses. He bases himself on the Pauline doctrine of the two men. “No longer lie to one another, putting off the old man with his acts and putting on the new, the man who is renewed in the knowledge according to the image of him who created him (Col. 3: 9, 10).” Origen concludes from this passage that each of us consists of two men, each having a correspondence with the other:

> For just as the exterior man has for the interior man as like-named, so is the case with its members. We can assert that each member of the exterior man is found, under the same name, in the interior man. The exterior man has eyes; the interior man also is said to have eyes... in observing the divine precepts we acquire, in the order of the spirit, a more penetrating vision. The eyes of the interior man are more penetrating than we are.[18]

This thought is elaborated in considerable detail for each of the bodily senses, but in addition, for other bodily parts. There exist spiritual bones as well as corporal; when Jeremiah cries out that his intestines are in pain, he refers to those of the heart which we also feel when the Church suffers in childbirth. When Isaiah refers to those who have lost their heart, he surely refers to the spiritual, not the bodily heart.[19]

Karl Rahner considered this doctrine of Origen in so far as it dealt with the spiritual senses to be of considerable importance for the spiritual life and for a fuller understanding of the history of spirituality. He devoted his first major publication, in 1932, to this theme.[20]

In the West too there was an incorporation of the doctrine of the spiritual senses into the traditional teaching on the inner life. It found a particularly felicitous expression in St. Augustine’s Confessions:

> What is it that I love when I love you? It is not the beauty of a body, nor the fittingness of time, not the brilliance of light, so welcome to these eyes, nor the sweet melodies of all kinds of songs, nor the aromas of flowers, ointments and perfumes, not sweet cakes and honey, nor lovely limbs to be embraced- it is not these I love when I love you, O God . And yet I love a certain light, and a certain voice and a certain odor and a certain food and a certain embrace when I love my God: it is the light, the voice, the sweet odor, the food and the embrace of my interior man where light shines on my soul which has no place, and where there is a sound that time does not snatch away, and where there is a

[18] Entretien d'Origène avec Héraclide, ed. Jean Scherer, S Chr 67 (Paris: Cerf, 1960) 88–90

[19] Entretien 96, 98.

[20] Karl Rahner “Le Début d'une doctrine des cinq sens spirituels chez Origène”, *Rev. D'Ascétique et de Mystique,*13 (1932) 113–145. This article was later abridged and translated into English in Th Inv16. 81–103.

> sweet odor which the breeze does not scatter, and where there is a savor that eating does not diminish.[21]

In the course of the centuries, this doctrine was often referred to in connection with spiritual experience by authors dealing with prayer and the inner life, usually only in passing, without any intent to give a further development to it. The Cistercians of the twelfth century often refer to the spiritual senses, with conviction. A particularly moving passage is found in William of St. Thierry's *Commentary on the Canticle:*

> illuminating grace is the virtue of all virtues, and the light of good works, without which even virtues are without effect and good works have no good fruit. Or if on occasion they should seem to have some, yet they are without vigor, they give no cheer, they lack the oil of joy, they teach no unction, they have no flavor of divine sweetness, no odor of eternity, no efficacious experience of the spiritual senses.[22]

This statement provides an implicit program for the way of prayer. Merton was formed to the contemplative life under the persisting influence of such teaching as this passage reflects. As his perseverance in the Cistercian Order as a monk and priest attest, the perspectives created by this school of prayer remained dominant, absorbing the influences he discovered in Eastern religions. He had a strong Catholic faith that he remained committed to unto the end. He stated his view in relation to Buddhism quite explicitly: "it is quite clear that no non-Christian philosophy has any thing that Christianity needs in so far as it is a revealed religion."[23] He pointed out, however, that in applying the faith to life, from early centuries the Church made use of the practical insights afforded by various philosophical schools, and could profit from using the wisdom of the East today in the same manner. In carrying out this project Merton was following in the path traced out by such Catholic masters as Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory the Great who considered the spiritual life to be the art of arts. The twelfth century Cistercians had made themselves disciples of the Latin Gregory and their stress on contemplative prayer as a transforming process culminating in unitive love remained a powerful influence on Thomas Merton through the years. Such prayer, he was persuaded can be learned only by experience formed under the dominance of the Spirit of God. May this same Spirit of Jesus lead us all in the way of prayer that prepares us for life everlasting in the bosom of the Father.

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[21] Augustine, *Confessions*, X.6.8, PL 32:782B3

[22] Guillaume de Saint Thiérry, *Exposé sur le Cantique des Cantiques*, 47, J.-M. Déchanet, tr., S Chr 82 (Paris: Cerf, 1962) 138

[23] Bailey 175.