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Technology and the Loss of Paradise

ON JUNE 5, 1966, Thomas Merton gave a talk, “The Christian in a Technological World,” to novices at the Abbey of Gethsemani.¹ At the time, Merton was spending more and more time at a hermitage near the main compound. In October 1964, he received permission to sleep at St. Mary of Carmel “without any special restriction.” Merton experienced himself as “fully human . . . Fit to be offered to God” and as free to explore life in Christ. Like the holy men and women who went to the wilderness in the fourth century, Merton was seeking his own true self, or inner self in Christ.²

The hermitage was paradise on earth where he could recover his truest self. By paradise, Merton had in mind a state . . . a place, on earth . . . in which man was originally created to live on earth . . . What the Desert Fathers sought when they believed they could find “paradise” in the desert was the lost innocence, the emptiness and purity of heart which had belonged to Adam and Eve in Eden.

With the desert saints, Merton understood his calling as growing in love. His ultimate goal was neither love, nor purity of heart. Rather, “the ultimate end was the “Kingdom of God.” With Staretz Zosima, Merton believed “paradise is attainable because . . . it is present within us and we have only to discover it there.”³

In an essay entitled “Rain and the Rhinoceros,” Merton cited the provocative nineteenth-century writer and thinker Henry David Thoreau, who spent two years in a self-built house on the shores of Walden Pond outside of

1. The full text of “The Christian in a Technological World” may be found in my earlier book, *Thomas Merton: Twentieth-Century Wisdom for Twenty-First-Century Living*, 205–13.

2. Merton, *Wisdom of the Desert*, 3–5.

3. Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, 116. In a Russian Orthodox monastery, a staretz is a wise elder.

Concord, Massachusetts. Thoreau was likely as self-aware a prophet as Merton. Both warned future generations of the capacity of technology, wrongly used, to distract, inhibit, and undermine one's quest to recover paradise lost.

Thoreau sat in *his* cabin and criticized the railways. I sit in mine and wonder about a world that has, well, progressed. I must read *Walden* again, and see if Thoreau already guessed that he was part of what he thought he could escape. But it is not a matter of "escaping." It is not even a matter of protesting very audibly. Technology is here, even in the cabin. True, the utility line is not here yet, and so G.E. is not here yet either. When the utilities and G.E. enter my cabin arm in arm it will be nobody's fault but my own. I admit it. I am not kidding anybody, even myself. I will suffer their bluff and patronizing complacencies in silence. I will let them think they know what I am doing here

Of course at three-thirty A.M. the SAC plane goes over, red light winking low under the clouds, skimming the wooded summits on the south side of the valley, loaded with strong medicine. Very strong. Strong enough to burn up all these woods and stretch our hours of fun into eternities.⁴

This excerpt indicated Merton's concern less with his personal life and more with human rights, warfare, and the natural world. Technology impacted each area. Regarding to nature, Merton expressed concern that people used technology to alter the natural environment, changing it into an artificial one without due regard for unintended consequences.

From 1955 to 1965, Merton served as Master of Novices at Gethsemani, after which he moved permanently to his hermitage. There, he occasionally received guests or gave a talk. In his June 5, 1966 talk, Merton cited concrete examples of useful technological innovation:

OK, fine, there is nothing wrong with lawn mowers; monastic life allows us to do the lawns. This is excellent, but this is technology. Technological society around a place like this makes possible a lot of closely cropped grass.

Another example is that we used to have many creeks and fields around here. Of course we have rains and then there are many more. This is what happens. Instead of five fields, you have one; instead of several creeks, you have one. Of course it sometimes rains then you have many. But that's exactly how technology operates, so you can simplify everything and get at it faster. The ancient monastic outlook on things is suspicious of this view of the world. A person may ask if this is practical. I don't know.

4. Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable*, 12-13, 14, Merton's emphasis.

Attempts to control nature troubled Merton. Lack of concern about a crucial effect of technology especially bothered him. As antidote to the tendency not to question confidence in machines, Merton called on humans to accept limits, to use technology rightly, and to work for a “better world.”⁵ Merton saw “paradise is all around us,” but lamented,

we do not understand. It is wide open. The sword is taken away, but we do not know it: we are off ‘one to his farm and another to his merchandise.’ [Matt. 22: 5] Lights on. Clocks ticking. Thermostats working. Stoves cooking. Electric shavers filling radios with static. ‘Wisdom’ cries the dawn deacon, but we do not attend.⁶

Merton made careful observations about the seasons, the elements, plants, and creatures. Emphasizing the intrinsic worth of creation and of the possible loss of our right relationship to nature, Merton wrote that humans are part of nature.

In an April 11, 1963 journal entry, Merton described having come upon a titmouse, a small resident bird. It lay dead on the grass, perhaps due to his actions. Merton had dumped some calcium chloride on a couple anthills intending to direct the ants elsewhere, not to poison them. Merton lamented, “What a miserable bundle of foolish idiots we are! We kill everything around us even when we think we love and respect nature and life. This sudden power to deal death all around us simply by the way we live, and in total “innocence” and “ignorance,” is by far the most disturbing symptom of our time.”⁷ He journaled,

Two superb days. When was there ever such a morning as yesterday? Cold at first, the hermitage dark in the moonlight (I had permission to go up right after Lauds), a fire in the grate (and how beautifully firelight shines through the lattice-blocks and all through the house at night!) Then the sunrise, enormous yolk of energy spreading and spreading as if to take over the sky. After that the ceremonies of the birds feeding in the dewy grass and the meadowlark feeding and singing. Then the quiet, totally silent day, warm, mild morning under the climbing sun. It was hard to say psalms: one’s attention was totally absorbed by the great arc of the sky and the trees and hills and grass and all things in them. How absolutely true, and how central a truth, that we are simply part of nature, though we are the part

5. Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, 148.

6. Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 132.

7. Merton, *Turning toward the World*, 312, Merton’s emphasis.

which recognizes God. It is not Christianity, indeed, but post-Cartesian technologism that separates man from the world and makes him a kind of little god in his own right, with his clear ideas, all by himself.

We have to be humbly and realistically what we are, and the denial of it results only in the madness and cruelties of Nazism, or of the people who are sick with junk and drugs. And one can be “part of nature” surely, without being Lady Chatterley’s lover.⁸

Reflecting on implications of such experiences, Merton called on people to acknowledge how well God has made all things. Affirming the sacredness of all life, he concluded that denial of our place in nature resulted in the madness and cruelties of Nazism, in people becoming sick with junk or drugs, and in the loss of paradise. Merton respected other writers who championed taking everyday care of earth. He pointed to the investigations of scientists like Rachel Carson (1907–64), author of groundbreaking books that challenged readers to reclaim their proper place in paradise.

Carson’s celebrated *Silent Spring* was first serialized in *The New Yorker*. She dedicated the book to Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965), humanitarian, medical missionary, and, in 1952, recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize. In her dedication, Carson cited Schweitzer as saying, “Man has lost his capacity to foresee and to forestall. He will end by destroying the earth.” Carson called for new, imaginative, creative ways to share earth with one another and all creation. As much as any piece of writing can be credited, *Silent Spring* inspired birth of the modern environmental movement and passage by US Congress of legislation to care for earth. A commentator observed, “*Silent Spring* changed the world by describing it.”⁹

Through a friend, Anne Ford, Merton secured a copy of *Silent Spring*. After reading the book, Merton wrote Carson to commend her for “contributing a most valuable and essential piece of evidence for the diagnosis of the ills of our civilization.” Merton observed, “The awful irresponsibility with which we scorn the smallest values is part of the same portentous irresponsibility with which we dare to use our titanic power in a way that threatens not only civilization but life itself.” He saw the need to address a “consistent pattern” that runs through every aspect of life—culture, economy, “our whole way of life”—and to arrive at a “clear cogent statement of our life, so that we may begin to correct them.” Otherwise, humans might direct their efforts to superficial symptoms only. This risked aggravating the sickness in that the “remedies” became “expressions of the

8. Merton, *Turning toward the World*, 312, Merton’s emphasis.

9. Kolbert, “Human Nature,” 23.

sickness itself.” Merton characterized the root cause of the problem as a subconscious hatred of life and a death wish.¹⁰

There is no evidence that Carson received the letter, or replied. Merton wrote to her before he kept letters he received or copies of letters he wrote. In this case, he kept a carbon planning to use it in *Cold War Letters*. Merton’s superiors forbade him to publish the book, which did not appear in his lifetime.¹¹

Merton’s letter to Carson reflected not only his growing concern about the impact of technology on nature, but also his self-understanding as monk and writer. In *Thoughts in Solitude*, Merton wrote that some technological advances undermined one’s true humanity.

When men are merely submerged in a mass of impersonal human beings pushed around by automatic forces, they lose their true humanity, their integrity, their ability to love, their capacity for self-determination No amount of technological progress will cure the hatred that eats away the vitals of materialistic society like a spiritual cancer. The only cure is, and must always be, spiritual. There is not much use talking to men about God and love if they are not able to listen.¹²

Merton recognized that our devices had become like angels—or the devil—something in the realm of the sacred that had come to stand between us and the real world. A characteristic of modernity that troubled Merton was a lack of awareness of this numbing of the spiritual dimension of human beings.

In a poem entitled “Exploits of a Machine Age,” Merton captures the emptiness of modern, technological society. A couple awakens one morning, again dismayed

By their own thin faces in the morning. They
Hoped they would not die today, either.
They hoped for some light
Breakfast and a steady hand.

The couple flee to their “protected work” and “unsafe machinery” by which they lived empty lives while their employers lived well. At the end of the day, the machines are safe, nothing at all having happened. Literally

10. Merton to Carson, January 12, 1963, in Merton, *Witness to Freedom*, 70–72.

11. In 2006, Orbis Books published *Cold War Letters*, edited by Christine M. Bochen and William H. Shannon.

12. Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*, xii.

nothing. The couple return to their grim dwellings, “muttering.” “Better luck tomorrow!”¹³

Merton drew on important twentieth-century thinkers, including writer Albert Camus (1913–60), mentioned often in Merton’s journals and essays, and sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) who characterized modern people as living at loose ends, a treadmill-like existence called *anomie*. For Merton, this constituted formless living driven by an insatiable will, a sort of derangement.

Merton explained that technology was not in itself opposed to spirituality or to religion. Rather, technology had become a great and dangerous temptation. Merton warned that there can be “a deadening of spirit and of sensibility, a blunting of perception, a loss of awareness, a lowering of tone, a general fatigue and lassitude, a proneness to unrest and guilt which we might be less likely to suffer if we simply went out and worked with our hands in the woods or the fields.” Merton invoked the possibility that good means could result in bad ends. As a result, he insisted on the need for “a certain prudence . . . in the use of machines.”

For Merton, it was imperative to leave to God the sanctification of our own nature, “the temple of our being.” Technology could fulfill its promise only by serving all that is higher than itself—reason, humankind, God. “But becoming autonomous, existing only for itself, it [technology] imposes upon man its own irrational demands, and threatens to destroy him. Let us hope it is not too late for man to regain control.”¹⁴

This awareness sustained Merton, who faithfully observed the spiritual disciplines of Benedictine monasticism, including meditation, confession, and the Liturgy of the Hours. Such practices enabled Christians to “reach and realize their limit” while recognizing that their praise and other practices could not “attain to God” but “reach not only the heart of God but also the heart of creation itself, finding everywhere the beauty of the righteousness of Yahweh.”¹⁵

In the passage that followed, Merton highlighted the importance of the “night spirit” and “dawn breath” in restoring to life the forest that has been cut down. Merton cited the Ox Mountain parable of Mencius, who lived during the fourth century before the Common Era in China. Many Chinese regard Mencius as their Second Sage after Confucius.

13. Merton, *Collected Poems*, 237–38. The poem first appeared in *The Strange Islands* (1957), a collection dedicated to Mark Van Doren, who supervised Merton’s graduate work at the Columbia University, and Dorothy Van Doren.

14. Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 25–26, 77.

15. Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 136–37.

Even though the Ox Mountain forest has been cut to the ground, if the mountain is left to rest and recuperate in the night and the dawn, the trees will return. But men cut them down, cattle browse on the new shoots: no night spirit, no dawn breath—no rest, no renewal—and finally one is convinced that there never were any woods on the Ox Mountain. So, Mencius concludes, with human nature. Without the night spirit the dawn breath, silence, passivity, rest, man's nature cannot be itself. In its barrenness it is no longer *natura*: nothing grows from it, nothing is born of it any more.¹⁶

Merton regarded the Ox Mountain story as showing how human nature was created good but later corrupted. For Merton, the story offered parallels with the Abrahamic religions and was important in his quest for a spirituality by which he could satisfy his need for unhurriedness. Having escaped the “busy-ness” of the world, Merton found monastic life too frenetic.

Fascinated by spiritual paths offering alternatives to values of technological culture, Merton looked to aboriginal peoples, those who in his view exemplified the qualities he sought. Merton's Cistercian colleague Matthew Kelty, mentioned in the introduction to this book, was a crucial resource. Kelty had served as missionary in Papua New Guinea from 1947 to 1951. Around 1970, he lived there in a hermitage. In 1982, he returned to Gethsemani.

Kelty had studied cargo cults, messianic movements that appeared sporadically, notably during and immediately after World War II in Papua New Guinea. The aboriginal people saw troops based in their islands importing large quantities of material goods. After the war, the military bases closed, thereby eliminating a source of goods and income. Attempting to gain further deliveries of goods, indigenous people initiated cargo cults in which they engaged in ritualistic practices like building crude landing strips, aircraft, and radio equipment. They imitated behavior and dress of the troops. Merton saw parallels between the cargo cults and themes in apocalyptic literature and other phenomena sweeping the modern world. A universal feature of these social movements was to attack everything old and to create something new.

Merton read *Mambu* by anthropologist Kenelm Burridge and reviewed the book in an essay, “Cargo Cults of the South Pacific.” Merton

16. Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 137. See *Sources of Chinese Tradition* for references to Mencius and the Ox-Bow parable. In my earlier book *Thomas Merton: Twentieth-Century Wisdom for Twenty-First-Century Living*, I devote chapter 6 to Merton on “Care of Earth.” Other scholars also highlight Merton's love of nature, including Kathleen Deignan and Monica Weis; also, “Forest Is My Bride.”

resonated with Burridge's idea of a New Man, a fusion of white and Kanaka who will get cargo. Merton saw this as paralleling unreal, mythlike expectations regarding technology. Merton concluded this was dangerous.

If our white Western myth-dream demands of us that we spiritually enslave others in order to "save" them, we should not be surprised when their own myth-dream demands of them that they get entirely free of us to save themselves. But both the white man's and the native's myth-dreams are only partial and inadequate expression of the whole truth. It is not that the primitive needs to be dominated by the white man in order to become fully human. Nor is it that he needs to get rid of the white man. Each needs the other to cooperate in the common enterprise of building a world adequate for the historical maturity of man.¹⁷

A careful reader of indigenous spiritualities, Merton worried about ongoing devastation by human beings of the natural world. He raised concern about ecological balance, and the need for people to unite technology and wisdom in total self-forgetful creativity and service. "It would however be insufficient to limit Christian obligation, in the present crisis, merely to a course of action that can be somehow reconciled with moral principles. The problem is deeper. What is needed is a social action that will have the power to renew society because it springs *from the inner renewal of the Christian and of his church.*" Merton saw the basic problem of his time as "basically spiritual. One important aspect of this problem is the fact that in many Christians, the Christian conscience seems to function only in rudimentary vestigial faculty, robbed of its full vigor and inescapable of attaining its real purpose: a life completely transformed in Christ."¹⁸

Merton wrote prior to the publication of writings that have enabled Christians today to recover spiritual practices of Christians in the first and second centuries of the Common Era. For Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, among myriad authors, by the third century Christians had exchanged crucifixion for empire. Brock and Parker believed communities were needed to train perception and teach ethical grace. "Paradise provides deep reservoirs for resistance and joy. It calls us to embrace life's aching tragedies and persistent beauties, to labor for justice and peace, to honor one another's dignity, and to root our lives in the soil of this good and difficult earth."¹⁹

17. Merton, *Love and Living*, 94.

18. Merton, *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*, 149.

19. Brock and Parker, *Saving Paradise*, 410; also, White, "Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," 1203–7.

Merton's considerable gifts included his call to live respectfully on earth, to leave light footprints, and to relate to communities respectful of the integrity of creation. Merton worried that humans had come to believe technology could fix whatever problems life presented. He sounded an alarm similar to those of the wider global environmental movement that emerged in his lifetime. By April 1970, less than two years after Merton died, more than 300,000 people in the United States, and greater numbers worldwide, took part in Earth Day. At the time, it was the largest environmental demonstration in history.

Writing on April 22, 2020, the fiftieth anniversary of Earth Day, I recognize the extent to which climate catastrophe has intensified the importance of addressing climate change as well as other threats to life on earth. Merton contributed to a growing movement to prioritize care of earth and refusal to identify nationals of countries with which the United States was at war as enemy. On May 26, 1966, a time when the United States was at war with North Vietnam, he met Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh, whom Merton called his brother.²⁰

Merton also called for demilitarizing life by refusing to consent to preparation for what could lead to the destruction of all life in a nuclear war. "Our duty . . . is to help emphasize with all the force in our disposal that the Church earnestly seeks the abolition of war . . . underscore declarations like those of Pope John XXIII pleading with world leaders to renounce force in the settlement of international disputes and confine themselves to negotiations."²¹

Merton called on us to simplify our lives as a step to giving up attachment to the relative prosperity of the United States and the West.²² Merton understood that humans, having the power to destroy, also had the power and the freedom to nurture, to look beyond the glitter of modern Western society, and to contribute to saving humanity. Debunking the "ethic of expediency and efficiency," decrying nationalism, which he saw as inevitably leading to war, and denouncing all that the automobile had come to represent, Merton believed that "we have created for ourselves a culture that is not yet livable for mankind as a whole." This failure was at the heart of "all contemporary American problems: race, war, the crisis of marriage, the

20. Merton, *Passion for Peace*, 260–62.

21. Merton, *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*, 155.

22. Chapter 4, "Thomas Merton on Simplification of Life," in my *Thomas Merton: Twentieth-Century Wisdom*.

flight from reality into myth and fanaticism, the growing brutality and irrationality of American mores.”²³

Not without hope, Merton saw humans as part of a world God had created and pronounced good. Merton believed it possible to channel technology along a better path, contribute to the healing of paradise lost, and restore the integrity of creation.

SAMPLE

23. Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 73, 76.