

Intersubjectivity and Reciprocal Causality within Contemporary Understanding of the God-World Relationship

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Contemplation and the Suffering Earth: Thomas Merton, Pope Francis, and the Next Generation

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Abstract: During his address to the US Congress in 2015, Pope Francis lifted up the Trappist monk and famed spiritual writer Thomas Merton as one of four "great" Americans who "offer us a way of seeing and interpreting reality" that is life-giving and brings hope. Drawing from Merton and gesturing to Pope Francis's 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si'*, the author explores the epistemological roots of the environmental crisis, arguing that while intellectual conversion to the crisis is crucial, Merton's witness suggests a deeper kind of transformation is required. Reading Merton schools the imagination in the way of wisdom, or *sapientia*, a contemplative disposition that senses its kinship with Earth through the eyes of the heart, illuminating what Pope Francis has called "an integral ecology." The author considers the impact of two major influences on Merton's thought: the Russian Wisdom school of theology, or sophiology, and French theologian Jacques Ellul, whose 1964 book "The Technological Society" raises prescient questions about the role of technology in education and spiritual formation. Arguing that our present crisis is both technological and spiritual, epistemological and metaphysical, the author foregrounds Merton's contributions to a sapiential theology and theopoetics while asking how the sciences and humanities might work together more intentionally toward the transformation of the personal and collective human heart.

Keywords: *Laudato Si*', sapiential theology, Russian sophiology, Sergius Bulgakov, Jacques Ellul, Andrew Sullivan, environmental crisis, Virtual Reality, wisdom awareness, *Hagia Sophia*

The poetry of the earth is never dead.

John Keats

During his address to the US Congress on September 24, 2015, Pope Francis lifted up Thomas Merton as one of four "great" Americans who "offer us," as he put it, "a way of seeing and interpreting reality" that is life-giving and brings hope.¹ The others were Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Dorothy Day. For Catholics like myself, who have long admired all four figures but Merton and Day in particular as an exemplary models of Catholic intellectual and spiritual life, it was a thrilling moment, affirming not only Merton and Day but also throwing light on the kind of witness that Francis is urging upon us today, as the world faces an uncertain future. Pope Francis described Merton as a man of paradoxes, "a man of prayer, a thinker who challenged the certitudes of his time and opened new horizons for souls and for the church.

¹ Pope Francis, "Address of the Holy Father, United States Capitol, Washington, D.C., Thursday, 24 September 2015."

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He was also a man of dialogue, a promoter of peace between peoples and religions." Though he did not say so then, the pope might have also lifted up Merton's legacy as a peacemaker between human beings and the Earth: Merton the contemplative who gives us, if you will, an implicit metaphysics and theology of the planet.

In the opening paragraph of his encyclical Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home, promulgated just months before his visit to the United States, Pope Francis cites St. Francis of Assisi to call the global human community toward a radical renewal of its relationship with Earth, "our common home, who is like a sister with whom we share our life and a beautiful mother who opens her arms to embrace us. 'Praise be to you, my Lord, through our Sister, Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us, and who produces various fruit with coloured flowers and herbs." But then, like the proverbial canary in the coal mine, Francis gives voice to the Earth's present suffering, a kind of mirror, he suggests, of the alienation and violence that infects our own hearts.

This sister now cries out to us because of the harm we have inflicted on her by our irresponsible use and abuse of the goods with which God has endowed her. We have come to see ourselves as her lords and masters, entitled to plunder her at will. The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life. This is why the earth herself, burdened and laid waste, is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor; she "groans in travail" (Rom 8:22). We have forgotten that we ourselves are dust of the earth (cf. Gen 2:7); our very bodies are made up of her elements, we breathe her air and we receive life and refreshment from her waters.4

I remember vividly the release of this encyclical on June 18, 2015, and how prophetic and somewhat surreal its words seemed to me on that morning, principally because on June 17, the night before, nine African Americans were shot dead in a church basement in Charleston, South Carolina, by a young white man whom they had welcomed into their midst—a man who would tell police hours later that he wanted to start a race war. It was in the atmosphere of that unthinkable event that I first read Francis' assertion that there "can be no renewal of our relationship with nature without a renewal of humanity itself. . . . We are not faced with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather one complex crisis which is both social and environmental."5

If there is golden thread that joins Pope Francis and Thomas Merton in challenging "the certitudes" of our times, perhaps it is that prophetic wisdom for which the pope's namesake, Saint Francis of Assisi, is most celebrated: the fate of suffering Earth and the fate of all God's creatures are not separate but are bound beautifully, integrally, and urgently together. To the extent the manifold social and environmental crises of our times do not paralyze us, they give rise to creative theological thought: what images and stories of hope can we offer the next generation? How to reimagine and reanimate our elemental notions of the divine-cosmic-human relationship? Indeed the great struggle and beautiful invitation for theology in our times seems to be the need for a radical renewal of theological anthropology: a vision and corresponding praxis of the human person and human community linked organically to the whole, to all creatures and the entire Cosmos, wherein the imago Dei saturates our reverence for and celebration of the "all in all." There can be no renewal of our relationship with nature without a renewal of humanity itself. That strikes me as a very Mertonian statement.6

My principle concern in this essay is the education and spiritual formation of young people with regard to the present "complex crisis which is both social and environmental." How to cultivate in the

² Ibid.

³ Pope Francis, Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home (hereafter LS), see 10-12.

⁴ LS 2.

⁵ LS 139, 118.

⁶ The link between anthropology, theology, and ecology is everywhere implicit and often explicit in Merton's nature writings and in innumerable social essays; it surfaces powerfully as well in his frequent laments for the West's (and Christian Europe's) refusal to learn from the ancient sapiential traditions of the conquered indigenous peoples of Mexico and Latin and North America. See Merton, When the Trees Say Nothing: Writings on Nature; Weis, The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton; Horan, The Franciscan Heart of Thomas Merton; Fox, A Way to God: Thomas Merton's Creation Spirituality.

next generation a more palpable sense of communion with nature and sensitivity for the "symptoms of sickness" increasingly manifest in all forms of life? How to help them fall in love with the suffering Earth, so inextricably linked to suffering humanity? The intuition I develop in part I is that intellectual conversion to the environmental crisis, while crucial—and mediated especially by the scientific disciplines—is not enough. Merton's witness as both monk and writer suggests a deeper transformation is required, an opening of the heart and imagination. Reading Merton schools the imagination in a more holistic and participatory way of being in the world, cultivating the seeds of a contemplative orientation that senses its kinship with Earth, "our common home," through the eyes of the heart. Merton's theopoetical vision reorients the reader's imagination toward what Pope Francis in Laudato Si' has called "an integral ecology." This is especially evident in Merton's 1961 prose poem Hagia Sophia, the fruition of his long engagement with the Russian school of Wisdom theologians, whose "sophiology" we consider in part II. As Merton would insist fifty years ago, our crisis is at once scientific and spiritual, epistemological and metaphysical.⁸ How might the university disciplines, from STEM subjects to the humanities, work together toward the needed transformation of the human heart? In addressing this question, educators today cannot fail to consider the significant role of new technologies in shaping human consciousness. In part III we examine the impact on Merton's thinking of French philosopher Jacques Ellul, whose critical questions regarding the technological milieu and its implications for education seem to me quite prescient.

A last preliminary note. As a theologian at a Jesuit Catholic university, I can get away with fairly vigorous appeals in the classroom to biblical, mystical, and prophetic aspects of the Christian tradition. At the same time, explicitly theological appeals tend to fall on deaf ears with my students if they are not grounded in and reinforced by appeal to common human experience, and thus to disciplines that extend well beyond theology and the sciences: storytelling and music, poetry and the arts. Both Merton and Pope Francis, I suggest in part IV, share experiential and poetic impulses that resonate across disciplinary boundaries which, in the university context, tend to divide and compartmentalize. Their theopoetical sensibilities find broad purchase in the imaginations of all sorts of readers, not least young people from diverse backgrounds.

1 Merton and contemplation: bringing wisdom (sapientia) down to Earth

One of the richest yet least cited of Merton's many journals is the last one he prepared for publication before his death, a little volume called *Woods*, *Shore*, *Desert*, which draws from a small notebook that he kept during a visit to California and New Mexico, May 6-20, 1968. He first travelled to Our Lady of the Redwoods Abbey on the northern coast, to give some conferences to the Trappist sisters living there, then to San Francisco, where he visited his friend, poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and finally to Abiquiu, New Mexico, where he spent several days at the Benedictine Monastery of Christ in the Desert. In part, Merton was keeping his eyes open for another possible hermitage site that would permit him to live in deeper solitude than he was able to maintain at Our Lady of Gethsemani, in Kentucky, where he had a constant stream of visitors. Also on his mind as he travelled the American west was his forthcoming trip to Asia—a final pilgrimage during which he would meet his unexpected death. Notes on Hindu sages and Chinese poets that he was reading are peppered throughout the journal. "I am as tired of talking and writing as if I had done it for centuries. Now it is time to listen at length to this Asian ocean. Over there, Asia."

⁷ LS 10, 11, 62, 124, 137-162, 230; and on "ecological conversion," LS 5, 216-21.

⁸ On Merton as mystical (and sapiential) theologian, see Pramuk, *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton*; in a more narrative and poetical key, Pramuk, *At Play in Creation: Merton's Awakening to the Feminine Divine.* For a compact overview, see Pramuk, "Wisdom Our Sister: Thomas Merton's Reception of Russian Sophiology"; with attention to interfaith dialogue, see Pramuk, "Something Breaks through a Little"; with attention to suffering and feminist models of God, see Pramuk, "Theodicy and the Feminine Divine."

⁹ Merton, Woods, Shore, Desert.

¹⁰ Ibid., 20.

Perhaps the most striking feature of Woods, Shore, Desert is the photographs Merton took which accompany the text. Merton was "a man of the earth," and the camera, an extension of his contemplative eye. Thus both in enigmatic words and evocative images he captures the grand vistas of California's forests and coastlines, the grandeur of New Mexico's rocky canyons, the beauty of ordinary things everywhere: leaves, tree trunks, a stretch of beach littered with washed-up debris. Only one of the photographs he took has people in it: a wonderful shot (if slightly out of focus!) of Georgia O'Keeffe and anthropologist Peter Nabokov taken outside O'Keefe's home in Abiquiu. On one of his last nights at the Monastery of Christ in the Desert, Merton writes:

Up the canyon from where I now sit, a couple of miles below the monastery, there is the heavy, domed architecture of a fat mountain ringed with pillared red cliffs Fresh wind, song of an ordinary robin in the low gnarled cedars. . . .

Last night at dusk, the three tame white ducks went running very fast through the green alfalfa to the river, plunging into the swift waters, swimming to the other side, standing up in the shallows, flapping their white wings. Then the fourth discovered their absence and followed them through another corner of the alfalfa field.

The calls of the crows here in New Mexico as in California, are more muted, more melodious, briefer, less insistent than in the east. The crows seem to be flying at a greater psychic altitude, in a different realm. . . . a realm of high rocks and stunted pinon pine.12

A few weeks later, writing from his hermitage in the Kentucky woods, Merton dreams of the giant redwoods of California, "Who can see such trees and bear to be away from them? I must go back. It is not right that I should die under lesser trees."13

Recently I assigned students in my freshmen theology class to read "Rain and the Rhinoceros," 14 one of Merton's most beautifully realized essays. One of my students—like nearly all, she was brand new to Merton—wrote in her journal as follows:

Over the course of ten pages Thomas Merton made me the most confused college student in the world. By the time I finished reading those same ten pages the second time, Thomas Merton made me feel like one of the most enlightened people on the planet. The way Merton writes reminds me of the way waves crash on the shore of a beach. He makes a statement that hits you and then slowly seduces you into believing whatever he wants you to believe.

How does Merton do it? How does he confuse, disturb, crash into, seduce, and finally enlighten his readers, very often by turns in the same passage? Merton gives us a clue to his own artistry in a pivotal essay of 1959 on the Russian writer Boris Pasternak, when he describes Pasternak as "a poet and a musician," and the "structure" of Pasternak's novel, Dr. Zhivago, as "symphonic, thematic, almost liturgical." Much like Pasternak or any gifted poet, Merton "seduces" the reader not in the first place by advancing a chain of ideas, but rather by enclosing you in an atmosphere of wakefulness, of presence, and finally, as if by stealth, the divine Mercy. "Think of it," he writes in "Rain and the Rhinoceros," "all that speech pouring down, selling nothing, judging nobody."16 In Merton's hands, the rain falling through the forest canopy makes a peaceful noise, soaking the earth in eddies of protest against "the technological Platos who think they now run the world."17 Like waves crashing on the shores of our consciousness, Merton writes "by rhythms that are not those of the engineer,"18 rhythms we almost recognize but have largely forgotten. Like fish swimming in an ocean of grace, Merton reminds us: This is water. This is water.

My own introduction to Merton came at age 15, when my mother gave me an old copy of The Sign of Jonas, a journal from the early 1950s, and I came upon one of the most celebrated meditations in all of Merton's corpus, "Fire Watch: July 4, 1952." It begins with Merton putting on his sneakers and making his

¹¹ Weishaus, "Introduction," in Merton, Woods, Shore, Desert, xi.

¹² Merton, Woods, Shore, Desert, 32-34.

¹³ Ibid., 46.

¹⁴ Thomas Merton, Raids on the Unspeakable, 9-23.

¹⁵ See Merton, "The Pasternak Affair."

¹⁶ Merton, Raids on the Unspeakable, 10.

¹⁷ Ibid., 161.

¹⁸ Ibid., 9.

way up from the bowels of the monastery, walking in silence and darkness through its various rooms and hallways, checking for the risk of fire. It ends as he ascends the abbey tower and swings the door open "upon a vast sea of darkness and of prayer."

Now the huge chorus of living beings rises up out of the world beneath my feet: life singing in the watercourses, throbbing in the creeks and the fields and the trees, choirs of millions and millions of jumping and flying and creeping things. I lay the clock upon the belfry ledge and pray cross-legged with my back against the tower, and face the same unanswered question. Lord God of this great night: do You see the woods? Do You hear the rumor of their loneliness? Do you behold their secrecy? Do You remember their solitudes? Do You see that my soul is beginning to dissolve like wax within me?¹⁹

"The world is charged with the grandeur of God," wrote the great Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins. Merton's lesson to me, as a 15 year old boy, was: "Pay attention, you might miss it."

Whether walking in the woods surrounding the monastery or standing barefoot before the great stone statues of the Buddha at Pollanaruwa in Asia, a month before his death, what Merton describes in so many classic passages is not a chain of "peak experiences," here one moment, gone the next; rather he witnesses to a whole-bodied communion with reality, where divinity dances before us and in us, "in all things." Like the birds of California and New Mexico, Merton seems at once to "be flying at a greater psychic altitude" than most and bearing his readers with him into "a different realm," but then we suddenly find ourselves "plunging [with him] into the swift waters, standing up in the shallows," and airing out our "white wings." Merton is a poet of the liminal spaces of our lives, where sacred mystery breaks in, casting everything in a different sort of light. When Jesus of Nazareth prefaced his teachings with the words, "let those with eyes to see, see, and those with ears to hear, hear," scholars tell us he was speaking as a teacher of Jewish wisdom, appealing not just to the head but to the heart and imagination, the body and the senses, the whole person of the listener. The same is true with Merton. In effect the wisdom teacher invites us to sit *in the belly of a paradox*: listen to the silences, hear the forgotten voices, let the music of things seen and unseen speak to you. God is here, and everywhere present, coming toward us in the wind on the air, the rustle of the trees, in the voice of the stranger; but can we believe it?

Several decades after my introduction to Merton, it was the prose poem *Hagia Sophia*, his hymn to Holy Wisdom, the feminine face of God, which captured my religious imagination. The flowering in Merton of years of meditation on the Wisdom literature of the Bible, it is his most lyric expression of "Christ being born into the whole world,"²¹ especially in that which is most poor and hidden. It is a hymn of peace, *and of peacemaking*, with the Earth.

There is in all visible things an invisible fecundity, a dimmed light, a meek namelessness, a hidden wholeness. This mysterious Unity and Integrity is Wisdom, the Mother of all, *Natura naturans*. There is in all things an inexhaustible sweetness and purity, a silence that is a fount of action and joy. It rises up in wordless gentleness and flows out to me from the unseen roots of all created being, welcoming me tenderly, saluting me with indescribable humility. This is at once my own being, my own nature, and the Gift of my Creator's Thought and Art within me, speaking as Hagia Sophia, speaking as my sister, Wisdom.²²

The poem reanimates the dynamics of faith—and theology—in a sapiential key, the key of Wisdom. By distinction from *intellectus*, or the scientific method, *sapientia* invokes a participatory way of knowing in which the whole person is opened to the encounter with the sacred that surrounds and shines from within all things. Having himself struggled to make peace with alienated parts of his own life and perception of reality—"that part of the garden I never went to"²³—the poem offers a vision of faith fully reconciled with the body, with the feminine, with Earth. In *Hagia Sophia* Merton not only anticipates the concerns of

¹⁹ Merton, The Sign of Jonas, 360.

²⁰ From "God's Grandeur," a poem with a long history in the literature of eco-theology; cited in *Gerard Manley Hopkins: The Major Works*, 128.

²¹ Merton, A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's Life. Vol. 3, 197.

²² Merton, Hagia Sophia, 61.

²³ Merton, A Vow of Conversation: Journals, 193-94.

feminist and environmentalist theologies, he gives us, as Merton scholar Christopher Nugent has put it, "an elemental model on the birthing of peace."24

The image of "birthing" is exactly right: in Merton's writings we behold the birthing of new insight over the course of a lifetime, at once the *rebirthing* of ancient memories and intuitions of the divine long forgotten—and thus, I suggest, the theopoetical groundwork for the development of doctrine. Especially in his last decade, Merton brings Wisdom fully down to Earth, down to street level, initiating readers of diverse backgrounds into the realization of God's radical immanence in the creation, illuminating the mystery of the Incarnation "in its global totality and [movement] beneath the events of our time." Merton defines sapientia as "a kind of knowledge by identification, an intersubjective knowledge, a communion in cosmic awareness and in nature.... a wisdom based on love."25 Its concern is not fixing upon "a system of truths which explain life" so much as "deepening our communion with the concrete," cultivating in ourselves and in others "a certain depth of awareness in which life itself is lived more intensely and with a more meaningful direction."²⁶ In other words, there is nothing abstract or esoteric for Merton about contemplative or sapiential realization. "It is simply opening yourself to receive. The presence of God is like walking out of a door into the fresh air. You don't concentrate on the fresh air, you breathe it. And you don't concentrate on the sunlight, you just enjoy it. It is all around."27 In a late essay, Merton writes:

Sapientia is the Latin word for "wisdom." And wisdom in the classic, as well as the Biblical, tradition is something quite definite. It is the highest level of cognition. It goes beyond scientia, which is systematic knowledge, beyond intellectus, which is intuitive understanding. It has deeper penetration and wider range than either of these. It embraces the entire scope of man's life and all its meaning Wisdom is not only speculative, but also practical: that is to say, it is "lived." And unless one "lives" it, one cannot "have" it. It is not only speculative but creative. It is expressed in living signs and symbols.28

This passage offers a concise summation both of Merton's mature epistemology (wisdom is "the highest level of cognition"; it is "not only speculative," but it is "lived") and his mature theological method (wisdom is "expressed in living signs and symbols"; it embraces the whole of life "and all its meaning"). The point to emphasize is this: whereas "communication" in its manifold interdisciplinary forms takes place between a subject and a perceived object or field of study, sapientia opens onto a realm of "communion" beyond the division: "it is a sharing in basic unity" which "does not necessarily imply a 'pantheist metaphysic." 29 Nor does sapientia exclude truths gained through science. To the contrary, suggests Merton, a sapiential dimension of knowing "gives a new dimension to science. What would our world of science be, if only we had wisdom?"30

It is crucial to emphasize that Merton's sapiential or sophianic awareness did not come to him in isolation but was the fruition in him of years of engagement not only with biblical Wisdom literature but also with Zen Buddhism and Eastern Orthodoxy, above all, the Russian diaspora theologians of the Sophia tradition: Vladimir Soloviev, Sergius Bulgakov, and Paul Evdokimov, among others. While it is beyond the scope of this essay to offer a synthesis of the Russian school, a brief description will support my claim here that Merton's Hagia Sophia goes some distance in reclaiming for Western theology a more integral sensibility with respect to natural world.31

²⁴ Nugent, "Pax Heraclitus," 18.

²⁵ Merton, The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton, 108.

²⁶ Merton, Literary Essays, 98.

²⁷ Cited in Henry and Montaldo, eds., Merton and Hesychasm, 454.

²⁸ Merton, Literary Essays, 98.

²⁹ Merton, Love and Living, 73.

³⁰ Ibid., 68.

³¹ Merton is but one of a host of Catholic and Christian authors whose work unfolds at the edges of contemplation and environmentalism. The poetry and essays of Merton's contemporaries Denise Levertov (This Great Unknowing: Last Poems) and Wendell Berry (This Day: Collected and New Sabbath Poems) harbinger more recent works in "spiritual ecology," e.g., Christie, The Blue Sapphire of the Mind.

2 Toward a sapiential/sophianic metaphysics: Merton and Russian theology

The name "Sophia," of course, is the Greek word for "Wisdom," and a biblical name for God or the divine feminine. Her presence is found (and hidden) especially in the biblical Wisdom books, where she appears as a kind of divine Child or Presence within creation itself, God-with-Us in the dance of Life as it springs from the natural world (Prov. 8:22-31; Wis. 7:22-30), and where she is also personified as a Woman and Prophet crying out from the crossroads of the city, bringing hope especially to the "little" and "poor," beckoning human beings to imagine a future of justice and peace (Prov. 1:20; 8:1-4). For the Russian theologians, the name Sophia serves to dramatize the transformative meeting of two freedoms, as it were, the human encounter with God's love in creation and, above all, the invitation to participate in the co-creative dance of Life and Love as it plays out in every realm of history and culture. To remember and reclaim God in the key of Wisdom is to affirm the seeds of divinization everywhere in the world and also—and here is both its distinctiveness and its locus controversy—the eternal presence of "the world in God," as it were, the "body of God" in the material cosmos.³² If God's life is Love "from all eternity—Love which is always going beyond itself and creating that which has no source other than Divine Love," what Russian sophiology adds to traditional Trinitarian theology is a bold attempt to spell out just how radically "God and the created order intrinsically belong together, rather than being conceived as fundamental opposites," something that the doctrine of creation ex nihilo tends to suggest.³³

At the heart of Bulgakov's Trinitarian metaphysics—and resonant throughout Merton's Wisdomhaunted writings—is a "two-way energeticism," the dance of synergism or spark of interrelationality "in between" the Persons of the Trinity that spills over creatively and kenotically in creation's becoming, such that, as Paul Valliere explains, "the cosmos is viewed as being governed not just by the condescension of the divine in creation and salvation but by the heavenwards aspiration of all creatures." For Bulgakov, the Chalcedonian dogma of Jesus' divine-humanity "carries within itself not simply a Christological assertion, but also necessarily cosmological, soteriological and anthropological assertions." The world is neither necessary nor arbitrary: God *chooses* "not to be God without the world," and by nature of God's very Beingas-Love, God chooses so eternally. The name Sophia is "a way of speaking about the non-arbitrariness" of God's relation to the universe, revealed consummately for Christians in the "two-way" dynamism of Lovebecoming-flesh within the creation, in God, from God, and back to God: the Incarnation.

The sophianic perspective envisions the entire world as "one corporeality and one body," though it is not always clear whether this body "is that of Sophia, or of Christ, or of both united at the end of time." For Bulgakov the sanctification of the world, including the "transfiguration of the flesh," is heralded clearly and unambiguously in the Bible: "God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good" (Gen 1:31). "From the earth," says Bulgakov, "from Great Mother Earth, was created everything that exists." There are hints here of Jewish kabbalism's notion of *zimzum*, a mystical narrative with strong maternal (sophianic) overtones. By contrast to creation *ex nihilo* through a sheer act of omnipotent power, here God freely and lovingly wills to "open a space" in Godself for the world from "before the beginning" and in the flowering of time. Bulgakov comes close here, as Valliere notes, to Anglo-American process theology, and

³² See Pramuk, Sophia, 233-45.

³³ Louth, "Wisdom and the Russians: The Sophiology of Fr. Sergei Bulgakov," 173. The best introduction to sophiology in the English language is Bulgakov's *Sophia: The Wisdom of God*, a mature work (orig. 1937) written with Western readers in mind, and the book that introduced Merton to Bulgakov. In what follows I also rely on Valliere, *Modern Russian Theology: Bukharev, Soloviev, Bulgakov: Orthodox Theology in a New Key*; Evtuhov, *The Cross and the Sickle: Sergei Bulgakov and the Fate of Russian Religious Philosophy*; Williams, *Sergeii Bulgakov: Towards a Russian Political Theology*; Kornblatt and Gustafson, eds., *Russian Religious Thought*.

³⁴ Valliere, Modern Russian Theology, 270.

³⁵ Tataryn, "History Matters: Bulgakov's Sophianic Key."

³⁶ Williams, Sergeii Bulgakov, 169, and 169 n24.

³⁷ Rosenthal, "The Nature and Function of Sophia in Sergei Bulgakov's Prerevolutionary Thought," 167.

³⁸ Cited in Rosenthal, "The Nature and Function of Sophia," 167.

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even, as Rowan Williams suggests, to the divine-world relation as articulated by Protestant theologian Karl Barth.39

More freely and poetically, then, Sophia is the "love of Love" in the heart of the Trinity and at once Love's eternal object, kenotically birthed and sustained as the creation, God's pleasure, joy, and play. She enters the world of dark chaos, of inert matter, bridging all subject-object dualisms and illumining the world with the light of the transfigured Logos/Christ. Sophia is the active and dynamic pivot or force within nature, natura naturans, the anima mundi; her rays activate and energize human beings. Sophia is the cloak between God and the world, neither reducible to one nor the other, but something that both unites and distinguishes God and the world. She is revealed above all as beauty; indeed, mining the iconographic roots of Byzantine spirituality, Bulgakov will suggest that art, rather than philosophy, is the direct way to know her. It is not incidental that Merton, too, would shift his attention in later years from traditional theological frameworks to literary criticism, photography, calligraphy, and experimental poetic forms. And once again, as with Merton's understanding of contemplation, Bulgakov's celebration of the mutuality between the "holy flesh" of humanity (Adam) and "matter-mother" (the earth) is anything but abstract. He writes:

Great mother, grey earth! In you we are born, you feed us, we touch you with our feet, to you we return. Children of the earth love their mother, kiss her, wipe her tears, because they are her flesh and blood. For nothing perishes in her; she preserves everything in herself, the silent memory of the world that gives life and fruit to all. He who does not love the earth, does not feel her maternity, is a slave and an alien, a pitiful rebel against the mother You silently preserve in yourself the fullness and all the beauty of creation.40

The invocation of earth as the silent memoria of God, seeded in soil and rock, wind and water, makes clear that Bulgakov's theology of "sacred corporeality" has little to do with bucolic sentimentalism, or literaryromantic aestheticizations of nature. Indeed, the passage calls to mind ancient Native and Latin American spiritualities that were so compelling to Merton in the last decade of his life.

Of course one hardly has to be a theologian or poet to acknowledge that the earth "gives life and fruit to all," or to lament the degree to which modern society threatens the environmental matrix of life and being. "The fate of nature," as Bulgakov asserted some eighty years ago, "suffering and awaiting its liberation, is henceforth connected with the fate of man, who 'subdues' it; the new heaven and new earth now enter as a necessary element into the composition of Christian eschatology."41 This is an astonishing insight. Long before the emergence of environmental theologies in the West, Bulgakov was not only advancing a theological "justification of the world to the guardians of divine truth" but observing further that the natural world suffers and groans for final "liberation." Bulgakov would spend two decades working out the implications of Soloviev's view of nature and of sacred corporeality in the rather mundane workaday realms of economics, agriculture, and social and political theory. Mirroring concerns of Catholic social teachings back to the 19th century, and anticipating Pope Francis in Laudato Si', Bulgakov sees the basis of personal and social ethics "in the call to active co-operation with the sophianic transfiguration of the world . . . [a world in which the characteristic human business is the transforming of an environment."⁴² The point recalls Francis: There can be no renewal of our relationship with nature without a renewal of humanity itself.

And finally we should not overlook the strong tenor of protest in Bulgakov's lament for those who do not love the earth or "feel her maternity." It is an intra-ecclesial protest, on the one hand, reflecting Bulgakov's rejection of the disdain for the world and the flesh that he saw in many of his fellow Orthodox

³⁹ See Pramuk, Sophia, 241-42; cf. Valliere, Modern Russian Theology, 300 n23, on how Bulgakov handles the doctrine of creatio ex nihilo. While Bulgakov saw that absolute pantheism leads to "the impious deification of the world," he was honest enough to admit that his sophiological vision "is also pantheism, only of a thoroughly pious kind." On what distinguishes his "pious pantheism" from an impious or idolatrous identification of God and the natural world and with human culture, see Pramuk, Sophia, 244-45.

⁴⁰ Cited in Rosenthal, "The Nature and Function of Sophia," 167.

⁴¹ Cited in Evtuhov, The Cross and the Sickle, 138-39.

⁴² Williams, Sergeii Bulgakov, 128-29. See also Willis Jenkins, Ecologies of Grace: Environmental Ethics and Christian Theology. Jenkins' final chapter, delightfully titled "Thinking Like a Transfigured Mountain," takes its inspiration from the Wisdom theology of Bulgakov.

"guardians of divine truth"—in Berdyaev's assertion, for example, that in the eschaton "womanliness will be confirmed in the aspect of virginity rather than motherhood."⁴³ But it also reflects Bulgakov's protest against the unyielding masculinity he saw ravaging the world around him, especially during World War I. "In effect," as Bernice Rosenthal suggests, "he was invoking Mother Russia against the German Fatherland, and 'feminine' qualities against 'masculine' ones—love rather than force, mediation rather than conflict, and selflessness rather than self-assertion, aggressiveness, and war. The abstract rationalism he hated is conventionally linked with a 'masculine' style of thought, and war has always been a 'masculine' affair."

Without question, Merton's invocation of Wisdom-Sophia during the 1960s—or better, her prophetic inbreaking into his consciousness—is cut from much the same cloth, that is, the cloth of *protest*. In the first place, in Merton's latter years he sought to confront honestly and come to healthier terms with the "flight from woman" crippling his own past relationships with women, and perhaps even crippling the prospects for renewal in the Catholic Church: "One wonders if our theological cautiousness is not after all the sign of a fatal coldness of heart, an awful sterility born of fear, or of despair?" Indeed, one wonders! But there is also his protest against the deadly "seriousness" of American power, its Promethean grasping for life that plays out tragically, in fact, as an addiction to death. Life under the shadow of war and its endless preparation wavers ever more desperately and unfreely between heroism and despair. "Eschatology" in such a climate becomes little more than "the last gasp of exhausted possibilities," as Merton laments, a secret desire "to get it all over with." Against such resignation and despair, the whole climate of the New Testament witnesses to "the flowering of ordinary possibilities" that are "hidden in everyday life," Merton insists. It remains for human beings to harvest the "fruits of hope that have never been seen before." This is the wonder, and the risk, of God's incarnation in creatures who are free.

This brings us back to Pope Francis. Much in the way Merton emphasizes the integration of poetic, religious, and scientific wisdom—*sapientia* and *scientia*, imagination and intellect—so also Francis in *Laudato Si*' articulates an integral ecology that dissolves crude oppositions between spirit and matter and dares us to imagine a planet that is not only self-aware but *sensually* aware of itself. In the soils and winds and waters, writes Francis, "the divine and the human meet in the slightest detail in the seamless garment of God's creation, in the last speck of dust of our planet." Of course this also implies the birthing of a radically re-imagined anthropology, a far more humble understanding of proper human limitations in relationship to nature and nonhuman creatures. Notions of growth, progress, and development—too often defined solely in terms of unrestrained free market capitalism—must be critically questioned and reexamined, literally and metaphorically, "from the ground up." Pope Francis's cross-disciplinary method in *Laudato Si*' begs a pedagogical question, within and beyond the church: How to form in the next generation a vision of the world "as a sacrament of communion, as a way of sharing with God and our neighbours on a global scale"?⁴⁹

A sapiential epistemology is at peace in the borderlands between intellect and imagination; it perceives by analogy what we might otherwise not perceive by a syllogism: that there is an underlying rhythm or pulse

⁴³ Cited in Rosenthal, "The Nature and Function of Sophia," 167; Berdyaev further maintained that "the new man [of the eschaton] would be a 'youth-maiden,' 'an androgynous new Adam-Christ, in whom 'there cannot be the differentiated and decadent life of sex,'" a view that Bulgakov attacked as anti-biblical and gnostic (ibid., 170).

⁴⁴ Rosenthal, "The Nature and Function of Sophia," 167.

⁴⁵ Merton, *A Search for Solitude*, 86. For a fascinating discussion of the role of both women and men in the Catholic Church, as well as Merton's rejection of various forms of gender "essentialism," see Merton's 1967 conference with religious sisters on "The Feminine Mystique," in *The Springs of Contemplation: A Retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani*.

⁴⁶ Merton, Raids on the Unspeakable, 175.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 159-60.

⁴⁸ LS 9.

⁴⁹ *LS* 9. For a rich and accessible primer in eco-theology by one of its leading thinkers and educators, including a sustained discussion Pope Francis' *Laudato Si*', see Deane-Drummond, *A Primer in Eco-Theology: Theology for a Fragile Earth.* Other Roman Catholic voices include Hart, *What Are They Saying about Environmental Theology;* Johnson, *Creation and the Cross: The Mercy of God for a Planet in Peril*, and *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love.* The emerging literature in eco-theology over the past several decades has often overlapped and paralleled the field of eco-justice. See, e.g., Bowers, *Educating for Eco-Justice and Community;* Bowers et al, *Eco-Justice: Essays on Theory and Practice in 2016.*

of unity in the midst of limitless diversity. In its cataphatic mode (as in Bulgakov's dogmatics and Merton's Hagia Sophia), a Christian sapiential theology reaches for language to give voice to this metaphysical intuition of communion at the heart of reality, while in its apophatic mode (also present in Hagia Sophia, if less so in Bulgakov), theology rightly cautions against equating language, even cherished dogma, with "the thing itself." Buddhism terms such unity-in-diversity Interbeing or Nonduality; Merton calls it a Hidden Wholeness, or the Hidden Ground of Love. Martin Luther King, Jr., described it as an "inescapable network of mutuality," a "single garment of destiny," and for King too, there can be no doubt that the source of his hope was theological, grounded in God. Yet none of these thinkers presume that such realization will come easily to people whose lives are patterned so deeply by utilitarian rhythms, the values of the marketplace, the rhetoric of war. Here we return to the epistemological problem noted at the top of this essay, which is at once a pedagogical question about the education and spiritual formation of the next generation.

3 Merton, Jacques Ellul, and the next generation

Like many religious and philosophical thinkers in the 19th and 20th centuries, one of Merton's central concerns is that people in modern society have lost touch with the depth dimension of reality—what Jewish philosopher Martin Buber famously called the "I/Thou" mode of encounter—in favor of an analytical mode that engages the world by collecting data through our senses; analyzing, naming, and categorizing that data; and then developing theories about it—what Buber calls the "I/It" mode of experience.⁵⁰ We have traded mystery and wonder for mastery and technological manipulation, for manufactured imitations of the real thing. The result is a sense of alienation, of feeling oneself cut off from all the "others," equally isolated in the churning wheel of experience; cut off from the natural world, increasingly subjugated to utilitarian ends; and cut off from "God," who becomes a projection of our own sense of aloneness in an infinitely receding universe.

In an essay of 1967, Merton borrows an arresting image from the German physicist Werner Heisenberg, who, in a famous essay on the role of technology in our relationship with nature, suggested that humanity now finds itself "in the position of a captain whose ship has been so securely built of iron and steel that his compass no longer points to the north but only towards the ship's mass of iron."51 The moral and spiritual peril of the "ship's captain" can be allayed, says Heisenberg, only "if he recognizes what has gone wrong and tries to navigate by some other means—for instance, by the stars," 52 To "navigate by the stars," says Merton, is to go beyond the limitation of a narrowly Cartesian, utilitarian worldview and recover our sense of sacred symbols, and disciplines of silence and solitude, so that we might hear again the rhythms of the Earth.

Behind his critique of technology Merton acknowledges the influence of French philosopher and theologian Jacques Ellul. In his influential 1964 book, The Technological Society, Ellul describes the nature of technology—or more precisely, "technique," from the French—not as a machine or a computer but as the very organization of life itself.⁵³ Indeed Ellul's critique has less to do with the particular tools and devices we take so much for granted today—computers, earth-movers, airplanes, smart phones—than with the ways that the systematic proliferation of such technologies risks overtaking human freedom, sacrificing personal dignity and agency to the collectivity. Instead of technology being utilized in service of humanity as a means toward higher ends, its practical reach into every domain of life means that "human beings have to adapt to it, and accept total change."54 Nature also loses its autonomy and transcendence. Whereas nature once comprised the all-encompassing environment and power upon which human beings were dependent, and so was experienced as sacred, in the technological milieu nature is desacralized, consumed, and replaced by products—or the imagery of products, well beyond actual reach of the world's poor—themselves endowed

⁵⁰ Buber, I and Thou.

⁵¹ Merton, Love and Living, 60.

⁵² Ibid., 61.

⁵³ Ellul, The Technological Society.

⁵⁴ Ellul, What I Believe, 136.

with an aura of sacred value and meaning by sophisticated advertising imagery. "The time will come when they will sell you even your rain," Merton writes in "Rain and the Rhinoceros." "At the moment it is still free, and I am in it. I celebrate its gratuity and its meaninglessness."

Anticipating fierce debates in higher education today, Ellul worried about the diminished value of the humanities in the technological milieu. As young people (and their parents) begin to question the value of learning ancient languages, history, or other subjects which may seem, on the surface, to do little to advance their financial and technical state, the focus of many schools has shifted to the world of information, educating students to work with computers but knowing only their language, their logic, their relationships, and the interactions between them. The language-world of "technique" colonizes the whole intellectual domain and also that of conscience. Like Buber, the existentialists, the critical thinkers of the Frankfurt School, and many others in the modern period (Abraham Joshua Heschel, Bertrand Russell, Karl Marx, to cite a few), Ellul underscores the degree to which modern technology elevates the *means* of production (efficiency, utility, autonomy, profit) over the substantive *ends* for which human beings have traditionally strived to flourish as social beings (love, justice, happiness, meaning, the common good). Ellul writes:

[W]hat is at issue here is evaluating the danger of what might happen to our humanity in the present half-century, and distinguishing between what we want to keep and what we are ready to lose, between what we can welcome as legitimate human development and what we should reject with our last ounce of strength as dehumanization. I cannot think that choices of this kind are unimportant.⁵⁶

In sum, to the extent that modern technology has become "a total phenomenon for civilization, the defining force of a new social order in which efficiency is no longer an option but a necessity imposed on all human activity,"⁵⁷ it becomes very difficult for individuals or societies to make discerning moral and political choices toward personal flourishing and the common good. By its nature the technological milieu operates more or less independent of human desires. "Not even the moral conversion of the technicians could make a difference. At best, they would cease to be good technicians. In the end, technique has only one principle, efficient ordering."⁵⁸ Driven by instrumental rationality, the technological milieu enforces the logical and mechanical division of labor, the setting of universal production standards and norms, and so forth, in an artificial system that perpetuates itself and eliminates or subjugates the natural world. What we sanguinely call "the market," however, is far from morally neutral; it bears and projects a value system onto everything it touches. Merton's concerns echo Ellul's, Pope Francis's, and a century-and-a-half of Catholic Social Teaching in its critiques of unrestrained capitalism: the global economic-technological order has effectively become a "closed circuit" that does not admit of human intervention. In his journal of 1964, Merton sardonically observes: "The machines are meditating on the most arbitrary and rudimentary of essences, punched into IBM cards, and defining you and me forever without appeal."⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Merton, Raids on the Unspeakable, 9.

⁵⁶ Ellul, *What I Believe*, 140. It is worth noting that Ellul was a leader in the French resistance during World War II. For his efforts to save Jews, he was awarded the title "Righteous Among the Nations" in 2001 by the Jewish Holocaust museum in Jerusalem, Yad Vashem.

⁵⁷ Fasching, The Thought of Jacques Ellul: A Systematic Exposition, 17.

⁵⁸ Ellul, *The Technological Society*, 79. For an excellent overview of Ellul's thought in dialogue with Merton and other modern philosophical and theological perspectives, see Shaw, *Illusions of Freedom: Thomas Merton and Jacques Ellul on Technology and the Human Condition*.

⁵⁹ Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage*, Vol. 5, 200-01. Two examples will suffice to illustrate Ellul's concerns across the human and non-human world. In his best-selling book *Flash Boys: A Wall Street Revolt*, investigative journalist Michael Lewis details practices of high-speed trading on the American stock exchange driven by computer algorithms at nearly the speed of light, moving enormous amounts of capital in a process that is "fully automated, spectacularly fragmented, and complicated beyond belief by possibly well-intentioned regulators and less well-intentioned insiders." Cited in Lewis, "Reflecting on *Flash Boys* a Year Later." In the realm of non-human animals, some forty years ago moral philosopher Peter Singer published *Animal Liberation*, arguing that industrial farming has caused more pain and misery than all the wars of history put together. A host of studies since then have exposed the deleterious impact of large-scale farming and mass food production techniques on animals, human health, and the environment. See Harari, *The Guardian*. The impact of global capitalism and free

Allow me to risk here a personal anecdote. Not long ago I was driving home from work when I heard a story on National Public Radio about the newest products being showcased at an annual technology show in Las Vegas. One of the big software companies was unveiling a kind of "virtual helmet" worn over the head that can "transport" the user into any environment of their choosing. The tech reporter spoke with great excitement about a program that would bear the wearer of the virtual helmet into—wait for it—Henry David Thoreau's Walden Pond, enabling the user to "see and hear everything Thoreau saw: the different birds and species of trees, the water lapping over rocks at the bank of the pond, the frogs croaking, the wisp of the wind through the cabin windows," and so on. "Now we can go to the woods and suck out all the marrow of life," the reporter gleefully concluded, "without ever leaving our living room." I nearly crashed the car. Thoreau, I expect, is either laughing or turning over in his grave—maybe both. Have we become so encased in virtual constructions of reality that we've forgotten what it is to be human, to feel the grass under our bare feet, to be free? To recall Ellul, the question is not necessarily directed at the technology itself—the potential good ends to which VR might be directed—so much as the perceived needs driving the development, use of, and voracious appetite for such products. What may be gained, and what may be lost, by raising still another generation of children far more intimate with gadgets and virtual mediations of reality" than with actual woods, rivers, wind, birds, sunlight, and, lest we forget, other people? "

"We live in a society," Merton wrote in 1948, "whose whole policy is to excite every nerve in the human body and keep it at the highest pitch of artificial tension, to strain every human desire to the limit and to create as many new desires and synthetic passions as possible, in order to cater to them with the products of our factories and printing presses and movie studios and all the rest."61 Some seventy years later, in a recent and widely-shared essay entitled, "I Used to Be a Human Being," British Catholic writer and popular blogger Andrew Sullivan-self-described as a "very early adopter of what we might now call living-in-theweb"-writes of his deepening addiction to "virtual living, this never-stopping, this always-updating," to the point of serious physical and emotional illness. "So much of it was irresistible, as I fully understood. So much of the technology was irreversible, as I also knew. But I'd begun to fear that this new way of living was actually becoming a way of not-living."62 The smartphone revolution, says Sullivan, is "the final twist of this ratchet, in which those few remaining redoubts of quiet—the tiny cracks of inactivity in our lives—are being methodically filled with more stimulus and noise." Like Merton, Sullivan laments the loss of the silences and open spaces so essential to a basic awareness of the state of our being.

[Just] as modern street lighting has slowly blotted the stars from the visible skies, so too have cars and planes and factories and flickering digital screens combined to rob us of a silence that was previously regarded as integral to the health of the human imagination.

This changes us. It slowly removes—without our even noticing it—the very spaces where we can gain a footing in our minds and souls that is not captive to constant pressures or desires or duties. And the smartphone has all but banished them.63

Sullivan cites comedian Louis CK who sums up his feelings about the virtual-technological world as follows: "You never feel completely sad or completely happy, you just feel . . . kinda satisfied with your products. And then you die. So that's why I don't want to get a phone for my kids."64

market ideology on the planet, as well as the witness of indigenous and other movements working for positive transformation, is chronicled by journalist Cline in her best-selling book, This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate.

⁶⁰ See Louy, Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder, a popular and influential exploration of the human costs of alienation from nature and the benefits of environment-based education.

⁶¹ Merton, The Seven Storey Mountain, 148.

⁶² Sullivan, "I Used to Be a Human Being."

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid. A 2012 Nielsen report shows that children aged thirteen to seventeen send an average of 3,417 text messages a month. The Pew Research Center notes that the near ubiquity of handheld devices has had an enormous impact on kids' free time, filling up the "interstitial spaces" in their daily lives. Yale professor Stephen Carter worries that as young people "increasingly fill their free hours with texting and other similarly fast-paced, attention-absorbing activities, the opportunities for sustained reflective thought will continue to fade." One cost of the new world of social media, suggests Carter, may be to accelerate the decline "of what our struggling democracy most needs: independent thought." Toppo, "Kids Spend Nearly 8 Hours a Day on Electronic Media"; Carter, "A Little Less Texting, A Little More Thinking."

The potentially harmful effects of inhabiting the digital world for children and young adults plays out especially in the realm of relationships and sexuality. While the proliferation and cultural normalization of online porn is an obvious example of concern, other, even more alarming trends are beginning to emerge. CNN, for example, has recently examined incidences of sexual assault via VR gaming platforms. As one female victim described it, the hand that stroked her in the virtual gaming situation felt "very lifelike. You can make the fingers move in really realistic ways." Some researchers suggest that there needs to be a code of conduct in VR since its psychological effects are still unknown. "No one wants to see the government regulate the game industry. But the truth is, VR is such a powerful experience, your brain feels like it's real. Subjects sometimes feel as if the body that they see in front of them is their own." Sociologist Katherine Cross, in a paper titled "Ethics for Cyborgs"—an emerging discipline within moral theology?—describes "the amoral substructure of gaming culture" as predicated on the presumption that "It's not real, therefore it's OK. . . . This, far more than anonymity, is the source of much gender and racial harassment on the internet."

In sum, the wholly immersive nature of our newest technologies makes it difficult to separate or even distinguish the technological device itself from the now-globalized technological and economic milieu that it signifies. To the degree we and our children are absorbed in our devices for inordinate amounts of time, the device itself begins to "effect what it signifies." To borrow a term from Catholic theology, the tool itself—the computer, the smart phone, the virtual helmet, the TV—becomes a kind of "sacrament," an instrument of "sacred presence" or of quasi-religious devotion for the user. While such a claim may seem over the top, it bears out in the near-mystical language of virtual-reality pioneers, who describe VR as "the final platform," a technology that allows the user "to blur the distinction between you and the rest of the world." The ultimate aim of VR developers is to create instruments that effect for the user "what they longingly call 'presence'—when you really feel like you're inside a fake environment."

Such critiques are by no means foreign to my students, as if they had never considered the implications of the digital world they inhabit. Most have. And many have expressed to me, on the one hand, how much they appreciate being so seamlessly "connected" to the world and yet at the same time, how they struggle to connect with other persons face to face, to be fully present to themselves, to others, to nature, without digital insulation or constant distraction. When talking about their smart phones not a few speak in terms of "addiction," and express a sincere desire to seek out alternative ways of social interaction. Though I am older by decades than most of my students, I certainly do not exempt myself from these concerns. The technological milieu is something that involves us all, as Ellul insists, and is not going away, even if many of us are still struggling to find the terms in which to grasp it. And that is the critical point I wish to underscore: simply the need, *precisely in the university context*, to be asking such questions. To put it another way: if not in the university, then where? Can we really trust Apple, Facebook, Exxon Mobile, JP Morgan Chase, or the fewer and fewer mass media conglomerates to frame such critical questions—or to mediate them politically in a transparent way—for future generations?

⁶⁵ See O'Brien, "Sexual Assault in Virtual Reality."

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Stein, "Why Virtual Reality is About to Change the World." A number of contemporary philosophers and theologians have described the lure of the virtual world as akin to the lure of "gnosticism," a term with ancient Christian provenance, which views salvation or participation in the divine realm as an escape from the limits and moral corruption of the body and of commitment to and responsibility for history. While condemned as heretical to Christian orthodoxy, various forms of gnosticism have lived alongside and within Christian thought from the beginning. The proliferation of science fiction fantasy and cyber-dystopian films such as *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), *Blade Runner* (1982), *The Matrix* (1999), and *Her* (2013), to cite just a few, suggests a deep cultural yearning, if not a deepening anxiety, about the future of embodied reality (i.e. history), humanity, and divinity in the age of the computer. Who or what can be trusted as real, and who or what is illusory, merely perceived or constructed? For a thoughtful overview, see Kazlev, "The Matrix and Gnosticism."

4 Learning again (and again) from the book of experience

It was more than a century-and-a-half ago that Thoreau issued his manifesto against the alienating pressures of modern life: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear."69 As compelling and romantic as Thoreau's story may be, the question of human fulfilment can no longer be confined, as it tends to be in the American mythos, to the "rugged individual" or private realm alone. The story and spirit of Thoreau must be translated into a much larger social and planetary Story of the common good. If spirituality broadly conceived means something like how one sees and engages the world, how we as individuals and as a human community lean into the whole of life, then surely Pope Francis's Laudato Si' offers a signpost of hopefulness toward an integrated vision for life and political engagement in the 21st century: to embrace the Earth "as a sacrament of communion, as a way of sharing with God and our neighbours on a global scale." The same can be said of Merton's Hagia Sophia. Together with emerging feminist and environmentalist theologies from around the planet, perhaps we can dare even to anticipate an eventual "tipping point" in theological discourse, in which habitual and worn-out ways of speaking of God and of the divine-cosmic relationship will yield to new forms of expression, prophetic lament, and mystical praise.

Much in the way of Merton, it is one of the distinctive marks of Pope Francis's witness that he does not reach first for the language of church doctrine, but would have us first and foremost listen to the language of our hearts, which rises from the book of experience. As pastor to the global Roman Catholic Church, Francis's teachings on the environment are fed by his own book of experience, above all, his contact with prisoners, refugees, the poor and forgotten, those who suffer most from the devastating effects of climate change. The images are concrete, unambiguous, and dramatic: washing and kissing the feet of refugees, including a young Muslim woman; struggling to answer a 12-year old girl's question in front of millions during an outdoor mass in the Philippines, a girl who had spent her life sleeping outside and foraging for food from other people's garbage. "Why did God let this happen to us?" she asks him. In other words, it is from his lifetime of pastoral experience among the most vulnerable that Francis insists we are "not faced with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather one complex crisis which is both social and environmental." And recall again that it is poetry, Saint Francis's hymn of praise for Mother Earth, with which Pope Francis opens Laudato Si', a mark of his appeal to the whole person of the listener.

Merton speaks to us in less publicly dramatic ways, but no less poetically, in the quiet atmosphere of studies and classrooms, in moments of solitude and searching, under lamps of intellect and imagination. As the United States marks the second year in the tenure of a president whose policies and appointments have inspired very little hope for the environmental cause, it seems to me that those of us who teach at universities are called to use whatever privilege and public voice we have to defend the Earth and those populations most vulnerable to environmental devastation. "Listen to the voice of the wind, and the ceaseless message that forms itself out of silence,"⁷⁰ says the poet Rilke. Every discipline within the university must play a vital role in the holistic re-imagining of human life in relationship to the planet, listening and responding to the voice of the wind, the soil and waters, and the cry of nonhuman creatures. In the meantime, I think both Merton and Francis would urge each of us, no matter our disciplinary expertise, to cultivate a renewed taste for silence in our lives, to reclaim daily practices of solitude, deep listening, and disciplined attunement to the rhythms of the Earth. And they would have us do so especially with young people.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Thoreau, Walden (1854), cited in Sullivan, "I Used to Be a Human Being."

⁷⁰ Rilke, The Duino Elegies & The Sonnets to Orpheus, 5.

⁷¹ Since 1969, The Journal of Environmental Education has led the way in publishing research on the benefits of environmentbased education and related fields, such as education for sustainable development, the relation between knowledge and affect in environmental formation, and the formative impact of children's nature experiences or the lack of them. Latest articles and archives at https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/vjee20/current.

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