

## Spiritual practice and divine personhood

### 1. Introduction

In this paper, I am going to examine one tradition of spiritual practice, and consider what it may suggest for the question of whether God is to be conceived in personal or a-personal terms. To keep the discussion within reasonable bounds, I shall take as my focus the work of the American Trappist monk, Thomas Merton (1915–1968), and specifically his text *New Seeds of Contemplation*, first published in 1961.<sup>1</sup> This book has become something of a spiritual classic in our times, and it is of some interest for that reason; but for our purposes, it is important more fundamentally because Merton is here speaking out of a broadly defined tradition of Christian spiritual practice. While he rarely alludes to his influences directly, anyone who is at all familiar with that tradition cannot fail to see echoes in Merton's thought of the work of central figures in the history of Christian spirituality, such as Augustine, Thomas Aquinas and John of the Cross. And Merton himself is clear that his object is simply make the core themes of this tradition accessible to a contemporary readership, noting that: "We sincerely hope [that this book] does not contain a line that is new to the Christian tradition."<sup>2</sup> So in this discussion, I shall take Merton as our primary guide to the nature of the spiritual life – and treat his account as authoritative because of its wider, representative significance. In the course of the discussion, I hope to show how we can address the question of whether God is to be conceived personally or a-personally by thinking about the structure of the spiritual life – and asking what kind of conception of God is required if the defining commitments of that life are to make sense.

### 2. Thinking of God as personal: a Mertonian paradox

Of course, as a kind of spiritual manual or record of the phases of the spiritual life, Merton's text is not concerned at all directly – and certainly not in a theoretical mode – with the question of whether we are to conceive of God in personal or a-personal terms. Nonetheless, we can put this question to his account, and when we do an interesting paradox emerges. First of all, Merton is throughout emphatic that human images and concepts fail to offer any substantive disclosure of the divine nature. And indeed, the kind of

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New Directions Publishing, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Merton, *New Seeds*, xx.

development in the spiritual life that he is recounting is defined by a growing appreciation of precisely this truth. In keeping with the tradition with which he is located, Merton refers to the activity or mode of life of the person of spiritual maturity as “contemplation,” and he describes the movement towards the condition of contemplation in these terms:

What a holocaust takes place in this steady burning to ashes of old worn-out words, clichés, slogans, rationalizations! The worst of it is that even apparently *holy* conceptions are consumed along with all the rest. It is a terrible breaking and burning of idols, a purification of the sanctuary, so that no graven thing may occupy the place that God has commanded to be left empty: the centre, the existential altar which simply “is.” In the end the contemplative suffers the anguish of realizing that he *no longer knows what God is*.<sup>3</sup>

In a similar vein, he comments:

The more perfect faith is, the darker it becomes. The closer we get to God, the less is our faith diluted with the half-light of created images and concepts.<sup>4</sup>

And similarly he remarks that faith involves:

realizing the utter hopelessness of trying to think intelligibly about this immense reality [the divine reality] and all that it can mean.<sup>5</sup>

Teachings of this kind are pervasive in the text, and they are not incidental to its central concerns, since Merton consistently relates a person’s growth in the spiritual life to their deepening realisation of the radical inadequacy of our images and concepts to represent the divine nature. It is worth being clear that this inadequacy is not simply a matter of our concepts being insufficient for a comprehensive, or at least pretty extensive, account of the divine nature. The claim seems to be, rather, that as the person advances in the spiritual life, so they come to understand that, as Merton puts the point in the text I have just cited, even “holy conceptions” of the divine must be set aside, and that “created images and concepts” of all kinds are to be abandoned, since we are simply incapable of “thinking intelligibly” about the divine nature. It is notable that Merton’s scepticism in these matters

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<sup>3</sup> *New Seeds*, 13, Merton’s emphasis.

<sup>4</sup> *New Seeds*, 134.

<sup>5</sup> *New Seeds*, 219.

extends even to the power of images and concepts to serve as helpful metaphors for the divine nature.<sup>6</sup>

It is worth attaching two qualifications to this account: first, Merton is not denying, I take it, that we can have negative and relational knowledge of God, as when we know that God is not an acorn, and that God is the source of the world. What he is repudiating is the ambition to describe the divine nature in itself. And secondly, the drift of his text reveals that his most fundamental concern is not to deny that any such description is possible (although that does seem to be what he is affirming in some of the texts I have just cited), but rather to maintain that such descriptions even if possible are of no real importance for the later phases of the spiritual life. So the fundamental thought is that at its deepest, the spiritual life has no use for concepts and images of the divine nature, and indeed Merton seems to think that the attempt to introduce such concepts and images would be, for the contemplative person, spiritually impoverishing.<sup>7</sup>

This strand of Merton's thought is of course entirely familiar from a wider corpus of work in Christian, and other, mystical traditions, and it seems to invite the conclusion that considered in itself, the divine nature must be for us (at least in the later phases of the spiritual life: I shall omit this qualification hereafter) a kind of blank, which renders all of our concepts equally useless. Following the example of some recent philosophers of religion, we might conclude that we are to withhold equally those epithets that represent God in personal and those that represent God in a-personal terms. (Compare John Hick's proposal that the Real in itself transcends all our substantive concepts, and is therefore neither personal nor impersonal.)<sup>8</sup> Yet this is not Merton's position. On the contrary he is insistent that God is to be understood not as a "what" but as a "Who." Hence he comments of "contemplative experience" that:

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<sup>6</sup> See Merton's remark that the person who relies on "his own natural enthusiasm and imagination and poetry" to communicate the divine reality "runs the risk of being drawn away from the simple light and silence in which God is known without words and concepts, and losing himself in reasoning and language and metaphor": 270.

<sup>7</sup> See again the footnote above. While poetry may have a spiritual value, it has no part to play in the contemplative mode of relationship to God.

<sup>8</sup> John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (Macmillan, second edition 2004), Chapter 14.

It seems that there is no “what” that can be called God. There is “no such thing” as God because God is neither a “what” nor a “thing” but a pure “Who.”<sup>9</sup>

Here we encounter at least the hint of a paradox: on the one hand, Merton seems to deny that “created images and concepts” can apply in any substantive way to the divine nature as it is in itself, so that all such concepts are equally useless, and on the other he is insistent that God is rightly considered a “who,” a stance that would appear to imply that God is, in fact, better represented by personal than by non-personal categories. It is worth emphasising that these two strands of his thought are both central to his account of the nature of the contemplative life: we couldn’t begin to characterise that life, in ways that are faithful to the drift of Merton’s thought, without introducing the idea that this is a state in which creaturely images and concepts have been set aside, and at the same time a state in which the divine is encountered as a “Who.”

There are various ways in which we might try to reconcile these two currents in Merton’s text. Among the more promising are, perhaps, first, the idea that the contemplative life is grounded in a non-propositionally structured, and concept-free and image-free, apprehension of the divine nature, in which God is disclosed as a Who rather than a What, and second, the idea that in addition to “created” images and concepts, we also have a stock of divinely authorised images and concepts, whose sense is given in revelation, and that it is only creaturely concepts and images, rather than divinely authorised concepts and images, that are to be set aside as the person approaches the condition of contemplation. I am not sure that either of these accounts will capture quite what Merton is proposing. But however that may be, I am going to propose another strategy for thinking about the relationship between what we might call Merton’s *apophaticism* and his *personalism* about the divine nature, a strategy which draws on the third and final strand of Merton’s representation of the nature of contemplation.

Throughout his text, it is clear that Merton thinks of growth in relationship to God, on the path towards contemplation, as integrally connected to the emergence in the person of a

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<sup>9</sup> *New Seeds*, 13. Interestingly, Merton felt the need to add this qualification to this remark in a footnote: “This should not be taken to mean that man has no valid concept of the divine nature. Yet in contemplation abstract notions of the divine essence no longer play an important part since they are replaced by a concrete intuition, based on love, of God as a *Person*, an object of love, not a ‘nature’ or a ‘thing’ which would be the object of study or of possessive desire”: 13.

new centre of agency and correspondingly a new sense of self. The connection of these three themes – apophaticism, personalism, and the development of a new sense of self – is evident in a very compressed form in a text that I have already cited in part, which in its entirety reads:

There is “no such thing” as God because God is neither a “what” nor a “thing” but a pure “*Who*.” He is the “Thou” before whom our inmost “I” springs into awareness.<sup>10</sup>

Let us think a little more closely about what is involved in this new sense of self that is rooted in the person’s encounter with the divine “Thou.” Once again, Merton’s account of these matters is intended to recapitulate themes that are familiar from earlier traditions of Christian thought, and is of interest for our purposes for this reason. He writes:

It is a great mistake to confuse the *person* (the spiritual and hidden self, united with God) and the *ego*, the exterior, empirical self, the psychological individuality who forms a kind of mask for the inner and hidden self.<sup>11</sup>

What distinguishes the contemplative, on Merton’s account, is their lived, rather than simply theoretical, apprehension of this truth concerning the nature of the true self. Similarly, Merton writes of this self that lies beyond the “empirical self” that:

This inmost self is beyond the kind of experience which says “I want,” “I love,” “I know,” “I feel.” It has its own way of knowing, loving and experiencing which is a divine way and not a human one, a way of identity, of union, of “espousal,” in which there is no longer a separate psychological individuality drawing all good and all truth towards itself...<sup>12</sup>

On this account, the contemplative vantage point on the world is no longer ego-referenced, or that of a “separate psychological individuality”; it is instead, in some sense, God’s vantage point on the world, since the contemplative’s will is said to be perfectly aligned with the divine will, and can even be said to exist in a state of “union” with the divine will. According

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<sup>10</sup> *New Seeds*, 13.

<sup>11</sup> *New Seeds*, 279, Merton’s emphasis.

<sup>12</sup> *New Seeds*, 282.

to Merton, the special “joy” that is characteristic of the contemplative state is to be understood in these same terms:

The only true joy on earth is to escape from the prison of our own false self, and enter by love into union with the Life Who dwells and sings within the essence of every creature.<sup>13</sup>

Here, Merton is offering, I take it, an experiential counterpart for the traditional story, as rehearsed in a writer such as Aquinas, according to which the spiritual life, in its later phases, is structured by dispositions which have been infused by God, rather than acquired by means of some process of habituation. In Merton’s terms, these dispositions count as infused because they involve a new kind of agency, one that is grounded in “union” with the divine; and accordingly, this new way of being in the world consists, as Merton puts the point, in a “divine way of knowing, loving and experiencing.”<sup>14</sup> For ease of reference, let’s call this new centre of agency, and the corresponding shift in the contemplative’s sense of what constitutes their “I,” *the infused self*.

We have now introduced the three key proposals which together comprise the building blocks of Merton’s account of the contemplative life, namely: apophaticism and personalism with respect to the divine nature, and in addition the idea of an infused self. I want to argue next that the idea of the infused self allows us to see how Merton’s apophaticism can, after all, be reconciled with his personalism, that is, with his claim that God is a Who rather than a What. More exactly, I shall suggest that Merton is in effect proposing a radically qualified personalism with respect to God – that is, a position that allows that God is to be conceived as a Who rather than a What, while distinguishing quite sharply between the way in which we standardly think of interpersonal relations and the way in which we are to conceive of relationship to God.

### **3. Addressing the paradox: the phenomenon of joint attention**

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<sup>13</sup> *New Seeds*, 25.

<sup>14</sup> Compare Merton’s comment on the contemplative life: “None of this can be achieved by any effort of my own, by any striving of my own...”: *New Seeds*, 63. The same point is made in the recurring affirmation that to lead the contemplative life, we “in some sense make ourselves ‘nothing’”: 62. Or again when Merton writes: “Morally speaking he is annihilated, because the source and agent and term of all his acts is God”: 286.

To make some progress with these questions, it will be helpful to introduce the notion of shared attention. This concept does not feature, at any rate not explicitly, in Merton's discussion, but seems to be essential for an understanding of interpersonal relations in the human case. Shared attention has been widely studied in the recent psychological literature, and interestingly some theologians have argued that Aquinas's notion of infused moral virtue, which is of course integral to his account of the spiritual life, can be brought into new focus once it is read in the light of the idea of shared attention. Here is Andrew Pinsent's summary of the phenomenon:

Manifestations of shared joint attention are ubiquitous across a vast range of interpersonal interactions, but are especially clear in interactions between parents and their very young children. These interactions include infants recognising faces and smiling back, raising hands to be lifted up, pointing, gaze-following, and reciprocal turn-taking. Such activities are characterised by shared awareness of shared focus, together with a shared attitude towards the thing or event in question.<sup>15</sup>

Drawing out the relevance of this phenomenon for interpersonal relationships, Pinsent continues:

Such interactions are also closely associated and possibly even synonymous with "I"-  
"Thou," or second-person relatedness, of the kind to which Martin Buber drew  
attention.<sup>16</sup>

As Pinsent indicates here, I-Thou relationships, where they are of any depth, typically involve not just an "I" and a "Thou," but in addition an object or domain that serves as a shared focus of attention for the I and Thou, and which provides the subject matter for their discourse or communication. Of course, the I, or equally the Thou, can itself serve as an object of shared attention, within the framework of an I-Thou relationship, but in that case the I will be playing a different logical role from the one it plays in so far as it functions as a subject in the relationship. As Pinsent also notes, the capacity to enter into relations of

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<sup>15</sup> *New Seeds*, 81.

<sup>16</sup> Andrew Pinsent, "Who's Afraid of the Infused Virtues? Dispositional Infusion, Human and Divine", in *The Virtuous Life: Thomas Aquinas on the Theological Nature of Moral Virtues*, eds H. Goris and H. Schoot (Peeters, 2017), 73–96.

shared attention is standardly implied in the formation of human selves as language users and participants in a community, in so far as a child's ability to learn concepts depends on its ability to latch on to the relevant interpersonal domain of significance. For instance, the child needs to be able to grasp what exactly the parent takes to be deserving of attention when they make a certain gesture. From this sort of case, it is clear that shared attention involves more than simply directing one's attention to a relevant set of objects; what is required in addition is that those objects be ordered in the right way, so that the parties have a common conception of their import, or of the aspect under which they are to be considered.

Pinsent argues, persuasively I think, that the notion of I-Thou relations, and the associated idea of shared attention, can help us to understand certain features of Aquinas's account of the infused moral virtues that might otherwise seem puzzling. For instance, it would be odd if a virtue produced by way of habituation should be destroyed by a single contrary action. (For example, if a person who has, at least in large measure, the virtue of courage were to perform a cowardly act, we would not expect them thereby to lose the virtue altogether.) By contrast, Aquinas supposes that an infused moral virtue can be destroyed by a single contrary action, and we can make some sense of this idea once we see that the infused virtues are ordered to a second-personal (or I-Thou) relationship to God. Similarly, a friendship can be destroyed by a single breach of trust, even if many of the underlying habits that were previously relevant to the friendship persist thereafter. In such a case, while various habits may remain, the objects within the relevant domain of shared attention will no longer bear the same import, since they will no longer be ordered to the goal of maintaining the friendship.<sup>17</sup> Let us consider next how this notion of shared attention may be used to think about the sense in which, according to Merton, the contemplative's relationship to God is to be conceived in interpersonal terms.

We have seen that in the human case, relations of any interpersonal depth standardly involve a domain of shared attention. In addition, they typically involve an appreciation of the other person in objective terms: for instance, my relationship to the other person may be structured by my experiential knowledge of them – as when I see them make a certain

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<sup>17</sup> Pinsent develops the example in "Who's Afraid", 83–4.



gesture or hear them utter certain words – and by my descriptive or what we might call theoretical knowledge of them – as when independently of observation I know that, for example, they are a member of a certain social group, and allow this information to inform my engagement with them. In the normal case, personal relations between human beings are also, of course, reciprocal or dialogical – as when I say something and my interlocutor responds, and so on. What Merton seems to be proposing is that just one element of this complex of features that standardly comprise interpersonal relations in the human case is preserved when we consider the relationship of God to human beings. In brief, shared attention is preserved in this further case, but not objective understanding or reciprocity. Let us think through the details of this proposal in a little more detail.

Given Merton's insistence that we do not know what God is and, similarly, his comments on the radical insufficiency of our images and concepts for an understanding of the divine nature as it is in itself, it seems clear that he will deny that we have any spiritually useful theoretical knowledge of God. Moreover, at no point in his discussion does he have recourse to anything like the idea of observational knowledge of God. And this seems to be significant: after all, had he wished to admit the possibility of this sort of knowledge of God, then presumably he would have introduced the idea explicitly, since such knowledge would make a root and branch difference to the contemplative's relationship to God, and the nature of that relationship provides, of course, the focus for his entire discussion. There is good reason to suppose, therefore, that Merton will deny to human beings not only theoretical but also observational knowledge of God. And to the extent that one human being's interpersonal engagement with another human being is standardly rooted in a mix of observational and theoretical knowledge of the other person, we have, then, some initial reason to suppose that the divine-human relationship has a very different character from the interpersonal relationships that obtain between human beings.

It also seems clear that the contemplative's relationship to God lacks the dialogical character that is typical of interpersonal relations in the human case. Despite what Merton's language may sometimes seem to suggest, this is not because there is simply no distinction between the divine self and the contemplative's self. Hence he comments that:

The way to reality is the way of humility which brings us to reject the illusory self and accept the "empty" self that is "nothing" in our own eyes and in the eyes of men, but

is our true reality in the eyes of God: for this reality is “in God” and “with Him” and belongs entirely to Him. Yet of course it is ontologically distinct from Him, and in no sense part of the divine nature or absorbed in that nature.<sup>18</sup>

So if the relationship between the contemplative and God lacks a dialogical structure, this will not be because there is simply no distinction between the infused self of the contemplative person and the divine self. But there are other reasons for thinking that this relationship lacks any such structure. As we have seen, according to Merton, the contemplative’s sense of “I” lacks what he calls a “separate psychological individuality.”<sup>19</sup> The infused self is then perfectly transparent to the divine will, and in this relationship, it is of course the divine will that is prior, and the will of the infused self is simply patterned on that will. So there is to this extent no conceptual space for the infused self to play the active role that is required for a dialogical kind of I-Thou relationship, where each party shapes as well as being shaped by the other.

In sum, on Merton’s account, interpersonal relations in the human case turn out to be fundamentally different from the relationship of human beings to God, in so far as the first kind of relationship but not the second involves objective knowledge, of a theoretical and observational kind, and also reciprocity. As we have seen, Merton insists, even so, that God is to be understood as a Who rather than a What, and we might conclude that he is inviting us to ground the idea that the relationship of human beings to God is interpersonal, in spite of these differences, in the remaining feature of interpersonal relations that we have identified, that is, in the phenomenon of joint attention. Let us consider how this proposal may be developed further.

As we have seen, Merton supposes that the infused self of the contemplative is united to the divine will. As he puts the point elsewhere, speaking again of the contemplative in particular, “God’s will enters into the depths of our own freedom.”<sup>20</sup> And if that is so, then the contemplative’s construal of the significance of a given domain and the divine construal

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<sup>18</sup> *New Seeds*, 281–2. Contrast this report of the phenomenology of some kinds of contemplative experience: “in the depths of contemplative prayer there seems to be no division between subject and object, and there is no reason to make any statement either about God or about oneself. He IS and this reality absorbs everything else”: 267.

<sup>19</sup> *New Seeds*, 282.

<sup>20</sup> *New Seeds*, 266.

of that domain will coincide, which is to say that God and the contemplative will stand in a relation of shared attention with respect to any such domain. Similarly, speaking now of the contemplative's relationship to Christ, Merton writes:

Christ has granted us His Friendship so that He may in this manner enter our hearts and dwell in them as a personal presence, not as an *object*, not as a "what" but as a "Who."<sup>21</sup>

When God has entered into the contemplative's subjectivity in this way, it seems to follow once again that the contemplative's assessment of a given subject matter will track the divine assessment of that subject matter, since the will of the contemplative is now patterned on the divine will. So in this case too, we can speak of God and the contemplative as standing in a relationship of joint attention. In this way, Merton's account indicates that interpersonal relations in the human case do resemble the relationship of the contemplative to God, in so far as in each case the two parties stand in a relationship of shared attention. And perhaps it is for this reason that he feels entitled to suppose that in the relationship of God to the contemplative, God is presented as a Who rather than a What. So in this way, we might appeal to Merton's account of the infused self, and in turn the idea that the contemplative's will is patterned on the divine will, to explain how his apophaticism is to be reconciled with his personalism about God.

Of course, this account still leaves various puzzles. A sceptic may ask: if we agree that the divine reality that the contemplative encounters is a will, or Will, and allow that the contemplative's will is patterned on this will, then we will indeed have good reason to suppose that the contemplative stands in a relation of shared attention with this divine reality; but if we start from the assumption that the divine reality is a will, haven't we just assumed what we were trying to show, namely, that we have reason to think of this reality as a Who rather than a What? I don't think Merton addresses this question, and that may well be because he is simply starting from the assumption that the divine is a Will. His reflections on the character of the infused self will still have some point in that case,

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<sup>21</sup> *New Seeds*, 154. Immediately before this passage, Merton speaks of: "The power of a direct and simple contact with Him, not as with an *object* only, a 'thing' seen or imagined, but in the transsubjective union of love which does not unite an object with a subject but *two subjects in one affective union*": 153. The later text makes especially clear that the relevant relationship is in no way like that of subject to object.

because they allow us to see how the relationship of the divine will to the will of the contemplative resembles, in at least one key respect, the relationship of human beings to one another in interpersonal contexts. And to that extent, they give us some reason to endorse the view not simply that the divine is a will, and therefore personal, but that it is encountered as a *Who in the life of the contemplative*.

To spell out this idea a little, in experiencing God “entering into the depths of their freedom,” we might say, the contemplative becomes aware of finding a new significance in the objects they encounter in everyday experience – and thereby becomes aware of standing in a relationship of shared attention with God with respect to these objects. I’ll spell out this proposal a little more fully shortly. But to the extent that we may represent the situation in these terms, then the divine human-relationship will come to resemble interpersonal relationships between human beings in this further respect: God and the contemplative will be united not only in a relationship of joint attention, but also in a relationship of shared awareness of joint attention, or what Pinsent calls, when speaking of interpersonal relations in the human case, “shared awareness of shared focus.”

On Merton’s behalf, we could perhaps venture a more ambitious answer to the sceptic’s question by supposing that Merton has given us some reason to think of the divine reality that structures the subjectivity of the contemplative in personal terms, or as a will, in which case the idea of God as personal need not be taken as simply a presupposition of his account. Merton comments, “If we experience God in contemplation, we experience Him not for ourselves alone but also for others.”<sup>22</sup> Similarly, he writes, speaking of the life of the contemplative: “What it is, is freedom. It is perfect love.”<sup>23</sup> So in brief, the reorientation of the contemplative’s will that Merton is describing has the effect of drawing the contemplative into a deeper, more loving participation in the interpersonal realm in general. And we might suppose that this truth throws some light on the nature of the divine reality that is at work in re-shaping the will of the contemplative: if these are the effects of that reality, then have we not some reason to suppose that it is itself, perhaps in some appropriately analogical sense, personal, and indeed loving? At any rate, adopting this view would generate one account of why the transformation of the will of the contemplative

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<sup>22</sup> *New Seeds*, 269.

<sup>23</sup> *New Seeds*, 284.

takes this and not some other form. (Perhaps there is a contrast here with the case of the Daoist sage, who also reports that their will has been brought into alignment with the tendencies of the fundamental nature of things. But in this case, it is, arguably, less clear that the sage has thereby become more loving. And we might suppose that this is as it should be, because after all the Dao, as standardly understood, is not a personal, let alone a loving, reality.) Of course, this way of thinking about the matter might suggest that we can have a kind of theoretical knowledge of God after all, as the source of a certain kind of effect. And for this reason, Merton may not wish to be drawn into this kind of speculation.

A further kind of sceptical enquiry might run: even the most minimal commitment to the idea that the divine is a Will must surely entail that we have some kind of substantive knowledge of the divine nature, namely a knowledge of God as personal rather than impersonal, and is this not a breach of Merton's apophaticism? Here, Merton might reply that while we do have a kind of knowledge of God as a Will, this knowledge is rooted in the experience of our own will being transformed by the divine presence, and to this extent is not observational or theoretical. On this account, it is only through the experience of my will being changed, and in turn of my stance in the world being changed, where I take this change to have its source in God, that I can give some content to the idea that God's reality is indeed personal. This thought suggests a way of qualifying Merton's apophaticism, while retaining what is I take it his core affirmation, namely, the claim that where the later phases of the spiritual life are concerned, whatever understanding of the divine we may attain is rooted in a reorientation of the will, so that there is no disengaged or simply theoretical understanding of the divine. As we shall see at the close of the paper, there is some reason to think that Merton does subscribe to a position of this general type.

#### **4. Understanding the idea of shared attention with the divine**

I have been arguing that Merton's conception of the divine as a Who rather than a What can be expounded at least in part by reference to his idea that God and the infused self stand in a relationship of shared attention. In making this case, I have for the most part simply taken for granted that the contemplative attends to various domains, and then added the thought that the contemplative's stance with respect to any such domain is patterned on the divine stance, so that the contemplative and God are united in a relationship of shared attention with respect to any such domain. But we might want to know more about the nature of

these domains, and what it is for God and the contemplative to stand in a relationship of joint attention. In my closing remarks, I shall think a little more closely about this question.

Much of Merton's discussion of the contemplative life is concerned with the importance of detachment from creatures. Hence he writes of how "the crisis of suffering that rends our roots out of this world ... is a pure gift of God."<sup>24</sup> And similarly he affirms that if a person is to progress to the later stages of the spiritual life, then "Even the joys of the lower levels of contemplation must ... be renounced."<sup>25</sup> But at the same time, Merton is clear that the contemplative stance does not amount to a disengagement from the world. Hence he writes:

it was because they [the saints] loved Him alone that they alone loved everybody.<sup>26</sup>

Similarly, he remarks: "Let my eyes see nothing in the world but Your glory and let my hands touch nothing that is not for Your service."<sup>27</sup> Or again: "When we love God's will we find Him and own His joy in all things."<sup>28</sup> And: "True joy is found in the perfect willing of what we were made to will: in the intense and supple and free movement of our will rejoicing in what is good not merely for us but in Itself."<sup>29</sup> While Merton does not spell out the point in any detail, these passages invite us to suppose that the contemplative adopts a distinctive evaluative stance in their dealings with the everyday sensory world. And if that is so, then we can try to make sense of the idea that God and the contemplative stand in a relationship of joint attention by supposing that the domain to which God and the contemplative jointly attend is, at least in part, the ordinary world of daily experience.

We can develop this idea a little further by reference to the phenomenological categories of salience and hue. In my dealings with the everyday world, certain objects stand out in the perceptual field, as salient, and as specially deserving of attention therefore. Similarly, we can speak of the hue or colouring of perceptual objects. When I learn that the meat that I am chewing derives from Shuttlecock the pet rabbit, it is to be expected that the meat will be newly salient in my experience, so that it now stands out relative to other features of the

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<sup>24</sup> *New Seeds*, 210.

<sup>25</sup> *New Seeds*, 210.

<sup>26</sup> *New Seeds*, 23.

<sup>27</sup> *New Seeds*, 44.

<sup>28</sup> *New Seeds*, 124.

<sup>29</sup> *New Seeds*, 259.

perceptual field. But in addition, the meat is likely to change in its intrinsic phenomenal feel: it will now taste revolting. We can record this further sort of change by referring to the hue or colouring of items in the perceptual field, or of the field as a whole.

The case of the rabbit indicates how, in standard cases, we latch on to the significance of the world directly in perceptual terms: the meat's salience in the perceptual field, and its hue or intrinsic phenomenal feel, are my way of apprehending the meat's significance in perceptual terms, independently of any inference or process of ratiocination. Similarly, we commonly register the import of situations directly in our bodily comportment in those situations, as when, independently of any reflection on how I ought to comport myself in bodily terms, I register the significance of a graveyard, or a supermarket, or a lecture theatre, directly in my bodily demeanour when located in the space.

If all of this is so, then we might wonder whether the distinctive perspective on the everyday world that Merton associates with the contemplative might be realised in their distinctive ways of seeing and otherwise perceiving the world, and in their bodily demeanour. While there is no space to pursue this question in any detail here, there is clearly some reason to answer "yes." We might recall, for instance, William James's observation that in cases of religious conversion, "a not infrequent consequence of the change operated in the subject is a transfiguration of the face of nature in his eyes. A new heaven seems to shine upon a new earth."<sup>30</sup> Here is one example of how the world may appear differently to the person of spiritual maturity. And we might in turn understand what is involved in this kind of transformation in the appearances by reference to the categories of salience and hue. Similarly, we might recall C.S. Lewis's observation concerning the "new" humanity of Christians, when he says that: "Their very voices and faces are different from ours; stronger, quieter, happier, more radiant."<sup>31</sup> Here the person's reckoning with the significance of things is inscribed in their bodily presence, and perhaps most notably in their facial expression. We might conclude, then, that both in virtue of their habits of perception, and in virtue of the inflexions of their body, the contemplative person

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<sup>30</sup> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (Longmans, Green and Co., 1911), 151. Merton himself does not think of the contemplative's experience of the world as in anyway dramatic or unusual. As he says, if the contemplative were to describe their condition at all, "it would certainly never be to think and speak of himself as someone separate, or as the subject of a grandiose experience": *New Seeds*, 284–5. This understanding is consistent with the account we have presented here.

<sup>31</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (William Collins, Sons & Co., 1944), 186.

can take up a distinctive stance in the world, one which tracks a distinctive set of significances. And in so far as it conforms to a divinely ordered scale of values, this assessment of the import of the everyday material world will mirror the divine assessment of the world. For instance, the salience of objects in the contemplative's perceptual field will be, we might suppose, directly proportional to the importance of those objects from the divine vantage point.

In this way, then, we can begin to make sense of the idea that one of the domains with respect to which God and the contemplative stand in a relationship of joint attention is simply the everyday world, where the contemplative maps the divine construal of the significance of that world both by virtue of the way in which the world appears to them, and by virtue of the inflexions of their body. In brief, on this account, we can use a standard conception of what it is to latch on to some significance in the everyday world to explore what it is for the contemplative to apprehend some divinely ordered significance in the everyday world, and thereby to stand in a relationship of shared attention with God.

But of course, there is more that needs to be said. The contemplative's attention is not only directed to the world. After all, most fundamentally of all, the contemplative intends their life to be lived in relationship to God. And in this sense, it is God who is supremely the focus of their attention. But how is the contemplative's attention to be directed to God, in Merton's view, if God is not known objectively? An answer to this question is evident, I think, in the account of the contemplative life which he develops at the very beginning of the text we have been discussing, where he writes:

Contemplation is ... the response to a call: a call from Him Who has no voice, and yet Who speaks in everything that is, and Who, most of all, speaks in the depths of our own being: for we ourselves are Words of His. But we are Words that are meant to respond to Him, to answer to Him, to echo Him, and even in some way to contain and signify Him. ... He answers Himself in us and this answer is divine life, divine creativity, making all things new. ... It is as if in creating us God asked a question, and



in awakening us to contemplation He answered the question, so that the contemplative is at the same time question and answer.<sup>32</sup>

In the light of our discussion, we can see this text as a compressed expression of a number of claims, without resorting too much to eisegesis. First of all, God has no voice, so cannot be heard or in general perceived – which is to say, in the terms we have been using, that we have no observational knowledge of God, or more broadly no objective knowledge of God. Yet, God speaks, which is to say that God is to be conceived as a Who rather than a What. Here we have, then, an affirmation both of apophaticism and of personalism about God. And how are these claims to be reconciled? In brief, on the account given here, by recognising that the Word that God speaks is registered only “in the depths of our being,” which is to say, in the transformation of our own subjectivity, which God effects, rather than objectively. So in these few lines, we have a very succinct account of how, in Merton’s view, we are to relate these three stock themes of a broad swathe of Christian spiritual writing: apophaticism and personalism with respect to God, and the idea of an infused self.

Lastly, this account also points to an answer to the question of how it is possible for the contemplative’s attention to be directed not only to the everyday world, but also to God. On the view developed here, this is because the Word that God speaks in the contemplative person, through the transformation of their subjectivity, is a Word addressed by God to God. So in this respect, the contemplative’s life does indeed involve a kind of attention to God, since it is addressed to God. And to this extent, we can suppose that God and the contemplative stand in a relationship of joint attention not only with respect to the everyday world, but also with respect to God. Although Merton does not put the point in these terms here, this is of course to say that the life of the contemplative is folded into the life of the Trinity as it is expressed in creation, since the contemplative is spoken by God, here like the divine Word, and then returns to God in a movement of love, here like the Spirit. Accordingly, we can speak of a further way in which the contemplative’s relationship

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<sup>32</sup> New Seeds, 3. This is not an isolated view. See too this remark: “if I am true to the concept that God utters in me, I am true to the thought of Him I was meant to embody, I shall be full of His actuality and find Him everywhere in myself, and find myself nowhere”: 37. In the same spirit, Merton observes: “God cannot be understood except by Himself. If we are to understand Him we can only do so by being in some way transformed into Him, so that we know Him as He knows Himself. And He does not know Himself by any representation of Himself: His own infinite Being is His own knowledge of Himself and we will not know Him as He knows Himself until we are united to what He is”: 132.

to God is a relationship to a Who, since on this reading, the contemplative participates in the life of a personal God – as one who is an address of God and an address to God.<sup>33</sup>

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