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# Religious Life: The Dialectic Between Marginality and Transformation

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## Sandra Schneiders: Religious Life: The Dialectic Between Marginality and Transformation

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THOMAS Merton began, early in his monastic career, to explain religious life and especially the enclosed contemplative form of that life, to what he then regarded as “the outside world.” At first his attitude toward the “world” was more than tinged with the contempt and even arrogance of someone who saw himself as having chosen the better part in contrast to those who did not have the spiritual wisdom or moral courage to abandon the

sinful context of ordinary life for the purity of the cloister.(1) Toward the end of his life he came to realize that “leaving the world” was more an interior project than a change of geography and that a lifestyle that was obligatory for him because of a personal vocation might not be appropriate for another who shared exactly the same ideals and pursued them with equal zeal and generosity.

In the 1960s, shorn of the insulation provided by a false sense of superiority, Merton began to take seriously the criticisms of religious life addressed to him by people like Rosemary Radford Ruether.(2) He felt challenged to address, inwardly but also in writing, the occupational hazards of the form of life he had originally considered as selfevidently superior. He realized that religious life, especially the cloistered form he had embraced, could easily pander to spiritual narcissism, back to nature romanticism, evasion of social responsibility and moral laziness.(3)

In Merton’s time, especially during the socially and ecclesiastically turbulent ’60s, the cloistered contemplative form of religious life required a justification that so-called apostolic religious life did not.(4) At that time ministerial religious life seemed adequately justified by the good works religious did, whether in traditional ministries such as education and health care or in more controversial involvements such as social justice activism.

In our own day the situation is reversed. Spirituality is as “popular” today as social activism was in the ’60s and it sometimes makes unholy alliance with the self-absorption of “me-generation” narcissism. A single-minded pursuit of one’s own spiritual integration and identity, which Merton often presented as the ultimate goal of monastic life and which is integral to the healthy spirituality of our own day, is no longer looked upon with suspicion by the “yuppie” cohort even though they may understand that pursuit in terms Merton would have found obscene. But in any case, it is less the contemplative form of religious life that is questioned today; it is the ministerial form.

The questioning of ministerial religious life comes from several sources. First, Americans in general, including Catholics, have ceased to regard the Church as a quasi-department of health, education, and welfare for immigrant communities. What religious once supplied through Catholic schools, hospitals, and social services is no longer expected primarily or exclusively from these agencies. And even if it were, the depletion of personnel and financial resources within religious orders makes impossible the continuance of these services on the massive scale characteristic of the first part of this century.

Secondly, the adaptations of religious life that were mandated by Vatican II and eagerly undertaken by religious orders, especially those of women, have effectively destroyed the mysterious subculture of religious life that evoked a certain fascination in Catholics and non-Catholics alike. Exotic dress, cloistered houses, and quaint if not macabre customs have given way to an ordinary life-style that no longer offers potential members instant identity or social status.

Thirdly, the theology of superiority that made religious life the “best” vocational choice for the spiritually serious as well as the object of a certain admiring awe on the part of those not called to religious life has been seriously undermined by the Conciliar teaching on the universality of the Christian vocation to holiness, the baptismal foundation of ministry, and the sacredness of matrimony as a state of consecrated life for believers.(5)

In short, one can not only save one’s soul and serve one’s neighbor but also achieve the fullness of the Christian life without entering a religious order. Therefore, it seems to many, the only reason for entering religious life is to escape from the burdens of life in the world while enjoying the security of a congenial lifestyle enclave and meaningful employment coupled with relatively high status in the ecclesiastical social structure. No doubt the fact that religious life has been stripped both of its claim to a unique kind of social usefulness and of its religious mystique’ has contributed to the decline in numbers of candidates. But perhaps this stripping away of claims to superiority which were never well founded has also created the providential climate in which religious life can be radically re-examined in terms of its true meaning and role within the Church’s vocation to herald, signify, and serve the coming of the Reign of God.

It is not my intention in what follows to defend religious life. For those who are genuinely called to this life, as Merton often pointed out, no defense is necessary, and for the enemies of this life no defense is possible.(6) Religious choose religious life because, in some deep way, they must. Like the artist who has to paint or the poet who has to write, religious have to do what they do, not because it makes sense but because life does not make sense for them on any other terms.

However, it may not be out of place, even in an ecumenical setting, to try to explain Roman Catholic ministerial religious life, not in order to justify it but in order to clarify its potential for contributing to the quest for justice in our world. Throughout his religious life and especially toward the end Merton was convinced that the life he had chosen was significant for the social justice agenda of his time. In his journal for December 22, 1964, Merton

records a sudden realization. He had, for days, been distracted at prayer in his hermitage by the incessant booming of guns at nearby Fort Knox. Then he notes,

“ The guns were pounding at Fort Knox while I was making my afternoon meditation and I thought that, after all, this is no mere distraction. I am here because they are there; indeed, I am supposed to hear them! They form a part of an ever renewed decision and commitment, on my part, for peace. But what peace?

I am once again faced with the deepest ambiguities of political and social action.(7)

”  
I, and many other religious in the Church today, are equally convinced that the quest for peace and justice is integral to our choice for religious life.

### **THE MEANING of RELIGIOUS LIFE**

For several reasons the attempt to explain religious life is risky, if not doomed to failure. First of all, religious life is not a Platonic essence realizing itself in accidentally diverse historical instances.(8) It is a life-movement at the heart of the Church which has taken very diverse forms at different periods in church history and is undergoing massive change in our own times.(9) These forms themselves are integral to the life as it is lived by its adherents and so any attempt to separate essential content from accidental form is based on a misunderstanding of the life itself. In other words, it is difficult to talk about “religious life” as such because, in a very real sense, like human nature it does not really exist as such but only in concrete and ever-changing forms.

Secondly, as Merton once remarked about his reflections on Cistercian life and prayer,(10) whatever I say about religious life can and probably will be disavowed by some people who live this life with convincing authenticity. Nevertheless, in order to reflect on the relationship of religious life to the quest for justice in society and the Church I must attempt to explain that life itself.

I have already suggested that religious life can no longer be understood as an ecclesiastical job corps or as an exotic spiritual subculture and that it must not be understood as a comfortable lifestyle enclave for the religious elite.(11) Furthermore, if religious life is to be

significant for the Church's identity and mission today it must be so because of what it is and not just because of what some religious, in fact, do (however valuable that may be) because religious life is not merely a collection of individuals who engage in a variety of good works but a distinctive state of life in the Church. (12)

By state of life I mean a permanent, stable, and public form of consecrated life in the Church, such as matrimony or religious life, which raises to visibility in a special way some aspect or dimension of the Christian mystery which all the baptized are called to live but to which all do not witness in the same way. Thus, my first task is to say what I think religious life, as a state of consecrated life in the Church, is and means. To what aspect or dimension of the Christian mystery does this state of life witness in a special way and what is the significance of that witness in our time?

Throughout his life Thomas Merton was preoccupied with the issue of solitude, his own vocation to solitude, the role of solitude in monastic life, and the contribution of lived solitude to the Church and to the world. Although Merton tended to engage this issue primarily in terms of flight from the world and physical isolation, first in the monastery and then in the hermitage, solitude is actually at the heart of religious life as such because that life, whether enclosed or ministerial, is constituted by the vow of consecrated celibacy.

It is perhaps not at all fortuitous that at the end of his life Merton finally encountered the most serious challenge to his vocation to solitude not in his voluminous correspondence, his frequent visitors, his world-wide reputation as an author, his social involvements, or his travel but in the experience of falling deeply in love with a woman. (13) At that point, he had to choose celibacy not as he had in entering the monastery, i.e., as a flight from his own immaturity and self-centeredness, but as the free sacrifice of a relationship which could have become the center of his life (14) On May 11, 1967 he wrote that his love for this woman was "part of me" and that it revealed "[m]y need for love, my loneliness, my inner division, the struggle in which solitude is at once a problem and a 'solution.' And perhaps not a perfect solution either." (15)

Celibacy, chosen as a public and permanent state of life, establishes the religious in an existential solitude which no bonds, however deep, of friendship, community, or solidarity in mission can mitigate. Aloneness is, in a certain sense, the inner structure of the life of the religious as faithful and fruitful mutuality is the inner structure of matrimony. This aloneness, if cherished, attended to, and dwelt in as the heart of one's vocation, finds its positive meaning in contemplative prayer.

The solitude which religious choose through their public and lifelong commitment to celibacy raises to visibility in the Church the fundamental aloneness of every human being before God. I would like to explore two particular aspects of religious solitude, experienced as characteristics of this state of life, which have particular relevance for the relationship of religious life to the quest for justice: *immediacy* to God as a mode of Christian experience and *marginality* as a position in the secular order. It will be my thesis that immediacy and marginality are the foundation of the vocation to prophecy which Merton regarded as essential to the religious vocation. (16)

### IMMEDIACY AS A MODE OF CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE

The characteristically human way of seeking God and working for the transformation of the world in Christ is through material mediation. As incarnate spirits, born in the flesh and immersed in history, we work out our salvation in and through the material universe in which we live and move and have our being. This is our natural element. Nevertheless, natural and good as this approach is, there have always been some people who have felt called to bypass, as much as possible, the earthly mediations of the divine and to seek God with an immediacy that would be as foolhardy as Hosea's marriage unless it were a response to God's own invitation. In the Christian tradition we find such people from the very beginning of our history. They were the Christians of apostolic times who chose virginity rather than marriage; the men and women of the fourth century who abandoned the city for the starkness of the desert wilderness; the monks and nuns who roamed the roads of medieval Europe; the missionary religious who set out alone for regions where the name of Christ had never been heard.

For Merton, as for most religious of his time, the immediacy of the religious' search for God was expressed in terms of "leaving the world," because the secular order is quintessentially the mediation in and through which human beings naturally live and seek God. But toward the end of his life Merton himself acknowledged that leaving the world was less a geographical than a spiritual project. (17) And since Vatican II religious, especially those in ministerial forms of religious life, have come to a new realization that leaving the world is not a matter of physical flight from, much less condemnation of, the secular order. It is a matter of choosing, affirming, and trying to live the immediacy to God which celibate solitude announces and involves and to do so in solidarity with other Christians whose primary orientation is to the secular order as the mediation of God's will in their lives. (18)

It is difficult to say what immediacy as a mode of Christian existence means. It certainly has

nothing to do with an artificial “separation of powers and functions” in the Church which would charge clergy and religious with the sacred sphere and laity with the secular sphere. Rather, it has something to do with where one starts, regardless of whether one is dealing with specifically religious or explicitly secular matters. The religious who is true to his or her vocation starts with God, not primarily as the ultimate horizon in terms of whom everything is done, but as the first point of reference in which being and action originate. One comes to every historical experience out of one’s immediate involvement with God rather than seeking God primarily through one’s historical relationships and activities.

Obviously, such a stance is more than a little ambiguous in itself and it is a lifetime project to develop such an approach as habitual and consistent. Furthermore, it must be acknowledged that this approach to the relation between God and creation is non-natural and therefore very dangerous. I do not say this it is unnatural or anti-natural for nothing is more fundamental to our humanity than the quest for God. But because it involves at least a partial bypassing of the natural mediation of God which our condition as incarnate spirits demands, it is a dangerous path. Merton realized this and often acknowledged that he was both utterly incapable of living this way and even more incapable of abandoning the attempt to do so. Religious life is not the heroic quest of the spiritual athlete but a wrestling in the dark of ordinary human beings who, for some reason known only to God, have been attacked by a messenger who holds the secret of their name and will not release it without wounding them.

### **MARGINALITY AS A POSITION IN THE SECULAR ORDER**

The attempt to live such an immediacy to God on a day-to-day basis has led to the development of a lifestyle in the Church which places religious on the margins of the social order. I am not speaking here of any attempts by ecclesiastical authority to enclose the daily lives or suppress the political involvements of religious, but of the marginality that derives from the choices religious themselves make and even institutionalize for the sake of maintaining their immediacy to God. Religious choose not to forge a common destiny with any other individual human being through marriage and not to integrate themselves into the world’s historical process by procreating and raising the next generation of human beings. They choose not to participate personally in the profit economy either by working for personal gain or by making independent use of what they earn. They seek to guard an inner and ministerial freedom that is often incompatible with ordinary involvements in the political order. They choose a form of community life that transcends personal taste or advantage and intends to witness to the transcendent inclusivity of Christ’s universal reign.

These foundational choices are the coordinates of a lifestyle which places religious on the margins of the secular order as what Merton called “guilty bystanders” rather than at the center of secular life where they might exercise the leverage of tax-paying and draftable citizens.

Religious today share the anguish Merton often expressed over the ambiguity of their marginal position. Just as no one living in the flesh can retreat into total immediacy to God so no one living on this planet can stand fully outside the secular order. Religious not only eat and sleep and play; they also vote, serve on juries, hold jobs, and corporately own stock and real estate. And it is rarely absolutely clear when and whether marginality is the condition of prophecy or an excuse for selfprotection. As Merton well said, religious life is “neither worldly nor unworldly. It is not artificially ‘other-worldly: It is merely intended to be liberated and simple.”(19)

But as the monk realized, the more complex life in contemporary society becomes, the more difficult it is for one to live freely and simply, and the more important it becomes for some people to attempt it and to create a lifestyle in the Church which witnesses publicly to the desirability and possibility of living that way. By describing this attempt in terms of immediacy and marginality, rather than in terms of flight from the world or a dichotomy between the sacred and the secular, I am attempting to avoid fruitless arguments over words and even ore fruitless involvement in ecclesiastical politics while continuing to affirm that religious life involves an inner stance and a public lifestyle which witnesses to the primacy and all-sufficiency of God and grounds a vocation to prophecy.

## **RELIGIOUS LIFE AND THE VOCATION TO PROPHECY**

Prophecy is not primarily about foretelling the future. It is about telling what time it is, what it is time for, in the present. As Rabbi Abraham Heschel put it, the prophet’s “essential task is to declare the word of God to the here and now.” (20) Jesus is the prophet par excellence, the one who announced that the time is now and what it is time for is the Reign of God.

Prophecy requires three things: a clarity of vision and acuity of hearing that is a participation in God’s view of history; the ability to announce that vision effectively both to the powers which oppose God’s Reign and to the people who are oppressed by those powers; and the willingness to pay, even with one’s life, for the ultimate triumph of God’s covenantal order, the Reign of God.

First, the prophet has to see, to hear, from God’s point of view. As Heschel says, “the

fundamental experience of the prophet is a fellowship with the feelings of God, a sympathy with the divine pathos.”(21) The immediacy to God and the marginality to the social order that the religious attempt to live is directly ordered to sharing God’s perception of humanity in history, to the cultivation of sympathy with the divine pathos.

The choice of celibate solitude is ordered to contemplation, the actualization in prayer of immediacy to God. Contemplation is the place, the locus, of the coincidence of the contemplative’s view with the divine view. If there is one theme that Merton returned to more than any other it is that of contemplation as the entrance of the human person into the sphere of God. In contemplative prayer, according to Merton, we pass through the center of our own being into the very being of God where we see ourselves and our world with a clarity, a simplicity, a truthfulness that is not available in any other way. (22) And it is this view of reality which the contemplative must bring to bear upon the social order. For the religious, celibate solitude has as its primary purpose the fostering of such contemplation within which the religious participates in the divine perspective from which prophecy arises.

Anyone who has read much of Merton’s writing on social issues has some sense of what the contemplative vision of society and history means. Merton gradually discovered the meaning of freedom, peace, community, love, and justice through his ongoing contemplative practice and so he was remarkably clear-sighted although certainly not infallible in discerning violence, slavery, mob psychology, and false mysticism masquerading as the quest for justice. His profound and public disturbance when a young member of *The Catholic Worker* staff, Roger Laporte, immolated himself to protest the Vietnam War probably did more than many at the time could grasp to keep the Peace Movement on track.(23) Merton may not have been right in the strategy of his response; he acted precipitously and without full knowledge of the facts. But he was certainly right in focusing attention on the relation of means to ends even when the ends are unquestionably right. However urgent the quest for peace, human sacrifice could not be used as a means to attain it.

However, Merton’s protest of that tragic event sharpened for him the issue of marginality. Some of Merton’s friends in the Peace Movement, people he deeply respected and loved, who were irate at his intemperate response to Laporte’s action, expressed their anger by condemning Merton’s monastic distance from the public activities of the Movement. Merton was profoundly challenged by their charge that he was “in the wrong place” at this crucial time and that one whose body was not on the line had no right to pontificate on the issue. His reflection, however, drove him deeper into his conviction that it was really his own still

unpurified self that was so vulnerable to and controlled by the image of him that others had. He had to choose again to remain on the margins, to remain a “guilty bystander” in the eyes even of those he most respected, in order to preserve the inner equilibrium and clarity of vision from which his own prophetic contribution could be made.

Religious, including those who are not in monasteries and thus physically marginalized, will always have to deal with the charge of relative non-involvement in the secular order and their own inner questioning of where one really should be when the stakes are as high as they are today. Many members of ministerial religious orders, of course, have participated personally in public social protest, engaged in organized political lobbying, and even held public office. But religious life itself, as I have tried to show, involves a certain social and political marginality by the very fact that religious do not have the same personal stake in the ordering of secular life that their lay companions do. It is not our children, our jobs, our homes that are on the line, or at least not in the same way.

Marginality, as Merton tried to explain to his contemporaries, if it is lived authentically at all, is agonizing ambiguity. Without any attempt at self-justification or any claims to superiority, it gives the religious a hermeneutical vantage point which is somewhat analogous to that of the poor and oppressed, those who are marginalized not by choice but by violence. To be outside the system, especially when one does not have an alternate source for the goods and services the system should make available, allows one to discern the contradictions and the violence of the system that those who participate fully in it are less equipped to see. It is no accident that women rather than the ordained in the Catholic Church have analyzed the clerical system and are making clear to the whole Church why a religious caste system cannot finally serve the ends of ministry. It is no accident that blacks rather than whites, even whites who actively participated in the civil rights movement, exploded the myth of equality of the American social system.

Religious are marginal by choice, but that marginality is in the service of prophecy, not of escapism. From the edges of the system there is a view of what the system does to those who are excluded, to those who are made means to other people’s ends. If contemplation fosters immediacy to God, marginality fosters immediacy to the oppressed. The religious wants to be where the cry of the poor meets the ear of God. To feel the pathos of God is not a warm and comfortable religious experience; it is an experience of the howling wilderness driving one to protest.

The characteristic temptation for the religious, one which Merton felt very often and

analyzes repeatedly, is to abandon the vocation to solitude and throw oneself totally into the fray on the side of justice for the oppressed. There is something self-evidently right about that choice. Indeed, it is the right choice for most believers. But for some it is not the right choice because God asks something different of them. Whatever direct action they may take, and for many religious in ministerial orders it may be extensive, their essential vocation is to be a consistent locus of that prophetic insight born of immediacy to God and social marginality which is essential to the spiritual integrity of all action on behalf of justice.

The second requirement for prophecy is the ability to speak the vision to both the oppressor and the oppressed. To the former the prophet must speak a message of criticism and a challenge to conversion, and to the latter a message of hope energizing action toward a different future. Walter Brueggemann in his marvelous book, *The Prophetic Imagination*, (24) says that the first task of the prophet in speaking the vision is public lamentation. To lament is to declare, not by denunciation or condemnation but by public weeping, that everything is not all right. The guardians of the status quo, those who own, operate, and profit from the going system, want the oppressed to believe that everything is basically as it should be, that the system is designed and guaranteed by God, and that eventually all the minor problems will be remedied. The prophet says that the system is not God's plan; that God is on the side of the oppressed, of those whom the system grinds up and presses down; that the system does not have minor problems but that the system is a major problem.

The second task of the prophet is to recall God's promises and so, by projecting a vision of an alternate future, to engender hope. Hopelessness is a surrender to inevitability and the unchangeableness of the present arrangement. Those who control the system do so by paralyzing the imagination of the oppressed through the control of language for what cannot be said cannot be thought or sought. The prophet is one who has a fund of language that does not come from the system. It comes from the Word of God. With this new Word of promise the prophet can seed the imagination of the oppressed with the images that subvert the conviction of inevitability and divine legitimation of the system and engender hope for a different world.

Immediacy to God and social marginality are what equip the religious for this double prophetic task of public lament and energizing hope. In solitude and prayer the religious experiences the divine pathos for God's people. Sharing the divine pathos does not result in a new political program to rearrange the available pieces of the social puzzle but in a lament that will not be silenced, a howl of protest from the heart of the desert. It is the weeping of Rachel for her children who are no more; it is the lament of Jesus over Jerusalem which

does not know the time of its visitation. But contemplative immersion in God also results in a new vision derived not from the status quo but from God's promises, in new images that will energize alternative strategies, in new language for the saying of things we were not supposed to think. Amos Wilder called Jesus' discourse in parable "the language of the Kingdom," a new idiom voicing things hitherto undreamed and unleashing energy toward a new creation?(25)

Social marginality plays an especially important role in the prophetic task of announcing God's Word in the present social, political, and religious situation. While much can be done from within the system to ameliorate its worst effects there are few people who are willing and able to cut off the institutional branch on which they are sitting. To be on the edge, as Jesus was, gives one a certain freedom to see what is really happening and to say what one sees regardless of the consequences. Merton spoke often of his marginal situation which he valued because it gave him the distance which enabled that critical balance which is something "the monk owes to the world [f]or the monastic life has a certain prophetic character about it "(26)

The third requirement for prophecy is the willingness to suffer, even to die, for the sake of the newness one is commissioned to announce. As Brueggemann says, the prophet speaks only "at great political and existential risk. (27)

Immediacy to God in contemplation and social marginality is the source of strength for those who dare to criticize the establishment, whether secular or religious, and for those who energize the people for change. Prophets, from Moses on the far side of the Jordan to Jesus in Gethsemane, from Martin Luther King, Jr., on the balcony in Memphis to Dorothy Day in the soup kitchen in New York City, from Oscar Romero in the Cathedral of El Salvador to Teresa Kane in Cathedral of Washington, D.C., have testified that the willingness and the strength to lay down one's life for justice's sake comes from face to face encounter with the living God who hears the cry of the poor.

Social marginality makes the prophet a natural target for establishment violence, both secular and ecclesiastical. The prophet lives on the edges of the system, not just physically but ideologically. The rules of the social order do not have a self-evident priority for the prophet for whom the presumption is not in favor of the establishment's values but always in favor of God's justice for the oppressed. Thus, the prophet not only challenges the law but when necessary breaks it and encourages others to do the~same. This is a dangerous way to live and, as Jesus remarked, the tombs of the prophets are eloquent testimony to the tension

between “social order” and prophetic criticism (cf. Luke 11:45-52). In a sense, prophets court death, physical or spiritual, because their vocation is not to survive within the system but to change the system.

## **A CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGE TO RELIGIOUS LIFE AS PROPHETIC PHENOMENON IN THE CHURCH AND WORLD**

Although prophets stand on the margins of society their vocation is intimately related to the historical moment in which they live. Thus, in speaking of religious life as a prophetic phenomenon in the contemporary Church we must attend to the present ecclesial situation. I want to suggest that religious life today faces a challenge which has ramifications for both Church and secular society and that the challenge is specifically to play a dangerous prophetic role in relation to a question which daily becomes more urgent. The question is that of obedience to lawfully constituted authority in Church and civil society.

Both Martin Luther King, Jr., and Thomas Merton felt called upon to deal with the issue of obedience. King, following Gandhi, introduced Americans to the extensive use of civil disobedience as a non-violent strategy against racism and continued American prosecution of the Vietnam War. Merton, especially toward the end of his life, repeatedly questioned the current understanding of the religious vow of obedience that gave the superiors and the censors of his order nearly absolute power over the details of the monk’s life and work, and drove candidates from monastic life by the imposition of a rigid and mechanized uniformity on all members of the community. Merton saw the potential for tyranny on the part of the superior and for infantilization on the part of the subject in the absolutist interpretation of the vow, and he repeatedly protested against it. But both King and Merton saw themselves as dealing with the abuses of authority. King did not question the validity of civil authority nor Merton the validity of religious authority. They did not question whether obedience was the appropriate response to authority but only when, how, and whom to obey.

In the twenty years since the deaths of these two prophetic figures, which are also the years of the aftermath of Vatican Council II, the question of obedience has been exacerbated by the progressive deterioration of morality in American public life and the increasingly autocratic exercise of papal power in the Church. We are, in my opinion, being driven to face the question at a deeper level. It is no longer sufficient to ask whether authority is being exercised badly and, if it is, how it can be reformed. Nor is it sufficient to refuse obedience to those who abuse authority. It is time to ask whether there is something faulty in the very conviction that God’s will is necessarily or ordinarily expressed to most people through the

will of a few people

who hold office in Church or state. In other words, it is time to question whether our understanding of authority as the right of some to command and obedience as the obligation of others to comply with commands reflects a divinely ordained arrangement of human affairs or whether it represents the sacralization of an intrinsically faulty human ideology of power. In short, is obedience a civil and Christian virtue or the strategy of those in power for maintaining systems of domination, a strategy which plays into the codependency of the multitudes who would rather react than act, rather surrender autonomy than assume responsibility.(28)

A number of factors are raising this question at the present time. Historically, Nazism culminating in the Holocaust has called into question for all peoples of all times the alienation of personal responsibility through blind obedience to authority, which has traditionally been proposed to Christians as the supreme imitation of Christ in his obedience unto death.

Within the disciplines of philosophy and theology thinkers like Dorothee Soelle and Nicholas Lash have undertaken specific reflections on obedience in Christian experience. Soelle in a provocative little book called *Beyond Mere Obedience*(29) accuses Christianity of elevating obedience to the pinnacle of the structure of virtue, a place that the Gospel assigns to charity. Lash, in an equally provocative book, *Voices of Authority*,(30) describes the relativizing effect which the irreversible multiplication of authorities in every field of thought and action is having on the traditional understanding of authority and obedience.

In the practical order we are seeing the devastating effects of military obedience in incidents like My Lai; the ultimate dangers inherent in the chain of command mechanisms that control the use of nuclear weapons; the immorality in government that is permitted and justified as following orders; and the repression and demoralization of one group after another in the Church by the oppressive use of ecclesiastical authority. All of these factors are forcing us to ask whether the widespread situation of authority-generated injustice and oppression is merely an accident of the misuse of authority or a challenge to re-examine the entire issue.

Religious make a vow of obedience. This constitutes a claim to know something about the nature and role of obedience in Christian experience as well as a responsibility for safeguarding its evangelical character. But any spiritual practice, if carried out by large numbers of devotees over the course of centuries without radical reflective reexamination,

can degenerate into an ideologically sustained routine. At that point it can be used against its own deepest purposes and those purposes themselves can become unavailable. I would suggest that this has happened to Christian obedience in general and religious obedience in particular. I would also suggest that religious, in virtue of their vow, are called in a particular way to engage in a prophetic critique of the assumptions which undergird our understanding of obedience as a Christian virtue.

Because of the importance of the practice of obedience by subordinates in the power operations of those in office, any challenge to the traditional understanding of obedience is bound to be viewed as subversive. The administration's defense of Oliver North as an American hero is no more disturbing than recent events in the Catholic Church which make it very clear that virtually anything will be tolerated except a challenge to papal authority.(31) What has correctly been called "creeping infallibilism" has combined with a ruthless centralization of ecclesiastical control that is clearly aimed at the suppression of all centers of authority in the Church except the juridical one. Theological development, pastoral creativity, episcopal teaching, respectful dissent by the faithful, and the exercise of the legitimate autonomy of religious congregations have all been the objects of vindictive repression in recent years. (32) In every case acquiescence has been demanded in the name of obedience.

It seems to me that this situation is not merely an in-house Catholic problem. Catholics form the largest single denomination in the United States and are represented in disproportionately high numbers in the national legislature, the military, and the federal law enforcement agencies. Catholicism is, for better or worse, the strongest moral voice in contemporary Christianity, and it is Christianity which supplied the moral and spiritual rationale, the theology, for the understanding of obedience to which Hitler appealed, illegitimately no doubt, but very effectively.(33) It is Christianity, through the family, the parish church, and the parochial or church school, which continues to teach a theology of obedience that presents submission to parental civil, and Church authority as the quintessential Christian virtue.(34) What I want to suggest is that the understanding of obedience with which we are currently operating is dangerous in the extreme. We are playing spiritual and societal roulette by our failure to question radically the assumption that, in the absence of immediate and compelling evidence to the contrary, doing what we are told by those in positions of authority is the best way to fulfill the will of God.

Feminist analysis has helped us to see how patriarchy, the hierarchal system of domination and subordination which originated in the family as male headship in relation to women,

children, and other dependents was gradually generalized as the appropriate, indeed divinely instituted, principle of all organized social life. (35) Our current theology of obedience rests on a sacralization of patriarchal ideology. As feminist criticism enables us to see the essential destructiveness of patriarchy as a principle of social organization, it also enables us to see that the theology and spirituality of obedience as it has been generally understood throughout the Christian centuries is highly questionable.

It is not within the scope of either our time here or my abilities to attempt a full scale reconstruction of the theology of obedience. But perhaps it is possible to suggest certain theological propositions which, if mutually articulated, could function as coordinates for a renewed theology of obedience. The first is that obedience, if it is to be understood as a Christian virtue, cannot derive its intrinsic value either from its contribution to human power structure or from its contribution to social order or efficiency but only from its role in an enlightened search for and commitment to the divine will.

Secondly, and as an immediate corollary, obedience in the sense of the term, i.e., interior submission of mind and will to the will of another, can only be offered to God. It is an expression of our creaturehood, of the experienced fact that we are not absolute originators of our own being and action but responders to God's creative initiative. The more deeply a person enters into union with God the more attuned to the divine voice he or she will be. If there is someone whom we might expect to hear and articulate that voice with particular clarity it is surely the saint or the prophet rather than the office holder.

Thirdly, all human beings are essentially equal before God and nothing, including accession to civil or ecclesiastical office, erases that foundational equality. All hierarchical systems are provisional human arrangements which implicate us in various processes of cooperation, but none of them creates the conditions of ontological superiority and inferiority implied in the classical understanding of obedience. Finally, no human being, however highly placed or specially consecrated, actually holds God's place in relation to another human being. A person, because of his or her role in the community, may enter in special ways into the systems of mediation of the divine will that we attempt to construct as more or less reliable supports for our fallible discernment, but no human being speaks, purely and simply, with the voice of God. Therefore, there is no escape from the inalienable responsibility that every human bears to discern God's will and to act on that discernment regardless of the consequences. This responsibility is not fulfilled by merely ascertaining that the action commanded is not sinful, as the classical formulation has it. We are responsible not merely not to sin but to participate in the positive achievement of God's will in our world.

A radical rethinking of the theology of obedience in terms of these coordinates, namely, the religious meaning of obedience as a direct response of the creature to divine love rather than as a response of one human being to another, radical human equality, and the realization that personal moral responsibility can be neither eradicated nor alienated by assigning discernment to another, could lead to a new and healthy understanding of authority and obedience in both Church and civil society. It would definitively undermine the unaccountable exercise of power masquerading as authority as well as the facile alienation of responsibility in mindless subordination. It would delegitimize the recourse to violence for the sake of dominative control and necessitate the development of means of persuasion and reconciliation.

It is my conviction that religious have a particular stake in responsibility for the development of such a renewed theology of obedience. By undertaking the prophetic task of rethinking the vow of obedience which they profess in the context of that immediacy to God which characterizes religious life, and beginning to practice that vow differently on the margins of the institution, they can offer to the Church and through the Church to society at large resources for the Exodus from patriarchy which is fundamental to the building of a just and peaceful world.

Undertaking such a prophetic task will not be looked upon tranquilly by either the ecclesiastical or the civil establishments. To repudiate the understanding of Church and state as intrinsically unequal societies, to undermine the ideology of obedience as religiously mandated submission to those in power, to call into question the simple equation of office with authority, and to reimagine obedience as contemplative attention to God in every situation is to threaten the system which keeps believers sheep in the Church and citizens pawns in society. It is to energize people for autonomy and responsibility. Those in power rarely surrender it willingly, and so those who would undermine that power for the sake of Gospel freedom must be prepared for the fate of all those who have claimed that it is better to obey God than humans.

## NOTES

1. Merton himself repudiated his youthful approach to the world. See, e.g., his 1966 *Commonweal* essay, "Is the World a Problem?" which is available in *Contemplation in a World of Action*, intro. by Jean Leclercq (Garden City, NY: Image, 1973), pp. 159-79. On the first page of the essay he confesses that he is partly responsible for the absurdity of the title's question: "...due to a book I wrote thirty years ago [The Seven

Storey Mountain], I have myself become a sort of stereotype of the world-denying contemplative — the man who spurned New York, spat on Chicago, and tromped in Louisville, heading for the woods with Thoreau in one pocket, John of the Cross in another, and holding the Bible open at the Apocalypse. This personal stereotype is probably my own fault, and it is something I have to try to demolish on occasion.”

2. See Merton’s correspondence with Ruether between 1966 and 1968 in *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. by W. H. Shannon (New York: Farrar-Straus-Giroux, 1985), pp. 497-516.
3. See, e.g., “Vocation and Modern Thought,” *Contemplation in a World of Action*, esp. p. 68.
4. Merton’s major writings on the renewal of religious life are collected in *Contemplation in a World of Action*. Several essays in the collection deal with the special problems faced by enclosed religious. The traditional canonical terminology for the forms of religious life breaks down in contact with the lived experience of contemporary religious. I will use the term “enclosed” or “cloistered” to designate the form of contemplative religious life characteristic of orders like the Trappists and “ministerial” to designate what are usually called “active” or “apostolic” congregations. Merton himself suggested that the difference between his form of religious life and others lay in the fact that ministry, in the explicit sense of the term, is not part of the experience of Christian mission for the monk. See “Appendices” in *Contemplation in a World of Action*, p. 245.
5. Cf. *Lumen Gentium* V, “The Call to Holiness”; *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, esp. I, 3, “The Foundations of the Lay Apostolate”; III, 11, “The Family”; and *Gaudium et Spes*, II, 1, 47-52 on the special holiness of marriage and its role in the modern world. References to Conciliar materials are to *Documents of Vatican II*, ed. A. P. Flannery (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1975). It is disturbing that Pope John Paul II in his Apostolic Letter, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, published on September 30, 1988, reiterated the superiority of virginity to marriage. See para. 22.
6. In his journal entry of January 31, 1965 Merton wrote: “...I no longer have the slightest need to argue with these people [those who “misunderstand the meaning of contemplation and solitude and condemn it”]. I have nothing to justify, nothing to defend. I need only defend this vast simple emptiness from my own self and the rest is clear.” *A Vow of Conversation: Journals 1964-1965*, ed. and pref. N. B. Stone (New York: Farrar-Straus-Giroux, 1988), p. 142.
7. *A Vow of Conversation: Journals 1964-1965*, p. 117.
8. The opposite impression would be created by the document published by the

Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes in May 1983, “Essential Elements in Church Teaching on Religious Life;” available in *Origins* 13 (July 7, 1983). For extensive and intensive responses to this document see *Religious Life in the U.S. Church: The New Dialogue*, ed. R. J. Daly et al. (New York/Ramsey: Paulist, 1984).

9. I have developed this theme of religious life as a movement in *New Wineskins: Re-imagining Religious Life Today* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist, 1986), pp. 18-44.
10. See Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1962), p. xiv.
11. I am indebted for my own reflection on the temptation of religious to the establishment of a lifestyle enclave to John Grindel who, in a 1988 unpublished paper entitled “Individualism and Religious Life” delivered to the National Formation Conference, applied the critique of American individualism by Robert Bellah et al. (*Habitats of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* [Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1985]) to religious life.
12. Because *Lumen Gentium* VI, 43 says that religious life is not an intermediate state between the clerical and lay states some religious have begun to speak of religious life as “stateless.” In my opinion this is a mistake. Religious life is not a hierarchical state but it is definitely a “state of life.” As *Perfectae Caritatis* 10 says, “Lay religious life, for men and for women, is a state for the profession of the evangelical counsels which is complete in itself.”
13. For an account of this experience in Merton’s life see Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), pp. 435-458. See also John Howard Griffin, *Follow the Ecstasy: Thomas Merton, The Hermitage Years, 1965-1968* (Fort Worth: Latitudes Press, 1983). Griffin provides a full scale treatment of Merton’s relationship with Margie Smith.
14. Griffin, *Follow the Ecstasy*, pp. 81-82 quotes Merton as saying: “My chastity is not merely the renunciation of sin or of sexual fulfillment but the renunciation of a whole mode of being, a whole conception of life and of myself.”
15. This quotation from the Restricted journals is from Mott, *The Seven Mountains*, p. 458.
16. Merton mentions this in many places, e.g., in “Problems and Prospects,” *Contemplation in a World of Action*, pp. 28-30.
17. See the chapter, “To Choose the World,” in Monica Furlong, *Merton: A Biography* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), pp. 252-269.
18. It is somewhat dangerous to draw this distinction at this point in ecclesiastical history since the Vatican has been at pains in recent years to reintroduce a dichotomy between

the sacred and the secular dictating an artificial and basically inoperable separation of functions between clergy and religious on the one hand and laity on the other. My proposals have nothing to do with this dichotomy or its conclusions.

19. "Problems and Prospects," pp. 43-44.
20. Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* [Harper Torchbook, vol. I] (New York/Evanston/London: Harper & Row, 1969), p. 12.
21. Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 26.
22. See Merton's "The Inner Experience: Society and the Inner Self (II)." "The Inner Experience" is a collection of essays from an unpublished work which were published serially in *Cistercian Studies* 18 (1983) and 19 (1984).
23. See Mott, *The Seven Mountains*, pp. 427-430.
24. Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978).
25. Amos N. Wilder, *Early Christian Rhetoric: The Language of the Gospel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), esp. pp. 1-17.
26. Cf. "Problems and Prospects," p. 28.
27. *The Prophetic Imagination*, p. 67.
28. I am dependent for this idea on the theory of Anne Wilson Schaef expounded in *When Society Becomes an Addict* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987).
29. Dorothee Soelle, *Beyond Mere Obedience*, trans. by L. W. Denef (New York: Pilgrim, 1982).
30. Nicholas Lash, *Voices of Authority* (Shepherdstown: Patmos, 1976).
31. This became distressingly evident when priests, ordained by schismatic Archbishop Marcel Lefevre, who refuse to accept the doctrinal and disciplinary implications of Vatican II, were readmitted to full Church membership and priestly functions provided they submitted to the Pope. In other words, communion of faith and practice is less essential than obedience!
32. I am alluding to the repressive actions taken against theologians Charles Curran, Hans Kung, Edward Schillebeeckx, Leonardo Boff; against Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen; against episcopal conferences; against the signers of the *New York Times* advertisement on dissent from official teaching on abortion; against individual religious such as Agnes Mary Mansour and against whole congregations through the process of approval of Constitutions.
33. Soelle in *Beyond Mere Obedience*, p. 7, supplies this quotation from Rudolf Hess who was a commandant in Auschwitz: "I was brought up by my parents to give due respect and honor to all adults, particularly older persons, no matter which social classes they belonged to. Wherever the need arose, I was told, it was my primary duty to be of assistance. In particular I was always directed to carry out the wishes or

directives of my parents, the teacher, pastor, in fact of all adults including household servants, without hesitation, and allow nothing to deter me. What such persons said was always right. These rules of conduct have become part of my very flesh and blood.”

34. John Bradshaw, a family therapist whose theories on societal dysfunction in America are gaining considerable attention, in *Bradshaw On: The Family: A Revolutionary Way of Self-Discovery* (Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications, 1988), calls the theologically reinforced attitudes toward obedience used in American child-rearing “the poisonous pedagogy.” See esp. p. 1-22.
35. For a thorough-going theological treatment of patriarchy and its effects on theology see Rosemary Radford Reuther, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1983).

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