

CONTEMPLATION AND COSMOS: Merton on Maximus and Teilhard

Donald P. St. John

Introduction

In September 1960, Thomas Merton wrote to a friend that he had recently been sent a copy of *The Divine Milieu* and another work, probably *The Phenomenon of Man*. He had immediately read and liked the former work. Merton then drew his friend's attention to a "French orthodox magazine" which had published his article on Mt. Athos.ⁱ This would not be the last time that Merton placed Teilhard in the company of Orthodox thinkers, Greek or Russian. In a 1966 letter to a Cistercian doctoral candidate studying in Rome, Merton states that he is "very interested in the possible parallel between Soloviev and Chardin."ⁱⁱ As late as 1967 in a review of Henri de Lubac's *The Religion of Teilhard de Chardin*,ⁱⁱⁱ Merton expresses regret that de Lubac, an expert "in Origen and the Greek Fathers," while indicating "deep affinities" between Teilhard and this tradition, does not further explore that connection. Merton notes that "this is a theme that could be profitably developed."^{iv}

Anyone familiar with the life of Thomas Merton knows that the period from 1958-1961 was for him one of rapid spiritual growth, intellectual expansion, and a renewed engagement with the world. It is our contention that several key factors in this personal transformation affected Merton's early perspective on Teilhard's work.^v Among the many factors that contributed to this change, Merton's deep encounter with the Byzantine and Russian Orthodox traditions must be considered prominent. An important bridge with these traditions was Maximus the Confessor (c.580 - 662). Until recently largely ignored in the West, Maximus was given the title of Confessor because of his strong defense of the Council of Chalcedon's (451) affirmation of the two natures and wills (dyothelite) of Jesus Christ.

Maximus' defense was unpopular among powerful monothelite proponents of his time and led to his torture, exile, and subsequent death. The Incarnation was also central to his understanding of creation since the very nature of the universe in its relationship to the Word/Logos prepares it for and anticipates the union of divine and human natures (and through Jesus all humans) in Christ's person. For Maximus and the Orthodox in general there never was a bare "natural" order separate from or opposed to the "supernatural" (and certainly not a "fallen" world). It is the process of *theosis* or deification that affects the history or movement both of creation and humanity into a more intense union with God (differentiation in union). Merton who himself remained Christocentric to the end, found in Maximus a way to affirm the hidden universal presence of the Logos both in creation and humankind. And, as we shall see, he found the Maximian contribution to the concept and practice of natural contemplation (*theoria physike*) a key to connecting the individual with the communal, the human with the natural, and all both permeated by and within the divine.

ⁱ Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1985), 397.

ⁱⁱ Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity: Letters*, ed. Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), 304.

ⁱⁱⁱ Thomas Merton, "Teilhard's Gamble," in *Love and Living*, eds. Naomi Burton Stone and Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979); reprint (New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1985), 184-91.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, 188.

^v For a more thorough exploration of these factors, please see the excellent work by Christopher Pramuk, *Sophia: The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009).