

Can One be a Contemplative in a Technological Society?

by William H. Shannon

This question — how contemplation fares in a technological society — is a very important one to struggle with, because all of us live in a technological society and presumably all of us would like to live a contemplative way of life. What I want to do in this article is to present some of the things Merton had to say about technology and see what bearing they might have on this question.

The Beginning of Merton's Problem with Technology

I think it can be said that technology and its relationship to a contemplative way of life became a problem for Merton soon after Dom James Fox became abbot and started to modernize the monastery and its operations. The noisy tractors, replacing horses and wagons, annoyed a Merton who had come to the monastery seeking silence, and had suddenly found it becoming a place of noise and distraction. In volume three of the Merton journals, *A Search for Solitude* (edited by Lawrence S. Cunningham), I noticed a journal entry for July 23, 1956. Merton was participating in a conference at St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota. He writes of his walk by the lake. It is a scene of beauty and serenity, abruptly spoiled by noise, as he sees a machine approach which was leveling a new lawn. Then he recalled how the night before he had walked alone in the pasture swatting mosquitoes when, in his words, I saw "the tracks of my enemy, the caterpillar tractor." (p. 54)

In the fourth volume of the journals, *Turning Toward the World* (edited by Victor Kramer), I discovered a lone reference to technology. It is the Journal's first entry. Merton writes that it is customary "to assume that technological progress is an unqualified good, as excellent as it is inevitable. But it becomes more and more passive, automatic - and the effects on 'backward people' more and more terrible." (p. 3-4) This stinging statement is followed by a sarcastic remark about a notice on the bulletin board . . . the news about an intercontinental missile fired from Florida and landing in the Indian



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William H. Shannon was one of the Founding Members of the ITMS, this year celebrating its tenth anniversary. He has been General Editor of the Merton Letters and wrote *Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story*, *Thomas Merton's Dark Path*, and will soon be publishing an introduction to Thomas Merton, titled *Something of a Rebel: The Life and Works of Thomas Merton*.

Ocean. Something to be proud of! Have we lost all sense of proportion along with our faith?" (p. 4)

Conjectures and Volume Five of the Merton's Journals

These are the only references I have located in the four journals that have been published up to now (there are no references to technology in volumes one and two). These four journals cover Merton's journal material up to 1963. There are a number of fairly long references to technology in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. In the preface to *CGB*, Merton tells the reader that the book contains material taken from notebooks which he kept since 1956. *Conjectures* was published in 1965. Hence it covers material from 1956 to 1965. But Merton adds that "the notes in this book are not in strictly chronological order" and that new ideas have been added. I would hazard what I think is a reasonably educated surmise that volume five of the published journals (which Dr. Robert E. Daggy has edited and which should be out relatively soon after I complete this article) will have the reflections on technology which appeared in *Conjectures*. My reason for saying so is that this fifth volume of the journals begins with the year 1964.

The Year 1964 and the Influence of Wilbur Ferry

And I think it is safe to say that it was not till early 1964 that reflections on technology became a serious concentration for Thomas Merton. This concentration was largely due to the influence of the late Wilbur Ferry, vice-president of the Center for the study of Democratic Institutions at Santa Barbara, California. Ferry introduced Merton to the writings of Lewis Mumford, an American social philosopher who was a passionate critic of technology, deploring the dehumanizing effects of modern technological civilization.

Enter Jacques Ellul

But, perhaps more important was Ferry's acquainting him with the writing of Jacques Ellul, the French social philosopher. Actually, it was Ferry and the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions who introduced Ellul, not only to Merton, but to American scholars in general.

In 1961 the Center was very much occupied with the subject of technology. This interest prompted them to ask Aldous Huxley about European works on the subject. Huxley recommended, above all, Jacques Ellul's work, *La Technique*, which had been published in 1954. Ferry persuaded the publisher Alfred A. Knopf to put out the English translation. The translation was published in 1964 with an unusual statement from the publisher. Mr. Knopf stated that he had never heard of the book till Ferry brought it to his attention. He published it on the strength of scholars' recommendations and, as he put it, "committed our firm to an undertaking that I soon began to call 'Knopf's folly.'" The book was translated by John Wilkinson, a scholar at the Santa Barbara Center and has an introduction by Robert K. Merton, professor of sociology at Columbia University. It was published in 1964. Merton read it as soon as he was able to get a copy.

November 1964 Meeting at Gethsemani

Thus it happened that a meeting of leaders in the peace movement (including A. J. Muste, Jim Forest, Daniel and Philip Berrigan, John Howard Yoder and others), which was held at Gethsemani from November 18th to 20th, 1964, turned into a discussion of technology. The topic of the meeting had been announced as: "Our Common Grounds for Religious Dissent in the face of injustice and disorder." A good bit of the time was spent in discussing the nature of the technological society: was such a society oriented by its very nature to self-destruction or could it become a source of hope for a new "sacral" order, a new millennial "city" in which God would be manifested and praised and people would become free and enlightened? The participants agreed

that, whatever the eventual answer might be, “technology at present is not in a state that is morally or religiously promising.” (*The Non-Violent Alternative*, 260)

The reason the discussion was steered in this direction was Merton’s excitement generated by Ellul’s book which he had just read. On December 29, 1964 he wrote to a French Franciscan priest in Bordeaux, Pere Herve Chaigne, about that November meeting. “There was much discussion,” he wrote, “of a book which I at the time had just read, Jacques Ellul’s great work on technology. Do you know Ellul? You must, I am sure. I admire his work and find it entirely convincing and indeed it has the stamp of prophecy which so much Christian writing on that subject seems to lack.” (*WF*, 109)

The Santa Barbara Center and “The Triple Revolution”

Those who are curious about Merton’s attitude toward technology would do well to concentrate a good bit of research on the year 1964. Not only did he read Ellul’s book and convene the meeting of November, he was also deeply moved by an important booklet published by the Santa Barbara Center. The paper was called “The Triple Revolution” and was published early in 1964. The three revolutions described are:

1. *the cybernation revolution*, which meant a new era of production, whose principles of organization are as different from those of the industrial revolution, as those of the industrial era were from the agricultural revolution. The cybernation revolution is brought about by a combination of the computer (the “thinking” part) and the automated, self-regulating machine (the “doing” part). The result of this revolution is an almost unlimited productive capacity which requires less human labor.
2. The second revolution was *the “weaponry revolution,”* which has produced weapons which could obliterate the human race. Such horrible weapons show the utter futility of war and the need to work for its abolition.
3. The third revolution spoken of in the booklet is *the “‘human rights’ revolution,”* which is a world-wide revolution toward the establishment of social and political regimes in which every person will feel valued and none will feel rejected on account of race.

The paper about the “Triple Revolution” together with the signature of a number of prominent scientists and other scholars was sent to President Lyndon B. Johnson on March 22, 1964. On April 6, 1964, the president replied through Lee C. White, Assistant Special counsel to the President. The letter said among other things that “the President has asked the Congress to establish a presidential commission to study the impact of technological change on the economy and to recommend measures for assuring the full benefits of technology while minimizing any adverse effects.”

Merton, who received the paper at the same time as the President, responded much more quickly. On March 23, 1964, he wrote: “Triple Revolution is urgent and clear and if it does not get the right reactions (it won’t) people ought to have their heads examined (they won’t). (Even if they did, it would not change anything). We are in for a rough and dizzy ride, and though we have no good motive for hoping for a special and divine protection, that is about all we can look for. I have recently been accused again of pessimism because I refuse to equate hope in God with an unbounded trust in our economic structures. How is it that so-called Christians (and they are perfectly sincere, even devout, nay holy) are totally convinced that the promises of God to Abraham are now totally invested in our spiritually and mentally insolvent society? One cannot question this first and basic truth without being hustled at least spiritually toward the stake.” (*HGL*, 216)

Back to Ellul's Book

Clearly the cybernation revolution will have its effect on the other two. It is this revolution that is at the heart of the technological society, which I wish now to examine via Ellul's book and Merton's reflections on it and, finally, its relationship to a contemplative way of life.

Ellul's book has an interesting subtitle: *L'enjeu du siècle*, which means "the stake of the century." It is something like Pascal's "wager." Pascal "wagered" about God; contemporary men and women about technology.

What do we mean by technology? It has been defined as "the ensemble of various practices by which humans use available resources to achieve values." Technology has benefited the human race in a number of ways:

1. It has made for greatly increased production
2. It has reduced the amount of human labor that must be expended
3. It has made labor easier
4. It can give some people a higher standard of living. In fact, computer technology has made Bill Gates the richest billionaire in the United States.

But there are also many undesirable effects:

1. Technology has brought about environmental pollution that generates a great deal of concern.
2. It has often led to a depletion of irreplaceable natural resources.
3. It has led to a great deal of "downsizing," as mechanization and automation take away the need for many workers.
4. Even the workers who remain are reduced largely to a state of passivity in which they forego all creativity. They are no longer there to guide the machine: it works itself. The workers are there to watch and then repair when necessary. As Ellul puts it: The worker "no more participates in production than a boxer's manager participates in a prize fight." (135) In the same vein Merton writes: "It is by means of technology that man the person, the subject of qualified and perfectible freedom becomes *quantified*, that is, becomes part of a mass — mass man [sic] whose only function is to enter anonymously into the process of production and consumption." (*CGB*, 76)

Merton's Review of Ellul's Book

The December 4, 1964 issue of *Commonweal* carried a review of Ellul's book by Thomas Merton. In this brief review, Merton calls the book "one of the most important of this mid-century. It should be required reading for anyone who wants to evaluate the relation of the church with the contemporary world." He continues:

To assume that our massive technology is fully under the rational control of human intelligence orienting it toward a flowering and fulfillment of [humankind] is not only naive, but perilous. Ellul does not say it cannot be brought under such control. But he thinks the situation is desperate and we have not yet begun to do anything serious about it.

He concludes his review: "This book is a frank, hard-hitting and doubtless controversial, statement of our most crucial problem."

One of the chief problems that Ellul finds in technology is that it tends to absorb, to subsume into itself,

traditional values that pre-technological societies have always cherished. More than that, or as a part of that, it tends to absolutize its own values which are power, profit and, as a means to these, greater and greater efficiency. As Merton puts it: "Technology has its own ethic of expediency and efficiency." (CGB, 75)

Power and Profit tend to Separate rather than Unite

Now great power and enormous profit tend to separate rather than unite people. Power, almost of necessity, tends to be concentrated in the hands of the few, often at the expense of the many; and profit-oriented endeavors tend to enrich even more the already wealthy and to increase the poverty of the already poor.

It must be said, therefore, that the general thrust of technology is away from such things as human dignity, neighborly love and compassion, which make for true community, but are unrelated to technology's all-consuming drive: for efficiency, power and profit.

It is this subversion of fundamental human values that Ellul sees as a result of a society that has turned itself over to technology and is willing to do its bidding for the sake of the benefits it hopes to achieve. This, I think, is what Ellul means when he speaks of technique as "the stake of the century." Some one has said, in criticism of Ellul: "Technology opens doors. It does not compel us to enter." Is this really true? Can we escape technique, even if we choose? Merton thought he had made such a choice. Yet technology caught up with him in the monastery.

Technology, Ellul maintains, is so pervasive that we now live in a milieu created by technology rather than in the milieu given to us in nature. Throughout his book Ellul insists that he is not making value judgments, but simply reporting the facts as they are.

So, a first problem about technology that I discover in Ellul's book is its subversion or absorption of traditional values that easily leads to the disintegration of human culture. To quote Merton again: "It does us no good to make fantastic progress, if we do not know how to live with it, if we cannot make good use of it, and if, in fact our technology becomes nothing more than an expensive and complicated way of cultural disintegration." (CGB, 73)

Technology and its Aversion to Mystery

A second problem Ellul discusses is very germane to the question I am attempting to discuss: namely, can one be a contemplative in a technological society? Technology, he says, "Desacralizes the world" in which we live. It cannot tolerate mystery. Sociologists and theologians have always recognized that humans live not only in a material world, but in a spiritual world. In that spiritual world forces operate that are unknown, and perhaps even unknowable. There is in the universe what Rudolf Otto calls the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, the mystery that infatuates, allures, that incites awe and fascination. We are drawn to it, but it always remains mystery. That is its fascination: we come to know something about it. We can experience its presence, but we never pierce through the mystery. It is there always inviting us to deeper insight. Yet no matter how deep our insight, there is always more. We can never plumb the depths of what Merton calls "the hidden ground of love for which there are no explanations." Never explanations, only awe and delight.

For technology there is no mystery. There are only problems which we must solve. And technology has the hubristic conviction that it has never met a problem it would not be able to solve. I use the adjective "hubristic" advisedly. For it seems to me that, when one looks at the dark side of technology, its overweening sin is *hubris*, which means overbearing pride and presumption. McGeorge Bundy, advisor to Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, though certainly a believer in the importance of technology (he advised increasing American

commitment to the war in Vietnam), still writes of the danger of a technology out of human control and not subject to the critique of human values: “There is no safety,” he wrote, “in unlimited technological hubris.”

Contemplation and Interiority

At this point, I want to make an abrupt change and discuss some of the characteristics of a contemplative way of life. Those who choose to live a contemplative life are convinced that there is much more to life than what you see. There exists, they would claim, a world of reality below and above (indeed all around) our ordinary daily experience. It is this world which alone is truly real. People who are content to live simply on life’s surface, are completely oblivious of the wonders that exist within them and all about them. How mightily their lives would be changed if they became aware of this other deeper dimension. Their situation is not unlike that of the people of Europe before the New World was discovered. Europe was all they knew. They were totally unaware that a whole other world, holding out new and exciting adventures, was there waiting to be discovered. When finally they came to know of its existence, their history was irrevocably changed.

This dimension of interiority and depth is present in everyone and can be reached by those who are willing to submit to the discipline which such a life demands. While this discipline may require a change in behavior, its principal aim is to achieve a transformation of consciousness, whereby we view reality differently. We discover the Mystery of God at the very center of our being. With this discovery a new life dawns. We are liberated from selfishness. The ego-self (which in reality is a false self) is discarded like “an old snake skin” (to use Thomas Merton’s words) and we come to recognize our true self which all the while had been hidden in God. The true self is not separate or isolated, but one with everyone and everything in God. Thus we find not only our own identity, but also our inextricable link with all our sisters and brothers in God. This is the contemplative vision. It begets compassion and non-violent love. It brings inner freedom.

This is not to say that everything is completely clear in the contemplative life. Far from it! Indeed, as Merton writes:

The real inner life and freedom of man begins when this inner dimension opens up and man lives in communion with the unknown within him. On the basis of this he can also be in communion with the same unknown in others. (WF, 329-30)

People like Thomas Merton who write about the contemplative life will differ in some respects about the ways to achieve this interiority of life. But all endeavor in some way or another to help people become aware of this dimension of human existence and to suggest ways of reaching it. For it is the discovery of this dimension that makes life worth the living.

Age of Seekers

We live in an age of seekers: people who experience a sinking feeling that their lives are empty and aimless. The fare of “bread and circuses,” which a life on the surface, and guided by technology, offers them, no longer satisfies. They search for meaning. They want to know if life leads anywhere. If it does, then where? If it doesn’t, then not much matters. Books on spirituality are written to help people deal with questions of this sort. They are especially important in an age in which many people find themselves, like Dante Alighieri, “in a dark wood,” where “the right way” seems to have been lost.

To search for life’s meaning in a deep interiority of life is a goal quite different from pursuit of greater productivity and greater profit. The one is about the inner spirituality reality of humans as it impinges on daily life; the other is about things exterior to persons. The one seeks to expand consciousness; the other to give it severe limits and boundaries.

Speed

Technology is geared toward speed, toward getting things done quickly. We have speedy mail that puts our correspondence into computers rather than envelopes; fast food, fast travel, speed reading [destructive of **Lectio**]. Everything needs to be done as quickly as possible. Contemplation, on the other hand, is oriented toward leisurely moments of silence and quiet reflection. It realizes that just as you can't grow a plant in a hurry or make a friendship in a hurry, so you cannot pray in haste.

Instant Results

Technology emphasizes doing and looks for instant results. It is full of inordinate ambitions. It strives to do better than others in order to achieve better results, in order to make it to the top. Contemplation is content just to be. It sees the desire to achieve results as a goal that can be illusory. William Johnston once wrote to Merton in July of 1967 asking him what he thought about the desire of a colleague of his at Sophia University, Fr. LaSalle, to achieve Zen enlightenment. Merton replied saying in effect. I hope he gets there. I'm rooting for him. But perhaps the desire to achieve enlightenment might itself be an obstacle to the achievement. This is entirely within the Christian spiritual tradition that we don't seek for special gifts in prayer from God. We simply allow ourselves to be open to the divine largesse. As Merton wrote in a brief introduction to a booklet of prayers prepared for the novices at Gethsemani:

We should never seek to reach some supposed "summit of prayer" out of spiritual ambition. For this would be a sure way to frustrate our own intentions. We should seek to enter deep into the life of prayer not in order that we may glory in it as in an "achievement," however spiritual, but because in this way we can come closer to the Lord who seeks to do us good, Who seeks to give us His mercy, and to surround us with His love. To love prayer is to love our own poverty and His mercy. (Abbey of Gethsemani, 1961)

Importance of Mystery

As I have already mentioned, technology does not tolerate mystery. It sees it only as a problem to be solved, with the assurance that the solution is somewhere down the line. Contemplation, on the other hand, revels in mystery, delights in mystery. In that booklet of prayers of Merton's which I mentioned a moment ago, Merton writes:

Prayer is always shrouded in mystery. To pray is to enter into mystery, and when we do not enter into the unknown, we do not pray. If we want everything in our prayer-life to be abundantly clear at all times, we will by that very fact defeat our prayer life.

Technology can make almost an idolatry of production and consumption. It easily sets false goals. It can divide people one from another. We put a man on the moon and eventually will put one on Mars, "while four fifths of the human race remain in abject misery, not properly clothed or fed, subject to arbitrary and senseless manipulations or violence at the hands of police, hoodlums or revolutionaries." (CGB. 223)

Contemplation and Compassion

True contemplation, I want to hasten to say, is not just about silence and reflection. It always issues in compassion. The contemplative believes, and in some ways experiences, that he or she is one with God and

with all of God's creatures. Such an intuition necessarily sparks social responsibility. Once we let go of the illusion of separateness, we recognize the deepest possible reason for our responsibility to the needy, the poor, the oppressed, the homeless, the marginalized. They are our sisters and brothers. We must love them as ourselves, for in a very true sense they are our "other selves."

Bringing Technology and Contemplation Together

Having spoken ever so briefly about technology and contemplation, I want to address briefly how we can bring the two together. First of all we should not see technology as the enemy. It can, when properly controlled and utilized, do so much good for human persons and for the environment. The Second Vatican Council made this very clear in *Gaudium et Spes*. It says in article 39:

Earthly progress must be carefully distinguished from the growth of Christ's kingdom. Nevertheless the fact that the former can contribute to the better ordering of human society, it is of vital concern to the kingdom of God.

Or, as Merton put it:

Obviously I am not maintaining that we ought to get rid of matches and go back to making fires by rubbing sticks together . . . nor am I maintaining that modern transportation, medicine, methods of production and so on are "bad." I am glad to have a gas heater this winter since I can't cut wood. Yet I have more "leisure," than I had last winter when I did a lot of chopping. Nothing wrong with chopping either. What I question is the universal myth that technology infallibly makes everything in every way better for everybody. It does not.

Two Suggestions

Let me offer briefly two suggestions that can be helpful to us in preserving a contemplative way of life in the midst of a world that has become more and more highly technical. First, we need to keep alive within us a sense of the divine immanence. We have to deepen our awareness of God's presence everywhere and in all of reality as the source and ground of all. When we come in touch with God's creation, we come in touch with God.

Secondly, I suggest that we need to build community, especially small communities that enable us to share with one another our hopes and dreams, our joys and sorrows, our sense of human solidarity. The local church of Rochester, New York, to which I belong is in the midst of a diocesan synod. One of the four priorities set by the Synod for our local church is the building of small Christian communities. Surely a most appropriate goal in an increasingly technological society that so easily ignores the importance of individual persons.

Enter the Angels!

Keeping in touch with God and keeping in touch with community bring to mind the fact that in an older Catholic world view one of the ways in which we, individuals and community, kept in touch with God was through the angels. Whatever kind of reality we assign to angels, they were for us symbols of our connectedness with God and of the connectedness of creation.

In 1967 Merton published in a small magazine called *Season* an article that appears to be whimsical enough, but actually is in deadly earnest. Entitled "The Angel and the Machine," it shows how the angels, once

thought to be our helpers in carrying out God's plans, have been replaced by the machine. He writes:

Technological civilization is . . . a civilization without angels . . . in which we have chosen the machine instead of the angel: that is to say we have placed the machine where the angel used to be: at the limits of our own strength, at the frontier of our natural capacity.

More than that, Merton points out, "the machines are 'our angels.' We made them, not they themselves. They are, we think, entirely in our power". They become extensions of our own intelligence, our own strength. "They form part of our own enclosed and comfortable world, they stand between us and nature. They form a 'room' in which we are isolated from the rest of material creation, and therefore all the more from spiritual beings." They create our weather for us and even abolish day and night, as we dwell in our windowless buildings "surrounded by angels of chromium and steel."

Merton goes on: "In our folly we have tried to convince ourselves that our machinery is sufficient for all our needs and that there is nothing that science cannot do for us. It is in our anxiety to make our machine world completely self-sufficient and autonomous [something which is no fault of the innocent machine!] that we render it spiritually unlivable for ourselves."

He suggests that we need the angels: not to replace our machines, but to teach us how to live with them.

For the angels come to us to teach us how to rest, to forget useless care, to relax, in silence, to "let go," to abandon ourselves not in self-conscious fun but in self-forgetful faith. We need the angels to remind us that we can get along without so many superfluous goods and satisfactions which instead of lightening our existence weigh it down. May they come back into our world and deliver it from its massive boredom, its metaphysical fatigue.

What he is saying is that we must and we can live in the world of the machine, the world of technology, and still build community. But we need the wisdom that comes from God: a wisdom that earlier ages personified in the form of super-human beings. Without needing to explain what precisely earlier ages meant by these angelic beings, we need the wisdom they personified, the wisdom that was their message from God.

Almost all societies have recognized the "way of wisdom." It has been respected, not as a flight into illusion, but as a return to reality in its hidden ground and roots. Indeed special homage has been paid to those people who have attained to the inner meaning of life and being, who have expressed this meaning for their brothers and sisters and who have been able to unite in themselves the divisions and complications that confuse the lives of their fellow men and women. This can also be true of a technological society, but only if it is ready to renounce its obsession with the triumph of the isolated individual and the collective will to power — in order to adopt a different view of reality that springs from solitude and contemplation and constitutes the life of Community. The fundamental question posed by technology is: "Do we mechanize the person or do we personalize the machine?"