

“... profoundly contemplative and rich in active work ...” Reformed reflections on the reappraisal of monastic spirituality in the 21st century¹

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Abstract

Given the growing contemporary interest among Christians of all traditions in monastic spirituality, the latter is discussed with reference to the most famous 20th-century monastic, former Protestant turned Trappist monk, Thomas Merton. Despite centuries of Reformed suspicion and disapproval of monasticism, it is asked whether, despite dogmatic differences, there are not elements of this “Roman Catholic” spirituality – e.g. monastic spiritual practices and virtues – worth reconsidering and incorporating into Reformed spirituality, especially given the challenges Christians face in the 21st century, or whether elements of this spirituality did, in fact, not survive outside its monastic context within the Reformed tradition.

Keywords: Thomas Merton, Monastic spirituality, Lay spirituality, Reformed spirituality

Introduction

A simple internet search will reveal the extent to which monastic spirituality, for many a remnant of the Middle Ages, is making a comeback. What will be surprising, perhaps, is the context in which it is coming back – that of lay spirituality. Book titles such as *Come! Let’s pray! A layperson’s guide for praying the liturgy of the hours* (Mathers 2002), *How to pray with the Bible: The ancient prayer form of lectio divina made simple* (Schultz 2007), *The inner room: A journey into lay monasticism* (Plaiss 2002), *St. Benedict’s toolbox: The nuts and bolts of everyday Benedictine living* (Tomaine 2005), *The Rule of Benedict: A spirituality for the 21st century* (Chittester 2010), *How to be a monastic and not leave your day job* (Tvendten 2006) speak, well, volumes. Kathleen Norris’s 1997 account of

¹ The author acknowledges that, due to the theme of the conference where this paper was originally read – the SAMS Conference, “Transforming and Liberating Spiritualities in the 21st Century”, Stellenbosch, 13-15 March 2013 – there is no pronounced missiological focus in the essay. However, it is hoped that reflections on monastic spirituality may serve the Missiological Society in its endeavours to investigate the missiological relevance of alternative or lesser-known spiritualities.

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her nine-months' stay as a lay person in a Benedictine community, *The cloister walk*, remained on the *New York Times* bestseller list for 23 weeks! German film maker Philip Gröning's 2005 film *Into Great Silence* gave an unprecedented glimpse into the life of Carthusian monks, received several international accolades, enjoyed extended runs in several countries and became the top grossing documentary film of 2007 in the USA. 'Monastic' music, the so-called Gregorian chant, became known far beyond Roman Catholicism in the wake of its being performed by the Spanish Benedictines of Santo Domingo dos Silos in 1994 to eventually peak at number 3 on the Billboard 200, selling six million copies worldwide!

It seems today as if monasticism is offering its wisdom even to traditions from which it is supposedly absent – compare, for example, Dennis Okholm's 2007 *Monk habits for everyday people: Benedictine spirituality for Protestants* (!). Some Protestants may think in this regard of 'Protestant-friendly' variants, such as the ecumenical Taizé Community, founded in France in 1946 by Swiss Protestant Roger Schutz³, or of Mother Basilea Schlink's 1947 foundation of the Lutheran Evangelical Sisterhood of Mary in Darmstadt, Germany, and some may even refer to Bonhoeffer's Finkenwalde community of seminarians. In fact, over the past three decades, this new appreciation for monasticism has grown into a movement in Protestantism,⁴ commonly known as the "new monasticism".⁵

This essay is not a call for the introduction of monasticism into the Reformed tradition. It does, however, want to understand what monastic *spirituality* entails and what its attraction may be for some Reformed Christians despite centuries-old Reformed hostility towards it. After finding some conceptual clarity on what spirituality is, monastic spirituality is discussed with reference to probably the most famous 20th-century monastic and former Protestant, Thomas Merton. Next, some of the traditional Reformed critique of monasticism and monastic spiritual

³ Cf. online <http://www.taize.fr/en> (accessed: 3 March 2013).

⁴ In the Anglican tradition, due to the efforts of the so-called Oxford Movement, monasticism was revived in that tradition in the 19th century already. Today, there are about 2 000 Anglican religious in 77 orders worldwide, most of them "mixed life" orders rather than purely contemplative ones (<http://www.caroa.net/article04.php>. Accessed 3 March 2013).

⁵ This movement refers to the emergence of intentional communities in all the major Western Christian traditions since the late 20th century – Evangelical, Protestant and Pentecostal-Charismatic – and, although they vary in purpose, outlook, and theology, most of these communities are small, formed by lay Christians (either married or celibate), self-governing, focused on prayer and personal conversion, and devoted to radical hospitality (especially towards the poor) and their members engage in productive work in the wider community (cf. Hurst 2008:2).

practices will be revisited with reference to Calvin before asking what value, if any, this kind of spirituality may have for contemporary Reformed Christians.

Spirituality – “the relationship between commitment to God and everyday life”

The word ‘spirituality’ is famous for being “especially elusive” (Bacik 2002:ix) – as are the academic methods, skills, instruments and focus areas in monastic studies (cf. Waaijman 2002:9, 360-64). Also, the meaning of the word has changed over the centuries. The Reformed tradition prefers ‘piety’, because ‘spirituality’ “appears to suggest a radical division between the spiritual and the physical, between soul and the body, between contemplation and everyday life” (McGrath 1991:31). To other Reformed believers, ‘piety’ smacks of narrow-mindedness and self-righteousness. Reformed theologian Dirk Smit (1989:83) draws a helpful distinction between two ways of understanding ‘spirituality’: First, in a *non-technical* sense, referring to that which spirituality concerns itself with – which Smit explains by referring to Ruhbach (“shaping of faith in everyday life”) and Wainwright (“the combination of prayer and life”), and by describing ‘spirituality’ as “the way in which prayer influences people’s attitudes, actions and way of life ... In short ... the relationship between commitment to God and the practice of everyday life, the way in which internal or personal experience of God stamps the life of the faithful” [my translation].⁶ Second, ‘spirituality’ is understood (according to Smit) in a technical sense, in which it has long been used over the centuries – referring only to the inner, experiential element of faith, often with no reference to ethics. According to the first understanding (which Smit prefers), *reflecting* on monastic spirituality will indeed require reflection on its manifestations in the daily lives of monks and nuns, on their attitudes, actions and way of life. However, to understand it, one has to consider what lies behind monastic spirituality, how the relationship between “commitment to God and the practice of everyday life” is understood by monastics – something with which Thomas Merton may assist.

⁶ In this sense – as is also reflected in recent publications on monastic spirituality referred to in the introduction to this essay – although this spirituality is found within the sphere of Christian monasticism, it may not only be relevant to the “monastic life” as such, but that elements of this spirituality may inform a “life in the Spirit” (in Merton’s terminology), also beyond the walls of the monastery.

Merton – from (non-practicing) Protestant to epitome of Roman Catholic monk

Thomas Merton is probably the most influential American Roman Catholic author of the 20th century. His autobiography, *The seven storey mountain*, has sold more than one million copies and has been translated into 29 languages since it was first published in 1948. Merton was a prolific writer of more than 70 books and hundreds of poems and articles. He also kept private journals (posthumously published in seven volumes!) and maintained a voluminous personal correspondence.

Born in France in 1915 to a New Zealand father and American mother, Merton converted to Roman Catholicism in 1938 while attending Columbia University. In 1941 he entered the Abbey of Gethsemani, in Kentucky, a community of monks from the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance (Trappists), one of the most austere of Roman Catholic monastic orders.

Although Merton spent 27 years at Gethsemani, through his writings, correspondence and some public appearances he became an unlikely champion of the 1960s American peace movement. Topics Merton addressed included the contemplative life, prayer, religious biographies and – later – controversial issues (e.g., social problems and Christian responsibility, race relations, violence, nuclear war, and economic injustice). Merton was also a keen proponent of interfaith understanding. During his last years, he became deeply interested in Asian religions, particularly Buddhism. It was while visiting Bangkok, Thailand, to address a conference on East-West monastic dialogue that Merton died, on 10 December 1968, by accidental electrocution.

Basic principles of monastic spirituality

In 1957 Merton's short (120 pages) *Basic principles of monastic spirituality* was published for the first time. In it, Merton aims not so much at discussing 'monastic spiritual practices' in detail, but at explaining the theological rationale behind them.⁷

⁷ Merton clearly has a "narrow view" of monasticism in mind here, according to which "monks/nuns" would not include those leading a "mixed life", i.e. the non-purely contemplative branches of the Franciscans, Dominicans or Carmelites, or the many examples of the new type of religious life that have developed since the 19th century, the so-called Congregations, with their pronounced active apostolate coupled with some traditional monastic elements (cf. King 1999:9).

Whom do you seek? – The “great and central truth” of monasticism

Merton takes as point of departure Chapter 58 of the 6th-century Rule of St. Benedict, by referring to the question that the prior/prioress/abbot/abbess (even today) poses to prospective postulants at the monastery door: “What do you seek?” The newcomer will be admitted if he/she “shows eagerness for the Work of God, for obedience and for testing... *that will lead to God*” [my emphasis].

Merton slightly changes the formulation of the question to “*Whom do you seek?*” (13). To him, this question is key to understand what it means to be a monk (14). Answers such as “To save my soul,” “To lead a life of prayer,” “To give myself to God” or “To love God” may be meaningful, but are lacking. Merton follows St. Benedict by stating that “we come to the monastery to *seek God*, that is, we come seeking spiritual perfection” (17; cf. Merton 1977:34). Now, the latter part of this statement would immediately make the hairs on the back of the neck of most Reformed Christians stand on end. But what does Merton mean by it?

First of all, Merton makes it clear that what is sought is not “some personal quality added to the monastic, some new gift. It is God Himself.” He admits that “[w]e cannot really know Him only by reading and study and meditation ... [but] only by becoming His sons [sic] and living as His sons (John 1:12-13).” According to Merton, one becomes a child of God by being born again in Christ – in baptism – and one lives, grows and brings forth fruit only by “remaining in Christ” (John 15:4) (1996:19). This “life in Christ” is, according to Merton, the “great central truth” of monasticism, without which nothing in the monastery makes sense (20). The correct answer Merton suggests to the prospective postulant on entering the monastery is to seek Christ, “to live in Him and by Him”.

Verbum caro factum est – The ‘foundation stone’ of monastic life

If seeking Christ is the central truth of the monastic life, who, then, is this Christ? According to Merton, Christ is, first of all, the Incarnate Word; therefore, “the whole meaning of the monastic life flows from the mystery of the Incarnation”⁸ (John 1:14; 4:9) (1996:23-24). Monks thus seek

⁸ When Merton uses the term “monastic life” he refers to a “life in the Spirit”, and as such, for him, it cannot be distinguished from “monastic spirituality”. In this sense Merton would agree with the definitions given earlier in this essay that spirituality refers to the “shaping of faith in everyday life”, “the combination of prayer and life”, and “the way in which prayer influences people’s attitudes, actions and way of life”. For this reason, too, Merton’s exposition of the theological basis of monastic life is the same as for monastic spirituality.

Jesus of Nazareth, Christ the Son of the Living God, who descended from heaven for the love of us, who died for us on the Cross and rose from the dead and sits, alive at the right hand of God the Father, filling us with His Spirit, so that He lives and breathes and works and acts and loves in us. Our purpose in life is then to grow in our union with the risen Christ (24-25).

Verbum caro factum est is the foundation stone of the monastic life (25) (cf. Merton 1977:16). This Incarnate Word is also the image of the invisible God and the exemplar of all God's creation, which he created and sustains and which lives in and by him (Col. 1:16-17). Thus the monk is called and seeks to love all things in Christ, including his brothers, sisters and the world. The fact that Christ became *flesh* also has another important consequence for Merton: "If the Word was made flesh... then bodily creation is not evil" (cf. Gen. 1) (1998:28). With this statement Merton rejects any suggestions of repudiating all contact with sensible and material things and calls on fellow monks to learn "how to see and respect the visible creation which mirrors the glory and perfection of the invisible God ... [to] see all material things in the light of the mystery of the Incarnation." Monks must revere all of creation because the Word was made Flesh (33).

However, the Incarnate Word that is to be sought is not only the Creator and exemplar of all things, but also *the redeeming Christ* (43). Without Christ there can be no salvation. Without Christ, human efforts in pleasing God are useless. "Man [sic] cannot save himself, no matter how heroic may be his sacrifices, without Christ." However, in light of the sacrifice on the Cross, in living with and in Christ, "even the smallest act of charity becomes valuable and precious in the sight of God" (44, 47). And the fact that Jesus sought the salvation and unity of *all* human beings (49) – what Merton calls the "doctrine of the cross" – forms the heart of the monastic life of prayer: the Divine Office, where the whole Church *and* those who do not know God are interceded for (51).⁹

But the Christ that is to be sought is also *the risen Christ*, the one who become for us the "life-giving spirit" (1 Cor. 15:45) through whom we receive a totally new character that thinks, loves and acts not only as Christ *would* in a given situation, but as He *does* act – through his grace in us – in the present. Our life thus is not an imitation from afar of a pattern offered by Jesus in the Gospels – and definitely not something we do by our own

⁹ This should also be read against an often voiced critique of monasticism as a flight from and contempt of the world and all things material. Cf. "The monk cultivates 'contempt' for the world [only] in the sense in which the world is opposed to God. But at the same time he retains his love for and concern with all those souls redeemed by Christ, who are struggling to find Him and to serve him in the midst of the world" (101, 103).

power, ingenuity or good will. Through this life-giving spirit which is Christ, “[c]harity then becomes the principle of a new activity, of the good works by which we serve the Living God” (56, cf. 101, 103).

Life in the Spirit vs. life in the flesh – The basis of monastic asceticism

To look upon things in a new way, as becomes the new person in Christ and without “the desires and prejudices” of the old person, the senses are to be educated or elevated rather than destroyed. Here Merton finds the rationale for monastic discipline “so that we learn to see, hear, feel, taste, etc. as Christ” (33-36), and warns against a “purely human kind of contemplation... and [h]uman ascetic and mystical techniques... [which] keep us far from God... because their illusion engenders in us a false confidence and pride. They are centered on man, not on God; they tend to glorify man, not God” (41).

Still, being saved does not exempt us from “a bitter conflict between the flesh and the spirit”, i.e. from our temptations to sin – sins of carnal lust, against religion (superstition, idolatry), especially sins against charity and (the sins of the flesh that Paul stresses most) those which divide the Body of Christ (envy, enmities, jealousies, contentions, factions, anger, etc.). With reference to St. Paul’s writings on the works of the flesh (Rom. 8:12; 8:5; Gal. 5:19-21), Merton again emphasises that this would not imply that the body were evil and only the soul were good. On the contrary, he says, “both terms refer to the whole man [sic], body and soul” (64), and both form part of “the life in the Spirit”. The latter life is one of joy, peace and unity with others. And for this to happen, two fundamental monastic spiritual virtues are needed: *obedience and humility*. Again Merton stresses: “The function of these virtues is... above all to unite us with Christ in His Body the Church... [to] abide in Him” (66). In fact, according to Merton, the whole of monastic ascesis of silence, obedience, solitude, humility, manual labour and liturgical prayer is aimed at uniting us with Christ and with one another in charity, to “walk in the Spirit” (67).

Thus, the monk’s *manual labour* (for example) gives expression to his obedience, the putting aside his own tastes and preferences, to “hasten to do the work assigned to us as Jesus Himself hastened to do the will of the Father” (77). In manual work, the monk becomes a co-operator with God the Creator, to help God change and renew the face of the Earth, but also to feed and clothe himself and his brethren and to contribute towards the support of the poor (77). The centrality of *prayer and the liturgy* (Divine Office) has already been mentioned. Suffice it to add that for Merton there is no tension between liturgy and private prayer. In fact, if

“liturgical prayer is not also personal and interior... it is not prayer at all” (83). In order to also ‘live the liturgy’, Merton refers to the *lectio divina*, for here, as in the liturgy, the monk seeks and finds Christ (78); here the Spirit tells that Christ is the Word made Flesh, the Divine Redeemer that unites us with him – and, through him, with the Father (82). For this, too, the requirement of *monastic silence* is necessary, as without it “we cannot hear the Word who speaks to us silently in the words of God” (81).

For Merton the whole of the monk’s ascetic life is summarised in the traditional five vows of *conversatio morum* – a conversion of manners: obedience, stability,¹⁰ poverty and chastity. All of this, he says, leads to “spiritual virginity”, which is the true essence of the contemplative life (89). Not the mere fact of living an enclosed penitential life, but an emptiness of self, a forgetfulness of self, because “[in] order to be perfectly what God wants us to be, we must be truly ourselves. But in order to be truly ourselves we must find ourselves in Christ – which can only be done if we lose ourselves in Him. This is our great vocation” (95). It means being free, available, unattached, waiting for God’s initiative (97). In this sense monastic spirituality has less to do with what the monk *does* than *for whom* he does it (95).

Reformed tradition and monasticism – a useless and perilous thing?

For many Reformed Christians, even seriously contemplating the legitimacy of monasticism may be unthinkable. One of the fiercest critics of monasticism was Luther, himself a former monk, in his 1521 *On monastic vows* (ten years after Erasmus’ famous attack on monasticism, *In praise of folly*). To Luther monasticism was an elitist, individualistic,¹¹ hypocritical and divisive institution,¹² prone to corruption and for which no biblical grounds could be found.¹³

¹⁰ Renouncing one’s freedom to travel from place to place, to live one’s life within one’s monastic community until death.

¹¹ In the sense of being focused on the salvation of the monk/nun/monastic community alone.

¹² “We have one baptism, one gospel, and one faith, and are all Christians, just the same as each other... there is no true fundamental difference between... those living in monasteries and those living in the world” (*Appeal to the German nobility*, 1520 in McGrath 1994:26).

¹³ Cf. also “It is pure invention that pope, bishops, priests and monks are called the spiritual estate, while princes, lords, artisans, and farmers are called the temporal estate. This is indeed a piece of deceit and hypocrisy... all Christians are truly of the spiritual estate, and there is no difference among them except that of office” (in Johnston 2000:340-41). Merton himself was, of course, acutely aware of all of these criticisms (cf. 1998:5ff.), and thus (already in 1968) the irony was not lost on him that “Protestants themselves have begun to discover monastic values” (1998:6).

Calvin shared much of this view. In the fourth book of his *Institutes of the Christian religion* (Chapters 12 and 13), he discusses the subject of asceticism and monasticism. In Chapter 13, Sections 8-21, the monastic vows of abstinence, fasting and votive pilgrimages are equated to “manifest impiety”, abhorred by God as “fictitious worship... placing the substance of piety in external observances, and despising all others who appear less careful in regard to them.”

Calvin does, however, also distinguish between the monasticism of his day and that of antiquity. According to him, the main purpose of the latter was, as the examples of Gregory Nazianen, Basil, Chrysostom and the writings of Augustine show, to train pious men in this way for the ecclesial offices. They were “monastic colleges”, “kind of seminaries of the ecclesiastical order”, although Calvin admits that not that all attained to this object or even aimed at it, since the great majority of monks were illiterate (Inst. IV.13.8).¹⁴

Referring to Augustine’s *De moribus Ecclesiae Catholicae* and his *De opere monachorum*, Calvin sums up “ancient” monks as follows:

Despising the allurements of this world, ...[they] congregated in common for a most chaste and most holy life, they passed their lives together, spending their time in prayer, reading, and discourse... No one possesses anything of his own... They labour with their hand in things by which the body may be fed, and the mind not withdrawn from God. ... These fathers are... of the purest of morals, ...distinguished for divine learning, and noble in all things, without pride, ...[They] abstain from flesh and wine for the purpose of subduing lust... Any surplus, after necessary food... is carefully distributed to the needy...

Calvin points out that, from this “holy and legitimate” monasticism, matters have deteriorated radically to the extent that there is little semblance between then and now, his contemporaries being preoccupied only with “frivolous and frigid ceremonies”. “Our monks,” he says, “place the principal part of their holiness in idleness. For if you take away their idleness, where will that contemplative life [be] by which they glory that they excel all others” (Inst. IV.13.10).

Calvin also alludes to the potential divisiveness and elitism of the monasticism of his day when compared to that of the early church, as the latter set an example of preserving the unity of the Church, while “our monks... imagine some new kind of piety, by aspiring to which they are more perfect than all other men... [while] the people... admire [them] as if

¹⁴ Although numerous bishops and church leaders in the early church came from the ranks of monastics, this was never a central purpose of monastic life and in this Calvin is historically inaccurate.

the monastic life alone were angelic, perfect, and purified from every vice” (*Inst.* IV.13.11). For Calvin, part of the problem with monasticism is that, in essence, “all other callings are deemed unworthy of the same [mark of perfection]”. For Calvin, God is offended when “some device of man is preferred to all the modes of life which he [God] has ordered, and... approved”. Indeed, for Calvin, whatever is built on this foundation – i.e., that there is some more perfect rule of life than the common rule which God has delivered to the whole Church – cannot but be abominable.

For similar reasons, Calvin rejects the monastic vows of chastity¹⁵ and poverty – even as found in ancient monasticism – as though

[i]t was a fine thing to cast away their substance, and free themselves from all worldly cares. ... God sets more value on the pious management of a household, when the head of it, discarding all avarice, ambition, and other lusts of the flesh, makes it his purpose to serve God in some particular vocation (*Inst.* IV.13.16).

In short, given the state of monasticism he saw around him, which he sometimes calls perverted, sometimes impious, schismatic or superstitious, Calvin was essentially opposed to monasticism in general, even ancient monasticism. Therefore, he was of the opinion that “there is certainly no small evil” in having introduced into the Church a vocation that is at once “useless and perilous” (*Inst.* IV.13.16).

Monastic spirituality – foreign, yet familiar?

Given Calvin’s critique of monasticism, reading Merton’s *Basic principles of monastic spirituality* confronts one with some questions. For example: Why does some of what Merton writes sound so familiar and, well, attractive to a Reformed reader? On the other hand, why does some of it leave one with a feeling of unease? Of course, part of the answer is theological, because behind this way of life and some of its practices lie much deeper dogmatic differences – different understandings of grace (and, with it, of the sacraments), theological anthropology and ecclesiology. Space does not allow for discussing these differences in any detail, but a good explanation can be found in the work of North-American Roman Catholic theologian David Tracy’s *The analogical imagination: Christian theology and the culture of pluralism* (1981). Tracy explains the differences with reference to different “conceptual languages” of different Christian

¹⁵ Calvin is opposed to the vow of “perpetual virginity to God”, because God gives this – according to him – only to some people. For Calvin it is arrogance for someone to think he or she has been given the gift, since not all who enter a monastery have been “given” the gift, and thus it is blatant pride and arrogance on the part of those who do not have the gift to enter a monastery (*Inst.* IV.13.17-18).

traditions, which underlie the “secondary manifestations” of the Christian faith (in creeds, liturgy and ethical codes of conduct – and, we may add, spiritualities). The first, “more Roman Catholic” language (according to Tracy) is “analogical language”, which emphasises a cosmos-wide pattern of sacramental, analogical relationships between God and creation. The latter emanates from the incarnation of Christ, *the* paradigmatic sacrament of God, and reveals a radical, all-pervasive grace that results in a fundamental belief in the goodness of matter and history (1981:412-13). In this sense one only has to think of Merton’s view – based on the “central truth of the monastic life”, the Incarnation – of that God embraces the material world and that it is necessary “to see and respect the visible creation which mirrors the glory and perfection of the invisible God” (1996:28). “Dialectical”, “more Protestant” language (according to Tracy) emphasises a radical distinction between the sacred and human culture, a “rupture at the heart of human pretension, guilt and sin – a rupture disclosed in the absolute paradox of Jesus Christ proclaimed in the judging, negating, releasing word”, with the latter referring to both Christ as primary and Scripture as secondary means of revelation of the Holy. This language system does not focus on “sacrament” (or, along with it, differences in understanding of grace as imputed or infused), but on the “preached word of grace and judgement” (Tracy 1981:414-15). Tracy’s two conceptual languages may help us understand the Reformed unease with, for example, Merton’s persistent referral to the idea of the quest for perfection in the monastic life – something that does make sense within the paradigm of an “all-pervasive grace that results in a fundamental belief in the goodness of matter” (including human nature, with its remnants of goodness which, by the inpouring of divine grace, is perfected), but it goes against the grain of one of the central tenets of the Protestant faith, namely the *corruptio totalis*.

However, the above does not detract from the fact that, with much of what Merton says, Reformed believers will concur – and concur with strongly: the centrality of Christ in the life of the believer; the importance of salvation and of Christ – not only as the Incarnate Word, but also as Redeemer of all mankind – and thus also the importance of intercession for a fallen world; the need to live ‘in the Spirit’ through the power of the Risen Christ; the fact that this does imply that we need to see things differently, with new eyes, and to act differently as new people in Christ, et cetera. This brings us to the next question.

But why monastic spirituality?

Merton's book – indeed, most books on monastic spirituality – raises the question: Why *monastic* spirituality at all? It seems that there is always tension between the familiar and the foreign, because much of what is being said about monastic spirituality is indeed, one feels, valid for all Christians. Merton himself states that “the monastic life is not defined merely by the fact that it enables us to save our soul [one of those uncomfortable expressions to Reformed ears!], to pray, to do penance, to love God. All these things can be done outside of the monastery and *are* done by thousands” (1996:16). Later again he admits that life in common, with a common purpose and interests, is something that even Gentiles do. Indeed, when Merton in a different work speaks of *all* Christian life¹⁶, he speaks of it with a ‘monastic ring’ to it – as a life “profoundly contemplative and rich in active works” (1979:159).

This one can understand only when one understands what Merton means by contemplation, which is not something essentially strange and esoteric reserved for a small class of almost unnatural beings... [but] the work of the Holy Spirit acting on our souls through His gifts of Wisdom and Understanding with special intensity to increase and perfect our love for Him. These gifts are part of the normal equipment of Christian sanctity (1950:8).

The problem may be that of defining contemplative life (and monasticism as one form of it) with reference to the externals of the life. This, Merton (1998) recognises, often happened in the history of monasticism. He states that there is no longer a place for a view of monasticism as mere repudiation of the world; it has led to much misunderstanding of the phenomenon by both monks and their critics:

It is not enough to “say no,” to develop “contempt” for the world and to spend one’s life in a walled-up existence which simply rejects all the pleasures, interests and struggles of the world as suspect or as sinful. ...The monastic life is neither worldly nor unworldly. ...It is merely intended to be liberated and simple (25).

¹⁶ This has been a persistent view of many monks over the centuries, from the famous John Chrysostom (“You greatly delude yourself... if you think that one thing is demanded from the layman and another from the monk. ...Because all must rise to the same height”), to the anonymous 20th-century Carthusian author of *The hermitage within*: “The Christian is not a separate species of human being, but what each person is called to be. And the monk is not a separate species of Christian. He tries to be what each Christian ought to be. Conformity to Christ in faith, hope and love, this is holiness, each person is called to this holiness.”

For Merton, the monk is someone who has responded to an authentic call of God to a life of freedom and detachment from certain particular concerns (a “desert life”) outside normal social structures. The monk’s life is dedicated completely to love God and man (9). But,

[t]o love, one must be free, and while the apostolic life implies one mode of freedom in the world, the monastic life has its own freedom ... The two are not opposed or mutually exclusive. They are complementary and, on the highest level, they turn out to be one and the same: union with God in the mystery of total love, in the oneness of his Spirit (1998:25).

So, how should we understand and how do we react to the growing interest in monastic spirituality and its manifestations?

The challenge of monastic spirituality – Throwing out St. Benedict with the holy water?

Rice (1991:58-59) summarises the crux of Calvin’s rejection of monasticism as follows:

Calvin discarded the medieval monastic system of set-apart orders, not because he despised their practices or ideals, but because he wanted to break down the separation between holiness and life in the world... Christian faith has to do with the whole of life. There can be no separation between devotional practices of the Christian and ...[their] effect on one’s business, family and political life (cf. Smit 1988:186).

If this is so, what explains the contemporary interest in certain Reformed circles in monastic spirituality? It may be because monasticism – idiosyncratic though it may appear – constitutes, in the words of so-called political theologian of the 20th century, Jean Baptist Metz (1998:151), “productive prototypes”; examples of those who, in a post-Christian age, “will not let themselves be dissuaded from God, even when the rest of the world already believes that religion does not need God anymore... a condensed portrait of radical Christian existence today”. This is, to my mind, similar to what Bonhoeffer referred to when he said that “the restoration of the church will surely come only from a new type of monasticism which has in common with the old only the uncompromising attitude of a life lived according to the Sermon on the Mount in the following of Christ” (1990:424), or to what Alasdair MacIntyre means when in his *After virtue* (2007:263) he says,

What matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the dark ages which are already upon us. ... We are waiting not for Godot, but for another doubtless very different St. Benedict.

Perhaps what many find in the radicalism of monastic spirituality and life is not people who escape from the world but, as Merton explains, people who indeed partake in the struggle and suffering of the world, because to “adopt a life that is essentially nonassertive, nonviolent, a life of humility and peace is in itself a statement of one’s position. By my monastic life I am saying NO to all the concentration camps, the aerial bombardments, the staged political trials, the racial injustices, the economic tyrannies” (Merton 2007:107). This makes “contemplation in the age of Auschwitz and Dachau ... something darker and more fearsome than ... in the age of the Fathers” (Merton in Connor, 8-9). Elsewhere Merton writes,

[M]onasticism aims at the cultivation of a certain quality of life, a level of awareness, a depth of consciousness ... which are not usually possible in an active secular existence. This does not imply that ... there can be no real awareness of God in the world. ... But it does mean that more immersion and total absorption in worldly business end by robbing one of a certain necessary perspective (1998:9).

It may be, therefore, that people find – like Metz does (1998:148) – in the example of communal life in monasteries some hope “against the processes of extreme individualization in our society that are drifting into sheer hopelessness”. Jewish(!) scholar Shaul Magid (1999:48) does find in Merton’s reflections on monasticism a life at once steeped in tradition *and* counter-cultural; a life of protest, not “against the world, only against the world’s limitations. It is the choice to be liberated from the confines of human potentiality that the world wants us to believe in.” It is for this reason that Merton admits that “the monastic life has a certain prophetic character about it ... in the sense that [it] is a living witness to the freedom of the sons of God and to the essential difference between that freedom and the spirit of the world” (1998:10).

In a culture that is increasingly hostile to all and anyone who appears to be different, if monastic spirituality challenges us to find Reformed expressions of Benedictine spirituality’s remedy to this, namely radical hospitality (cf. Pratt and Homan 2002), should we not be grateful?¹⁷ In a

¹⁷ This is, for example, exactly what John-Bede Pauley (2006) does with regard to the Anglican tradition, in which he “sought to articulate some of the important monastic qualities inherent in Anglicanism’s identity” (272) as found in the 1549 Book of common prayer and the works of 17th-century Anglican authors – amongst other things with

culture that values honesty and courage but sees obedience and humility as servile, is a rediscovery of the Benedictine emphasis on these virtues – as proposed by Eric Dean (1989:39ff.) – not perhaps needed?¹⁸ In a materialistic consumer society, is it so strange that Ian Adams (2010:59ff.) finds in the monastic vow of poverty an invitation to reflect on living more simply, for our own sakes and that of creation? Perhaps what people find – like evangelical author Evan Howard (2008:21) does – is that a major part of the reason behind the “flight into the desert” of fourth-century monastics was the realization that solitude is not ‘better than’ ordinary life, but “the very ground of ordinary life” (Merton 1979:23). The realization that

[w]e live in a state of constant semi-attention to the sound of voices, music, traffic. ... We just float along in the general noise. ... Silence helps draw together the scattered and dissipated energies of a fragmented existence (1979:44-45).

If the latter happens, we might also better understand the growth in the popularity of retreats among the laity of all Christian traditions since the 1980s and we might appreciate anew Calvin’s reflections on the relationship between prayer and solitude in Inst. III.20.29. Through reflection on monastic disciplines, or reading Adalbert de Vogue’s *To love fasting: The monastic experience* (1994), we might be surprised by discovering Calvin’s positive view on this ‘monastic’ discipline in Inst. IV.12.16. When Merton has to carefully explain that being contemplatives in the world demands fidelity to one’s state – for example, as the head of one’s family – and that such a contemplative life “will be deepened and elevated by the depth of their understanding of their duties”; when he has to explain that married persons “bear witness to Christ’s love for the world”, that their work, leisure, sacrifices and even their distractions become in some degree contemplative and by its “very nature signifies the mystery of the union of God and human in Christ”, then we might appreciate our own tradition’s emphases once again. Looking at it in this way Bolton (201:24) perhaps sums the issue up by saying that

Calvin and the monastics generally agree that the Christian life is fundamentally paiduetic and ascetic, a life of formative education, practical training, and spiritual discipline. Moreover, ... they largely agree on which early church disciplines constitute the proper paiduetic

reference to the *lectio divina*, remnants of Benedictine vows is the BCP and the enrichment of Anglican liturgy via monastic liturgy.

¹⁸ Cf. according to Dean, the call to humility – as expressed, for example, in the wearing of similar habits by all in the monastic community – then no longer constitutes depersonalization or deprivation of individuality, but reflects a new freedom where one is accepted as Christ accepted people: for who one is and not for one’s titles or social roles.

repertoire: scriptural study, daily prayer and worship, psalm singing, moral accountability, the Lord's Supper and so on. Where they disagree is over precisely how – and by whom [and might we add where] – this paideia is properly lived out.

In the history of monasticism, many mistakes have been made – in fact, many monastics will be the first to admit this, and several waves of monastic reform over the centuries attest to this. However, Protestants and Roman Catholics do share centuries of Christian history with them, and as such they are part of all of our traditions and we may still learn something from them.¹⁹ In our contemporary rushed, individualistic and consumerist cultures, we may find in monastic spirituality elements of (in the terminology that forms the focus of this conference) a truly “transforming and liberating” spirituality.

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¹⁹ In our own African context monastic spirituality may also be significant for another reason, which space does not allow discussing in detail here. Christian monasticism is in a way a gift from out continent to the world. The roots of monasticism are not only found in the (Egyptian) desert fathers and mothers and in the first Christian monastic communities that flourished in the Early Church in the Egyptian desert, but remains a vibrant and characteristic part of the oldest Christian traditions on the continent, namely the Egyptian and Ethiopian Orthodox traditions – in the case of the latter, mostly its hermetic form, but also in its coenobitic (communal) form. For the history of the (African) roots of monasticism see, for example, Dunn (2003) and Harmless (2004).

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