

Seers who unmask illusion – In conversation with Thomas Merton and Henri J.M. Nouwen

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Abstract

As humanity seeks to redefine its relationships with technology, the earth and ultimate reality, the mystics can assist in discerning a way forward. How can we live at peace in a rapidly changing and technologically advancing world? Will these redefined relationships facilitate human flourishing or cause alienation? Twentieth century mystics Thomas Merton and Henri J. M. Nouwen believed that the conversation began with confronting illusion. The illusions human beings construct begin in the Self (with the false personas we create) but extend to the collectives we relate to. Merton and Nouwen were mystics and social critics, from a starting point of contemplation, representing ‘Christ, the challenger and disturber of human illusion.’ This article seeks to showcase their contribution while outlining some spiritual practices seekers might adopt to navigate our complex and constantly transforming milieu.

Keywords

contemplation; Fourth Industrial Revolution; Henri Nouwen; illusion; Thomas Merton; mystic

1. The quest for human flourishing in the Fourth Industrial Revolution

We live in a time of profound technological change. Since the eighteenth century there have been four major industrial shifts. The first Industrial

Revolution began around 1750 and was characterized by the development of spectacular new manufacturing processes. The symbolic identifier of this revolution was the steam engine. The second industrial revolution brought major developments in transportation (railroads), communication (telephone) and infrastructure (sewage, water, electrification, and gas supply). It also heralded the beginning of globalisation, and its symbol was the telephone. The third revolution announced the ascent of electronics, nuclear weapons and nuclear energy, biotechnology, and major developments in automated processes and data processing. The robot became its mascot. The world is now in the midst of a fourth revolution (4IR). In a similar way to the revolutions before, the 4IR will build on the advances of previous ones, but seemingly with increasing pace.¹

Two contemporary terms that relate to how human beings interact with the technological progress in the 4IR are “transhumanism” and “posthumanism”. Stellenbosch theologian Anita Cloete has addressed both. What is meant by transhumanism is that human beings could, by means of appropriate technology, move beyond their human limitations. Transhumanism does not aim at the elimination or replacement of human beings, but the enhancement of human capacity to achieve human flourishing.² Transhumanism is focused on the enhancement of human opportunity but posthumanism “... has the overturning of a human-

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- 1 “The computing power of the simplest smartphone dwarves the high-end computers of a decade ago. Automated processes, mobility, systems, and connectivity all come together in this Fourth Revolution, which promises to be as disruptive as all the revolutions before. Central to this Fourth Industrial Revolution is the blurring of the boundaries between the real and the virtual, hybridisation of the human and the technological, radical data driven processes, and artificial intelligence. As we are only beginning to see the possibilities of cyberwarfare, bitcoin-based financial trade, 3D-printing of goods locally (thus reducing the transportation of physical goods), and post nation- state communities, it is difficult to predict the effects of the Fourth Industrial Revolution on how we structure our societies.” (Ganzevoort 2020:48)
 - 2 In similar fashion, Childs (2015:9) defines ‘transhumanism’ as providing us the vision of perhaps “the most dramatic scenario for transcending the boundaries of human nature as we have come to think of it”. Peters (2015:133) understands the aim of transhumanism as the re-contextualisation of humanity in relation to technology, which operates on three levels, namely a metaphysical, psychological, and ethical level. The metaphysical level implies that the world is continuously involved in a complex process of evolution, while the psychological level holds the view that humans instinctively want to evolve for the sake of their own well-being and survival. According to the ethical level, humans should foster their will and ability to evolve to find meaning and purpose. (Cloete 2022:10)

centred world in mind, presenting a new state of existence. To reach this state of existence, humans need technological intervention to save us from ourselves and transcend our current physical, emotional, and cognitive limitations” (Cloete 2022:11). When considering the innovations of the 4IR, the question arises, will they result in transhumanism or posthumanism, human flourishing or extinction?

In this article, we will reflect on how two contemporary mystics or ‘seers’, Thomas Merton (1915-1968) and Henri J. M. Nouwen (1932-1996) might have responded to the threats and opportunities offered to us by the advances in technology in the 4IR and how we might be assisted by their advice in consideration of the human Self, the beloved community, and contemporary geo-political realities. We will do so by analysing their writing as it relates to how they faced similar challenges in their time.

2. Seers who confront illusion

A mystic is a seer, a person who has refined skills of perception, of the world and the Divine presence in it. Some seers are naturally gifted while others have worked hard to develop spiritual skills such as discernment. The first ‘seeing’ is inevitably at the level of the senses.³ Seers pay attention, they notice things that might simply be glossed over if they had not stopped and taken note, but seeing becomes discernment when a seer penetrates beneath the level of the ordinary to see, with spiritual sight (or the third eye) (Rohr 2009:28), what is happening there.

Evelyn Underhill described mysticism as “the direct intuition or experience of God” and a mystic as “a person who has, to a greater or less degree, such a direct experience – one whose religion and life are centred, not merely on an accepted belief or practice, but on that which he (sic) regards as first-hand personal knowledge” (1921:9–10). This ‘seeing’ may involve

3 For a deeper discussion of seeing as a spiritual practice, See “The Practice of Paying Attention. Reverence” in Brown Taylor (2009:17–34).

mystical encounters which may be ecstatic⁴ or ordinary,⁵ but usually these are transformative of the mystic's understanding of life and result in new practices. The mystic becomes conscious of the presence of God in a very intimate and direct manner and their faith therefore need not rely on book knowledge or merely mechanical ritualistic practices (Rohr 2009:29), but on real-life experiences of the Divine.

Thomas Merton and Henri Nouwen were two such seers who were able to use their skills of perception and spiritual sight to see beneath the surface of a world in turmoil (for Merton in the consequences of World War II and for Nouwen the American Civil Rights movement and the USA's nefarious involvement in Central and South America) and suggest practices that could contribute toward healing and human flourishing. McGinn wrote that the vocation of the mystic (or seer) is to call those who read or hear them to "imagine" and "explore" the inner transformation of the self, grounded in a new understanding of how human beings relate to God (2006:xiii). This is in essence what Merton and Nouwen did within the great global challenges of their time. In the process of seeing, sensing, and perceiving the world with spiritual sight (or the "third eye"), illusions are perceived and unmasked.

2.1. Thomas Merton's evolving vocation as a seer who unmasked illusion

It is remarkable that Karl Barth and Thomas Merton died on the same day, 10 December 1968. Leech believed that "(b)oth were theologians of resistance. Merton played a similar role in 1960s America, the America of Vietnam, of racial conflict, of the nuclear threat, to that played by Barth in the Hitler period. Merton himself saw similarities between the two periods. And as Barth inspired Niemoller, so Merton inspired the Berrigans. Both

4 McGinn writes that "mysticism (as the mystics have insisted) is more than a matter of unusual sensations, but essentially comprises new ways of knowing and loving based on states of awareness in which God becomes present in our inner acts, not as an object to be grasped, but as the direct and transforming centre of life" (2006:xvi).

5 For Ursula King, the "seeing" can better be understood as an "awareness" of "the powerful presence of the divine Spirit" in which the mystic "experiences to an extraordinary degree the profoundly personal encounter with the energy of divine life." (2001:3).

Barth and Merton wrote of the transcendence, of the darkness, of the hidden God” (1988:4).

Since Merton wrote so much, focusing on a particular era in his writing is a necessity. This article focusses on his later work, in the early 1960’s, after his Louisville experience, which displayed his sense of connectedness with humanity. This change in Merton did not come suddenly, but it was significant, to the extent that,

(b)y the mid-1960s his attitude toward the world had changed so dramatically that Merton-watchers were speaking of the ‘early Merton’ and the ‘later Merton’ to distinguish between his two careers, the one as a silent mystic who celebrated the virtues of monastic life in glowing prose and poetry, the other as a social commentator of great skill and imagination (Baker 2015:27).

2.2. Merton the prophet

In his Masters Thesis (Columbia University, New York City), Merton wrote that the poet William Blake could be read “as a ‘prophet’”, as one “who ‘utters’ and ‘announces’ news about man’s own deepest trouble” (1981:3). Michael Higgins responded by calling Merton “the William Blake of our time” (Higgins 1998:4) and hence a prophet in his own right.

Although Merton’s appreciation for, and sense of, his prophetic role may have developed later in his writings, Arcement argues that this awareness was in his mind from the time he entered the monastery.⁶ John Eudes Bamberger described Merton as

...a prophetic voice for his times. He spoke of God and of the spiritual life to large numbers of people with a fresh voice. In the words of Samuel Johnson, ‘he employed wit on the side of virtue and religion.’ (2008:18)

6 “For Merton, when a person makes the decision to enter a monastery, they in effect, assume a prophetic mantle. The vocation to be a monk is the vocation to live a prophetic life ... Thus, in Merton, this dual vocation of monk and writer became an influential source for the exercise of his own prophetic spirituality and contributed to his own personal integration.” (Arcement 2013:11)

If Merton understood himself as a contemporary prophet from early on, and this vocation developed as he matured, what shaped and formed his prophetic spirituality? Arcement believed that Merton's prophetic spirituality could be viewed from four specific perspectives. First, Merton's entire worldview was prophetic. "Through the use of the prophetic imagination, expressed especially in poetry and literature, transcendent values are apprehended and proclaimed in a manner that effectively exposes misplaced values and structures of evil" (Arcement 2013:Introduction). Second, Merton's prophetic spirituality was based on certain underlying values: simplicity, solitude, and authenticity. This was to expose the addictive patterns of society and the illusions⁷ that kept people trapped in those patterns. Third, Merton's prophetic spirituality was fundamentally charismatic by being sensitive to the prompting of the Divine in a free manner so that the prophetic element of the spiritual life was protected from the institutional (2013:Introduction). Finally, faithfulness to God became foundational in and of itself and, as a result, a method for challenging and exposing the corrupt values of the world and the misplaced values of the church.

For the purposes of this article, Merton's prophetic spirituality is considered from three distinct viewpoints. First, Merton's search for personal authenticity in the contrast of the True Self and the False Self. Then, Merton's search for authentic communion as he contrasted the Human City with the City of God and, finally, Merton's challenge to the power systems of his day as he contrasted the geo-political duality of Gog and Magog.

2.3. Personal Authenticity: The True versus the False Self

In *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Merton describes the false self: "Every one of us is shadowed by an illusory person: a false self ... My false and private self is the one who wants to exist outside the reach of God's will and God's love – outside of reality and outside of life. And such a self cannot help but be an illusion" (1972:34). The journey from the false to the true self is one undertaken as the false self, hidden in the subconscious, begins to make

7 "Merton understood that the unmasking of illusion belonged to the essence of the contemplative life... This unmasking is not a game one can choose to play or not to play. It is a sacred duty and regards the here and now of what occurs in this world." (Nouwen 1981: 89)

itself known through dreams, fantasies, imagination, and the person has to confront it, in a process described in Jungian terms as “individuation”. The goal is not to destroy or erase the false self, but to embrace it so it becomes a place of growth and development as one grows into the reality of the true self.

Merton described this process as a spiritual journey of discovery of who we really are, undertaken freely and by choice.⁸ One of the pivotal events in Merton’s journey of individuation was recorded in the epilogue to his book, *The Sign of Jonas*. As Merton walked through the monastery, checking for signs of potential catastrophe, he confronted his own “...buffer against total engulfment by darkness (the unconscious) ... which aids him in delving into the deepest aspects of his psyche where he will confront many things about himself, about Gethsemani, and about the human family” (Waldron 1994:85). O’Sullivan pointed out that “[i]n ‘The Fire Watch’ the community is no longer the Augustine City of God. Merton’s view of the monastery is now ambivalent: ‘The Holy Monster’. The paradox, which he, too, recognises, is that he is part of the holy monster. The darkness is not just the night of the watchman but of perception and judgement. The questions of Babel are always in the background of this night journey: What is false? What is true? Is the community holy? Is it a monster?” (2006:80). It appears that Merton himself appreciated this as he reflected about the architecture of the monastery as reflecting his own psyche, Gethsemani’s, “... length and height, but also in depth” (Merton 1976:347).

Later, in *New Seeds of Contemplation*, he recognized the nature of the journey he had undertaken,⁹ but as Rakoczy notes, the journey Merton was on was not a journey to perfection, “...but to integration and wholeness, a process of slowly and painfully bringing the scattered parts of oneself into unity in Christ” (2016:5).

8 “For us, holiness is more than humanity. For me to be a saint means to be myself. Therefore the problem of sanctity and salvation is in fact the problem of finding out who I am and of discovering my true self ... God leaves us free to be whatever we like. We can be ourselves or not, as we please” (Merton 1972:31-32).

9 “Our vocation is not simply to be, but to work together with God in the creation of our own life, our own identity, our own destiny ... To put it better, we are even called to share with God the work of creating the truth of our identity ... The seeds that are planted in my liberty at every moment, by God’s will, are the seeds of my own identity, my own reality, my own happiness, my own sanctity” (Merton 1972:32-33).

Merton's dedication to his true self was one of the main drivers of his influential and public opposition to nuclear proliferation. This is a concern shared by Henri Nouwen (1992:48). Merton's concerns about the destructive nature of unrestricted technological progress were driven by his Catholic personalism.¹⁰ Merton's journey of individuation, his pilgrimage towards personal integration and wholeness and his deepening engagement with the human predicament, led him to confront some of the pressing social issues of his day. Embedded as he was during the third Industrial Revolution, he wrote powerfully on the issues of racism, nuclear weapons, peace and non-violence.

Bamberger believed that Merton understood that he was living in a time of radical change and monumental societal shifts:

Merton viewed his times in the light of history. This perspective permitted him to observe with keen penetration that 'somewhere in the last fifty years we have crossed a mysterious limit set by Providence and have entered a new era ... There has been a violent disruption of society and a radical overthrow of that modern world which goes back to Charlemagne.' (Bamberger 2008:19)

For Merton the radical shifts included nuclear proliferation and unbridled technological advance. With these in mind, he wrote the following, which also helps us see what Merton's approach to the fourth industrial revolution might have been, words that now have a distinctly prophetic ring:

On the level of political, economic and military activity, this moral passivity is balanced, or overbalanced, by a demonic activism, a frenzy of the most varied, versatile, complex and even utterly brilliant technological improvisations, following one upon the other with an ever more bewildering and uncontrollable proliferation. Politics pretends to use all this force as

¹⁰ Catholic Worker personalism asserted the absolute primacy of the human person and decried violence to persons in modern institutions, including war, the nation-state, and both Marxist and capitalist economies. Unlike Christian realism, personalism called for an undivided ethic of love in both private and public life. Personalism asked people to embody their religious beliefs in their everyday lives, to act locally and communally for the reform of politics and culture, and to work for the inclusion of 'household values' such as love and cooperation at the national and international level. Rejecting ignorance, apathy, and passivism, personalism called for active pacifism, for Christianity as a biographical and a public fact. (Farrell 1995:81)

its servant, to harness it for social purposes, for the “good of man.” The intention is certainly good. The technological development of power in our time is certainly a challenge, but that does not make it essentially evil. On the contrary, it can be and should be a very great good. In actual fact, however, the furious speed with which our technological world is plunging toward disaster is evidence that no one is any longer fully in control—and this includes the political leaders (Merton 1971:15).

O’Sullivan gave insight into how Merton might have responded to the challenges of the technological revolution in the twenty-first century when he quoted: “The twentieth century man who mistakenly imagines himself to be standing on a peak of civilised development (since he confuses technology with civilisation) does not realise that he has in reality reached a critical point of moral disorganisation. He is a savage armed not with a club or a spear but with the most sophisticated arsenal of diabolical engines, to which new inventions are added every week” (2006:271).

2.4 Merton’s search for authentic Communion (The City of God vs the Human City)

Dekar connects Merton’s dichotomy of the true and false self with Merton’s critique on technology as the destroyer of communion by proposing that technology affirms the false self. Technology also hinders our journey to discover the true self.¹¹ In 1950 Merton was invited to write an introduction to Augustine’s *The City of God*. Merton had written a best-selling autobiographical work that was being compared to Augustine’s *Confessions*. Merton was not too taken with Augustine’s work until he encountered the idea in Book 14 that the two cities are built on two loves: self-centred love and selfless love for God, God’s creation, and others.¹² O’Sullivan argues

11 But technology can easily manipulate the false self. Technology contributes to alienation from our pilgrimage to our truest selfhood ... “Our real journey in life is interior: it is a matter of growth, deepening, and of an ever greater surrender to the creative action of love and grace in our hearts.” (in Dekar 2004:225)

12 Only the second can lead to genuine community, true order, lasting peace, because it “leads the will to the possession of true values” and to a love for “a supreme and infinite good that cannot be diminished by being shared” ... “The city that is united merely by an alliance of temporal interests,’ Merton concludes, ‘cannot promise itself more than a temporary cessation from hostilities and its order will never be anything but a makeshift.’ (O’Connell 2022:60)

that “[f]or Merton there was another level of union beyond the community and that is the level of communion. In this restoration of time and place through God’s intervention in history there comes the possibility of communion. This is a union of deep intimacy where all are made one in the loving heart of God” (2006:289).

Three years later, Merton wrote a dramatic work, *The Tower of Babel*, which appeared in four different but interconnected works. In its final form, *The Tower of Babel: A Morality*, gave Merton the opportunity to flesh out thoughts first developed in his introduction. It also allowed him to express, in imaginative form, insights on the two cities of Augustine which he first considered in his 1950 *Introduction*.

Initially, for Merton, the City of God corresponded to the monastery and the life of contemplation, while the Human City corresponded to his early experiences in New York City.¹³ Eventually, however, when Merton wrote about the Tower falling, he had softened his approach to the Human City somewhat. While the inhabitants were plunged into despair when the tower fell, they are reminded by the Prophet that the Human City is not entirely evil, but a corrupted, yet discernible representation of the City of God. From the ruins of the fallen city a new city would rise, and this would indeed be, the City of God.¹⁴

O’Sullivan went on to point out that the development in Merton’s thought could be traced through the four works that made up *The Towers of Babel*: “language, technology, war, oppression and contemplation” (2006:195). She also recognized that when Merton wrote these four works, he moved “...from being a world-rejecting outsider to one who knew he had to take responsibility, even in a minor way, for the transformation of society”

13 The City in Merton’s thought was the social order established by men without the aid and counsel of God ... and leaves its inhabitants with a sense of placelessness and exile, for it is a “ceaseless motion of hot traffic, tired and angry people in a complex swirl of frustration.” (Baker 2015:54)

14 “Do not think the destroyed city is entirely evil. As a symbol is destroyed to give place to reality, so the shadow of Babylon will be destroyed to give place to the light which it might have contained. Men will indeed be of one tongue, and they will indeed build a city that will reach from earth to heaven. This new city will not be a tower of sin, but the City of God. Not the wisdom of men shall build this city, nor their machines, nor their power. But the great city shall be built without hands, without labor, without money and without plans” (Merton 1977:263).

(2006:310). Babel or Babylon became the symbol of Augustine's Human City, a place where all Merton regarded as holy and life affirming had been sacrificed. The Human City is a place where silence and solitude have been abandoned and the people who inhabit it are exiles. "Community is difficult in such places, communion is impossible. Cities, for Merton, create an inability to feel human unity with creation: an inability to know the creative force and not confuse it with technological power and scientific expertise" (O'Sullivan 2006:255).

In the closing section of the *Morality*, the exiles who have wandered so far and for so long, they have forgotten their own origins. They come upon a village in which a festival is taking place. It is a picture of true communion, however, there are two villages. One is the actual village while the other reflects the true village upside down in the lake. The houses of the real village turn out to be of substance while the houses in the water are blurred and ruined by the stirring of the water. They re-establish themselves in the subsequent calm.

Raphael, the guide, explains that the Human City is an inverted reflection of the City of God. It is our human addiction to activity and movement that disrupts the reality of the City of God. Our reality is shaped by the disasters that take place in the world, but the danger is that when the Human City is demolished, there will be no one left to see the City of God.¹⁵

The earlier Merton regarded the monastery as the City of God and the New York City of his experience as the epitome of the Human City. Now, the two villages, representing the two cities, are not completely separated from one another any longer. There is a nexus, a contact point between the two, and this point is underscored by Dekar who agrees that the more mature Merton no longer held to a hard division between the two cities but argues for some sort of communion between the two. Dekar quotes Merton:

The artist and the poet seem to be the ones most aware of the disastrous situation, but they are for that very reason the closest

15 "The city of men, on earth, is the inverted reflection of another city ... We who are obsessed with movement, measure the importance of events by their power to unsettle our world. We look for meaning only in the cataclysms which obscure the image of reality. But all the things pass away, and the picture of the real city returns, although there may be no one left to recognize it, or to understand" (Merton 1977:268).

to despair. If man is to recover his sanity and spiritual balance, there must be a renewal of communion between the traditional, contemplative disciplines and those of science, between the poet and the physicist, the priest and the depth-psychologist, the monk and the politician ... [i]f the contemplative, the monk, the priest, and the poet merely forsake their vestiges of wisdom and join in the triumphant, empty-headed crowing of advertising men and engineers of opinion, then there is nothing left in store for us but total madness (2004:230).

2.5 Merton's challenge to the dominant power systems of the World (Gog vs Magog)

Not only did Merton extol the true self over the false and in doing so search for authentic communion, but he also challenged the existing geopolitical structures of his day. Merton's analysis drew on the prophet Ezekiel's identification of the major power blocs, Gog and Magog. In Merton's view, the current conflict between Gog and Magog arose out of the technological emptiness that humans had created for themselves. Humans unleashed the contemporary drive to technological destruction by focusing on weapons and space exploration at the expense of overcoming poverty and world hunger. Merton did not consider the enlightenment of the late twentieth century something to be celebrated because it was that very enlightenment that led people to unquestioning submit to authority that led even to extermination camps. The powers that opposed one another in World War II had, in the Cold War that followed, revealed "in paroxysms of collective paranoia, have now aligned themselves in enormous power blocs of which the most striking feature is that they resemble one another like a pair of twins. I had not clearly understood from Ezekiel that Gog and Magog were to fight one another, although I knew that they were to be overcome. I knew that their ponderous brutality would exhaust itself on the mountains of Israel and provide a feast for the birds of the air. But I had not expected we would all be so intimately involved in their downfall. The truth is that there is a little of Gog and Magog even in the best of us" (Merton 1977:372-373).

For Merton, Gog was obsessed by power and Magog by money, but these differences did not distinguish them from one another. Rather they were like two sides of the same coin and their antipathy to one another threatened

the entire earth. To both Gog and Magog, “[o]nly names matter, to Gog and Magog, only labels, only numbers, symbols, slogans ... If you want to get a job, make a living, have a home to live in, eat in restaurants and ride in vehicles with other human beings, you have to have a right classification: depending perhaps on the shape of your nose, the color of your eyes, the kink in your hair, the degree to which you are sunburned, or the social status of your grandfather. Life and death today depend on everything except what you are. This is called humanism” (Merton 1981:376).

For Gog and Magog, obsessed as they are with money and power, the distinction between right and wrong no longer had any meaning. There were only means by which to identify people who fit in and those who don’t by attaching a label to the ones who don’t and proceeding to “cancel” them, not on the basis of what they have done, but on what they might do.¹⁶

3. Henri Nouwen confronts illusion among ordinary people in everyday life

Thomas Merton and Henri Nouwen only met once, on 7 May 1967 at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky (Penkett 2019:kindle location 17 of 154; Nouwen 1981:13). Penkett interpreted the meeting in the context of the race riots and the Vietnam war, believing that Nouwen was looking to Merton for inspiration, trying to determine how Merton seemed able to rise above the challenges of America in the late 1960s, to live as a contemplative and social critic (Penkett 2019:kindle location 17 of 154). Merton recorded the meeting in his diary in a way that seemed to indicate that Nouwen made little impression on him¹⁷ (Merton 1998:232) whereas

16 “Condemnation or rehabilitation have no connection with what you happen to have done. There is no longer any question of ethical standards. We may have been liberated from idealistic objectivity about “right and wrong.” ...This enables society to get rid of “criminals” without the latter putting anyone to any kind of inconvenience by committing an actual crime. A much more humane and efficient way of dealing with crime! You benevolently shoot a man for all the crimes he might commit before he has a chance to commit them” (Merton 1981:376-377).

17 “Yesterday the new Archbishop McDonough was here — I did not go to hear him speak. Ran into Raymond’s friend Alexis — the South African from Notre Dame — and Fr. [Henri] Nouwen (Dutch psychologist teaching at N[otre] D[ame], had a good talk in the evening by the lake in Charlie O’Brien’s pasture (old name for St. Bernard’s field).!” (Merton 1998:232)

Nouwen acknowledged later that “his person and work had such an impact on me,¹⁸ that his sudden death stirred me as if it were the death of one of my closest friends. It therefore seems natural for me to write for others about the man who has inspired me most in recent years” (Nouwen 1981:19).

Responding to the claim that Nouwen was a spiritual successor to Merton, John Eudes Bamberger, former Abbot of the Genesee, who had known both well, wrote: “Thomas Merton and Henri Nouwen were very different types of people ... They wrote to a different audience and wrote to different levels of experience. Merton was really a born artist and literary figure. Henri was basically a teacher and a communicator on the popular level” (Ford 2009:93-94). Both Merton and Nouwen believed in the power of contemplation to change the world, and both wrote from a place of deep compassion, seeking to unmask illusion in contemporary culture and proposing practices that might lead to human flourishing.

3.1. Ordinary people living in a disconnected world

In his landmark book, *The Wounded healer*, published in 1972, Henri Nouwen took the quest for unmasking illusion into everyday life by telling the story of twenty six year old ‘Peter’ (2010:7). Nouwen described Peter’s perception of his world as “drifting” with “boundaries” that were “becoming increasingly vague” (2010:7), so that he was less able to distinguish between fantasy and reality. “In the absence of clear boundaries between himself and his milieu, between fantasy and reality, between what to do and what to avoid, it seems that Peter has become a prisoner of the ‘now’, caught in the present without meaningful connections with his past or future” (2010:8).

Fifty years later, one can still identify with Nouwen’s description of Peter and his world and, perhaps more than ever, understand how “People have lost naïve faith in the possibilities of technology and are painfully aware that the same powers that enable us to create new lifestyles also carry the potential for self-destruction” (2010:9). Nouwen exposed how

18 See also the discussion of O’Laughlin on the impact of Merton on Nouwen (2004:101,105-108). “Nouwen delighted in the way in which Merton took apart a problem and discarded as inessential most of what we see, and he was convinced that Merton was right in focussing on the world as we find it, rather than what is beyond the world.” (2004: 106-107)

innovation and technological invention used without discernment and ethical consideration, had not always led to human flourishing but rather exploitation, polarization and even potentially self-destruction. Technology which seemed at first to make life easier had in fact caused pollution and ecological disaster (2010:10-11). “We are groping for direction and asking for meaning and purpose” (Nouwen 2010:11). In an attempt to unpack the reasons for Peter’s response to this new world order, Nouwen considers three factors: Historical dislocation, fragmented ideology and a search for a new immortality.

3.1.1. *The problem of Historical dislocation*

Nouwen believed that the average American in the seventies experienced a disruption in the sense of connection with the positive and life-giving aspects of their cultural tradition including beliefs and practices relating to family, worldview, faith, and expectations about life (Nouwen 2010:12). This “lack of a sense of continuity” (Nouwen 2010:12) caused people to respond to their world with apathy, lethargy and disinterest instead of the expected “anxiety and joy” (2010:13). This psycho-social environment resulted from historical dislocation, a break in “historical consciousness”.

It’s not hard to draw parallels between the sense of historical discontinuity Nouwen perceived in the seventies and the all-pervasive postmodern worldview which characterises contemporary thinking. Postmodernism distances itself from modernity by deconstructing “literal, fundamental truths”¹⁹ (Du Toit 2007: 25) and this may be disorientating to people who continue to perceive the world and history through a modern lens. Yet Postmodernism may bring with it gifts that will assist us in discerning the usefulness of technological innovation: “It alerts us to the dangers of technocracy, especially the way it threatens human personhood and the environment” (Du Toit 2007: 25-26).

19 “The postmodernist has emerged from Plato’s cave and no longer accepts a perfect world of ideas, of which this world is but an imperfect reflection. Truth does not lie above or beyond our reality but manifests itself in countless forms within it. It is governed by time, cultural history, tradition, the rules dictated by the language and interests of the community in which it functions. Our image of truth has become Escher-like: details make sense in their context, but the overall picture is always fraught with paradox and contradiction” (Du Toit 2007: 32).

3.1.2. *The problem of fragmented ideology*

Nouwen identified a fast-shifting value system in his average American ('Peter'), who he believed now lived without a discernible ideology. Peter's worldview had evolved from something fairly fixed and absolute to a set of more fluid fragments. Nouwen attributed this change partly to the "tremendous exposure of people to divergent and often contrasting ideas, traditions, religious convictions, and lifestyles" (Nouwen 2010:14). This exposure was disorientating in that it revealed the paradox that despite great human potential and unbelievable new opportunities of the age, there seemed to be a reluctance, and even an inability to bring an end to war (Vietnam) and segregation. On the one hand, humanity was capable of sophisticated interaction on human rights and morality, while on the other there were new revelations on torture (Brazil, Greece, and Vietnam). "We are confronted not only with incredible ingenuity that can build dams, change river-beds and create fertile new lands, but also with earthquakes, floods and tornadoes that can ruin in one hour more than human beings can build in a generation. People confronted with all this and trying to make sense of it cannot possibly deceive themselves with one idea, concept, or thought system that would bring these contrasting images together into one consistent outlook on life" (Nouwen 2010:15).

3.1.3. *A problem of a search for a new immortality*

The third point that Nouwen makes about the prevailing worldview of his 'Peter' is that his worldview is limited by his mortality. "When we are no longer able to look beyond our own deaths and relate ourselves to what extends beyond the time and space of our individual lives, we lose both our desire to create and the excitement of being human" (Nouwen 2010:17). Nouwen makes the point that this limitation, which involves a person's connection with human history, may cause disorientation, affecting a person's sense of continuity with time and space (Nouwen 2010:17-18).

This point is picked up by Sigmon in her attempt to navigate the problems and possibilities of living in a digital world (2022:164-172). Sigmon follows Nouwen in confronting the "stagnating closeness" (2022:168; Nouwen 1975: 32) that may be experienced by those who reach out to others when they themselves are lonely, fearful, disconnected and live under the illusion of immortality. Western culture, partnered with technology, sought

to persuade human beings that they are infinite, immortal, in the sense that we can prolong our earthly existence through better medicine, more advanced technology, and a healthy lifestyle. This is an illusion and an avoidance of the spiritual and transcendent. “A lustful violence is a result of our sentimentality and unmet expectations” (Sigmon 2022: 169; Nouwen 1975:117). The illusion must be unmasked and replaced by a more holistic acceptance of finitude, limitation and the embrace of a solitude within the self, hospitality toward the other and prayer – which is a reaching out to the Divine. “It is only in the lasting effort to unmask illusions of our existence that a real spiritual life is possible” (Nouwen 1975:113).

3.2. *Unmasking illusion is a gateway to wholeness*

In a way, Nouwen shared the same vocation as Merton: to unmask illusion and point his hearers and readers toward a new path. While Merton appealed to intellectuals, to those who were part of religious orders and to an eclectic array of poets and artists, Nouwen made his greatest impact among the ordinary faithful in everyday life, yet their insights appealed to an audience that was ecumenical, interreligious and even secular. Both proposed a mystical life in which people could “move away from illusion and, through periods of darkness and doubt, grow into true relationship with the divine” (Ford 2009:73).

Nouwen never discounted the revolutionary but believed that every real revolutionary should be a mystic at heart, and one who walked the mystical way was tasked to unmask the illusory quality of human society. He believed that mysticism and revolution were two aspects of the same attempt to bring about radical change. “Mystics cannot prevent themselves from becoming social critics, since in self-reflection they will discover the roots of a sick society. Similarly, revolutionaries cannot avoid facing their own human condition, since in the midst of their struggle for a new world they will find that they are also fighting their own reactionary fears and false ambitions” (Nouwen 2010:23-24).

4. Contemplation as a tool for unmasking illusion and discerning human flourishing

4.1. Contemplation is interior and revolutionary

As seers who confronted the illusions of an evolving world, both Merton and Nouwen lived the paradox that withdrawing from the world in contemplation²⁰ allowed them to interact with it more deeply and meaningfully. Merton wrote: “the [contemplative] withdraws from the world temporarily in order to listen more keenly to the deepest and most neglected voices” thereof (1973:10, 25). For Nouwen, contemplation included “a self-confrontation which prevents us from becoming alienated from the world” (1982:125). Following in the contemplation/action tradition, Richard Rohr’s Center for Action and Contemplation in Albuquerque, New Mexico, also seeks to serve “not only as a radical voice for peaceful, non-violent social change, but also as a forum for renewal and encouragement for individuals who seek direction from and understanding of God’s will”. The Centre’s goal is to integrate contemplative spirituality with a direct and practical response to the challenges of today’s world (see www.rc.net/org/cac/index.html).

Thomas Merton explained: “This age which by its very nature is a time of crisis, of revolution and of struggle, calls for the special searching and questioning which is the work of the Christian in silence, his meditation, his prayer; for he who prays searches not only in his own heart but he plunges deep into the heart of the whole world in order to listen more intently to the deepest and most neglected voices that proceed from its inner depths” (Merton 1968:34). A contemplative should be aware of two processes at work in determining a course of action to be pursued. First, a process of disillusionment, stripping away illusions and falsehoods, superficial ideas and stereotypes, and second, a creative process, moving towards wholeness and integration of body, mind and spirit (Marakey 2020:72). These processes involve “a shattering of illusions and a breaking down of façades of false confidence and false security. These movements

20 Egan defines contemplation as “an intensification of a transforming awareness of divine presence” (2005:211) and Ward notes that Contemplative prayer is “the kind of prayer in which the mind does not function discursively but is arrested in a simple attention and one pointedness” (1983:95).

become *kairos* moments which prepares us better to go out and “struggle with the world” (Leech 1992:144).

Richard Rohr believed that contemplation is a middle way in which the contemplative stands between two poles, neither appropriating the world’s power position nor denying it because of the pain it brings. “We hold the realization, seeing the dark side of reality and the pain of the world, but we hold it until it transforms us, knowing that we are complicit in the evil and also complicit in the holiness. Creativity comes from here and we can finally do a new thing for the world” (1999:171).

4.2. The warrior and the prophet

Dutch Carmelite theologian Kees Waaijman identified six paradigms within the practice of contemplation within the Christian tradition. Two are particularly helpful to our study here. One paradigm he called “the contemplative warrior.” This type of contemplation seeks to provide “a spiritual defence mechanism against destructive demonic forces” (Waaijman 2020:440). It is exemplified in the writings of the desert fathers and mothers. Their struggle was seen as “not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12). This clarification provides a lens through which to understand the spiritual practice of contemplation that allowed Merton and Nouwen to unmask illusion and expose the dehumanising consequence of unfettered human advancement. “The process of being clothed with God’s attributes achieves its end goal when the consciousness dawns that it is God Himself who is at work in all our warrior activities. Being clothed by God’s strength empowers one to defeat the destructive forces” (Waaijman 2020:443).

A second paradigm which relates is “prophetic contemplation”. Waaijman offers the Dutch Carmelite Titus Brandsma, who resisted German national socialism and died at Dachau, as an example of such a paradigm of contemplation (2020:454). This paradigm is a contemplation on “the transformative power of God’s word” (Waaijman 2020:454). Using Elijah as a model for prophetic contemplation, the one practicing the contemplation employs a three-layered approach. In the first layer action-and-contemplation are balanced with meditation-and-contemplation.

“This double-sided contemplation embodies the “double spirit” of Elijah, handed on to his true disciples” (Waaïjman 2020:454). The double-sided contemplation is then steeped in a life of prayer and in the third layer, this prayer is focused to become continual prayer, “an attitude of complete and uninterrupted orientation towards God. It is living in the presence of God, and as such both the realization of double woven contemplation and the foundation of liturgical prayer” (Waaïjman 2020:456).

Contemplation is then a powerful tool to unmask illusion, to discern the effects of technological change.

5. Contemplation unmasks illusion and discerns human flourishing

Humanity finds itself riding a wave of technological advancement in this Fourth Industrial Revolution and is increasingly reliant on being able to use (if not understand) an array of new technological tools. How will humanity define itself over against emerging technology and artificial intelligence? Will it change how we perceive ourselves? Will the innovations aid us in our search for human flourishing? The mystics (or seers) can help us with this conundrum.

This article has shown how seers in the tradition of Thomas Merton and Henri J. M. Nouwen have something to contribute to our search for clarity. Merton, who wrote in the aftermath of the Second World War, during the Korean War and the early stages of the Vietnam war, discovered contemplation as a tool for confronting illusion in a world addicted to power and money. Henri Nouwen, who wrote during the Civil Rights movement and the Iran contra scandal, popularised contemplation outside the Abbey among ordinary people in everyday life. Not only did contemplation offer these contemporary mystics a way to see through the pretence and “fake news” of their day but it also helped them expose the devastating consequence of Western power-politics and neo-liberal economics. Their work empowered ordinary people to protest structural violence and the commoditisation of humanity. This resulted in meaningful change. The spiritual practices they wrote about and offered to their readers will be the tools we can use to analyse the rapidly changing and technologically advancing world we live in. Do the innovations in this revolution facilitate

human flourishing or cause alienation? Are they transhuman and focused on enhancing human opportunity, or posthuman, ready to overturn the human-centred world in an evolution into a new state of existence? Can we confront illusion? This article sought to showcase their contribution and offer their tools to the problems of our day.

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