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The Art of Integration? Psychology and Religion in the work of
Thomas Merton.

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Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of MRes in Theology and
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Abstract

Whilst there have been a variety of attempts to understand Thomas Merton's psyche, there remains relatively little attention to his own research in psychology. By focusing on a number of lesser known writings by Merton, this thesis will address the question of the integration of psychology and religion in his work. I will argue first that the early Merton operates with a hierarchical distinction between ascetical theology and psychology, before examining the psychological ramifications of the developing turn to humanism in his work through his correspondence with and reading of Erich Fromm. First devoting a chapter to those of Fromm's writings with which Merton was familiar, I will then draw on this material in order to suggest that the avowed humanist harmony between the two writers in fact evaporates when considered in light of theological positions explicit in their correspondence. Subsequently analysing several chapters written in the twilight of Merton's life, the thesis ultimately challenges the claim that any asceticism-humanism tension is merely or primarily historical. Instead, an elaboration of how Merton's final putative integration of psychology, religion, and humanism incorporates Christian eschatology and soteriology will help demonstrate that this tension is intratextual, enduring, and perhaps also intrapsychic.

The Art of Integration? Psychology and Religion in the Work of Thomas Merton.

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Introduction

Commenting on some 15th century ascetic practices, Thomas Merton writes in a 1965 journal entry that “[d]eepth psychology, etc, have made these things forever questionable - they belong to another age” (Merton, 1997: 210). Less than two months later, Merton would reflect in the same journal that “without our listening and attention and submission, in total self-renunciation and love for the Father’s will...our life is false and without meaning” (Merton, 1997: 226). It is these two themes - psychology and ascetical surrender to God - which will ultimately form the dialectical framework for this analysis of the integration of psychology and religion in the work of Thomas Merton.¹ That Merton writes in a journal entry of 1958 that his “new fervour will be rooted not in asceticism but in humanism” (Merton, 1996: 237) suggests to us a third focus around which this dialectic develops, and which I will use to attempt to illuminate it. To prepare for this discussion, a general biography of Merton will be followed by a brief chronicle of his attitude to psychology, and an outline of the method employed in this thesis.²

The first child of artists Owen and Ruth Merton, Thomas Merton was born in Prades, France, on 31st January, 1915, followed by his brother, John Paul, in 1918. Merton’s mother died when he was barely six, and the subsequent decade saw Merton share the rather nomadic life of his father, mainly in Bermuda, France, and England. In 1929 - after a period of unhappy schooling in France - Merton entered Oakham School, and from here was granted a scholarship to

¹ We are dealing with two rather nebulous concepts, a problem exacerbated by the fluidity of Merton’s use of terms. Rather than devoting space to a discussion of what the concepts of psychology and religion generally denote, I will use each word to encompass a number of those used by Merton. Hence, for psychology one might also read psychoanalysis, psychiatry, or psychotherapy. Religion will often take concrete form as Christianity or Catholicism. This solution circumvents the perennial problem of definition, and is flexible enough to avoid curtailing the number of appropriate sources.

² Biographical information from (Merton, 1990), (Moses, 2014), (Mott, 1984), and (Waldron, 2011). The account of his attitude to psychology is compiled from (Merton, 1990; 1995; 1996; 1996b; 1996c; 1997; 1998), (Mott, 1984) and (Waldron, 2011).

enter Cambridge in 1933. Underwhelming examination results and dissatisfaction with the university lifestyle saw Merton return to the care of his maternal grandparents in the United States in 1934, and complete undergraduate and Master's degrees in English Literature at Columbia University between 1935 and 1939. Having long been a sporadic participant at Anglican and Quaker worship, Merton begins to take Catholic philosophical theology seriously whilst studying Etienne Gilson's *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy* (Gilson, 1991), and was received into the Catholic Church in 1938. It is at this point that the art-ascetic dialectic apparent in Merton's life and work begins to emerge clearly, as Merton commences both doctoral research and exploring the possibility of becoming a Franciscan friar.

Following almost two years of uncertainty and struggle, Merton enters the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani, Kentucky, in 1941, to begin the long process of becoming a permanent member of the Cistercian Order. Merton is drawn by the reputation for silence, austerity, and contemplation, but will continually question both the adequacy of the community and his own aptitude for this life. In 1948, having commenced study for priesthood, Merton published an autobiographical account of his life and entrance into the Church and monastic life, and is thrust into fame by its best-selling reception (Merton, 1975 [1948]).³ Over approximately the next decade, Merton continued to write on traditional Catholic themes, but would later look back on this period with discomfort, critiquing the rigid and binary manner in which he had portrayed the secular world as bereft of God (Merton, 1996b: 161, 283; 1997: 225).⁴

Until Merton's journey to Asia in 1968, where he was to die a Cistercian priest in Bangkok on 10th December, his life is largely stable geographically. Viewed in literary, intellectual, spiritual, and existential terms, however, the picture is

³ Square brackets will contain the original date of publication where relevant. Unfortunately in the case of Merton some of the original dates remain unclear.

⁴ Examples of Merton's "movement from cloister to world" (Merton, 1996c: xix), can be seen by comparing texts such as (Merton, 1975: 73, 94, 117, 141f, 225, 252f; 1995: 135; 1996b: 128, 313, 283) with passages like (Merton, 1996b: 161, 287, 457; 1996c, 274; 1997: 225).

rather more roving, as his life is characterised by engagement with an enormous variety of people, ideas, cultures, and questions. Merton himself distinguishes three phases in his life (Merton, 2009:11-12): (i) from 1938 to 1949, monastic days of strict fervour, resulting “in a highly unworldly, ascetical, intransigent, somewhat apocalyptic outlook [and a] [r]igid, arbitrary separation between God and the world”; (ii) Between 1949 and the early 1960’s, Merton begins “to open up again to the world...reading psychoanalysis (Fromm, Horney, etc.), Zen Buddhism, existentialism, and other things like that, also more literature”; (iii) a third period in which the “fruits” of the second begin to emerge, and a series of publications concerned with political and social issues appear. This transition accounts for the presence of “two Mertons: one ascetic, conservative, traditional, monastic. The other radical, independent, and somewhat akin to beats and hippies and to poets in general” (Merton, 2009:12).⁵ This chronology should be borne in mind throughout this thesis, though we shall see that it is twisting rather than linear.

Our record of Merton’s encounter with psychological writings begins in his own account of his years at Cambridge, where he reports reading “all the books of [Sigmund] Freud, [Carl] Jung, and [Alfred] Adler...the mysteries of sex-repression and complexes and introversion and extroversion” (Merton, 1975 [1948]: 137). As he describes this period here and in his early journals, he is both somewhat scathing about his own propensity to self-analysis (Merton, 1995: 96, 137), and - having entered Gethsemani - fairly positive about the value of understanding Freud and unconscious processes (Merton, 1996b: 196, 212, 389). This period (c.1948-9), however, is also psychologically noteworthy for the young Merton’s struggle against thought, desire, and emotion (Merton, 1996b: 377), perhaps indicating that the psychoanalytic studies had not quite been integrated into Merton’s self-understanding. And indeed, from Merton’s reading notebooks (Merton, 1956), and from biographical and autobiographical accounts of his 1956 encounter with the Catholic psychoanalyst Gregory Zilboorg, we can see that the real personal engagement begins around 1955. On the recommendation of his

⁵ It is unclear whether this bifurcation describes Merton’s own self-understanding or his perception of his public reception.

friend and publisher Robert Giroux, Merton had sent his manuscript “The Neurotic Personality in the Monastic Life” to Zilboorg, whom he was subsequently to meet at a conference on psychiatry and religious life in July 1956. Zilboorg was frank about his view of Merton, labelling him neurotic, stubborn, afraid of being ordinary, megalomaniac, narcissistic, and pathological, and his manuscript potentially harmful (Merton, 1996: 58f). Merton, both immediately and retrospectively, appreciated Zilboorg’s candour, but the meeting merely exacerbated his interior struggles and his distress over the question of whether he was neurotic (Merton, 1996: 364; 1996c: 320).

Nonetheless, this period was intellectually and pastorally formative for Merton, as he is involved in the attempts of his community to use psychological testing for new aspirants (Merton, 1996: 69; 1996b: 298), recommends Jung to a correspondent (Merton, 1996:322), and reads - generally appreciatively - Jung (Merton, 1996: 327; 1996c: 237), Erich Fromm (Merton, 1985: 309ff; 1996: 377, 384; 1996c: 151), Karen Horney (Merton, 1956; 1985: 309), and finally Freud’s “prophetic” *Civilization and its Discontents* (Merton, 1998: 82). Moreover, Merton undergoes his own period of analysis, with Jim Wygal (Merton, 1996: 364; Mott, 1984: 345, 364, 388, 455), and from 1956 begins to incorporate psychological themes in his writing, as we shall now see from my brief introduction to the structure of this thesis.

In my first chapter, our initial encounter with Merton’s psychological writings will consider the posthumously published “The Neurotic Personality in the Monastic Life” (Merton, 1993). That this text was the manuscript that Zilboorg advised Merton to shelve (Mott, 1984: 194) immediately presents us with the problem of dating its content. The editor of the text, Merton’s monastic brother Patrick Hart, writes that it had been considerably revised (Merton, 1993: 4), but I have been unable to locate any evidence of this process in Merton’s journals or letters. Given that I will attempt to assess the question of an historical development in Merton’s approach to the relation between asceticism and psychoanalysis, this text is both central and questionable. Short of any

statement from its author of a substantial revision before his death, however, I will proceed on the basis that it is a reliable account of Merton's position in 1956. This position upholds a hierarchical synthesis between psychoanalysis and ascetical theology, in which the treatment of neurosis, anxiety, and self-will, is seen as crucial to the development of a mature personality and the life of supernatural grace. The text, however, will be seen to harbour assumptions concerning the mortification of the flesh and the denial of the world. Hence it will be interpreted as somewhat transitional, at once a vestige from Merton's first period and an example of his burgeoning openness to the secular world.

Chapter Two will continue to chronicle this development, considering Merton's "The Mature Conscience" (Merton and Bamberger, unpublished), and a chapter from his 1961 series of monastic conferences *An Introduction to Christian Mysticism* (Merton, 1988). In the former, the authors (Merton and fellow Cistercian John Eudes Bamberger, a doctor who was around this time in psychiatric training) consider the problem of psychological immaturity in the development of freedom and sanctity, drawing on developmental psychology and personalist philosophy. This flourishing synthetic approach gathers pace in the latter text, in which Merton includes accounts of counselling, psychotherapy, psychoanalysis, and individuation, in his otherwise traditional study of mysticism and spiritual direction.

My third chapter will focus on the work of Erich Fromm, in order to prepare for a fourth and final chapter on the place of humanism, psychoanalysis, and eschatology in Merton's reading of and dialogue with Fromm. In *The Fear of Freedom*, (Fromm, 2001 [1941]), and *Man for Himself* (Fromm, 1949), Fromm lays the foundation of a critique of authoritarianism in religion in his *Psychoanalysis and Religion* (Fromm, 1950). Given both the frequency of surrender to God in Merton's writing, and his putative embrace of Fromm's humanistic alternative to authoritarian political systems, conscience, and religion, I have chosen to elaborate and evaluate these texts in some depth in advance of an assessment of Merton's extended written response in chapter four

(Merton, 1963; 1985). Here I will ask whether Merton's appreciation and endorsement of Fromm's views on humanism, psychoanalysis, and alienation, is not in fact compromised by his enduring commitment to Christian theology, eschatology, and anthropology. This question will be reiterated, and arguably reinforced, in closing the fourth chapter with an account of Merton's review of Rezah Arasteh's *Final Integration in the Adult Personality* (Arasteh, 1965; Merton, 1988b), in which I shall question whether Merton's attempt at integration is ultimately sundered in an eschatology of *disintegration*.

This question mark over integration clearly invites a further preliminary elaboration of my own method, and before proceeding to the first chapter I will now discuss the structure by which my research question will be formed and addressed. The paper will primarily be concerned with the matter of the integration of psychology and religion in the work of Thomas Merton, for the most part in the writings enumerated above but also drawing on journals and other texts where appropriate. In order to frame the question of integration, I will draw on the criteria of Robert Kugelmann from his *Psychology and Catholicism: Contested Boundaries* (Kugelmann, 2011). I have chosen this text as it seems to be the first comprehensive account of the history of the reception of psychology amongst Catholic psychologists, itself written by a psychologist. As well as its historical value, Kugelmann's text is also constructive, and it is here that I will employ it. Integration, on this model, is one of four possible approaches to the place of psychology within religion, and itself must be guided by the criterion of dialogue, existential reflexivity, and symbolic mediation.⁶ Concerning the four models of relationship, there are firstly approaches which argue for the separation of the two subjects; the second case employs a hierarchy in which psychology is ordered to the Catholic faith; third is the founding of a psychology upon theological language and concerns, using Scripture as data; and finally Kugelmann observes that psychology might function as a substitute for faith. The first and second categories are largely those studied by Kugelmann, who observes an historical shift from the first framework to one of recognising the "autonomous contribution of psychology to

⁶ See my conclusion for more detail.

understanding and changing human behaviour and minds” (Kugelmann, 2013: 403). Notwithstanding the fact that it seems unclear how psychology being “bound to philosophy and theology” is consistent with autonomy in anything other than basic method, it is this category in which I will attempt to place Merton.

Central to this task are the three criteria of dialogue, existential reflexivity, and symbolic mediation. Dialogue as utilised here involves the recognition of otherness, conversation, relationship: “assimilating the other’s position to one’s own world, and in journeying, becoming a stranger in a strange land” (Kugelmann, 2013:418). Reflexivity entails that “the integration must be grounded in one’s living”, such that it is a matter of personal desire and engagement (Kugelmann, 2013: 414). Finally, the candidate for integration must recognise that dialogue and commitment always take place mediated by the contingency of language, and so display “immersion in the symbolic order” (Kugelmann, 2013: 416). This exposes any putative positivist experience of pure facts transcending the mediation of symbolic forms as “the illusion of immediate grasp of the thing itself” (Kugelmann, 2013: 416), and so recognises the conditioned nature of human experience and culture. Using this framework, I will suggest that Merton is *prima facie* viable candidate for integration, but that ultimately certain theological imperatives in his work at least mitigate his adequacy.

In order to discuss these limitations in more depth, I will draw on David Cooper’s *Thomas Merton’s Art of Denial* (Cooper, 2008). Here, Merton is seen as having undergone a major reorientation from the hostile ascetic to the radical humanist, as Cooper describes in his analyses of Merton’s self-image as a writer and his writings on art, humanism, and social questions. I will consider whether this narrative is visible in Merton’s psychological writings, and ultimately suggest that the *historical* dialectic perceived by Cooper actually endures to the end. This will anticipate the scrutiny of whether Merton is properly inclusive, as suggested by Ross Labrie’s *Thomas Merton and the Inclusive Imagination* (Labrie,

2010), in which Merton is seen as longing for the unity of persons and of being. I will end by questioning whether this desire is fulfilled in the integration of psychology and religion in a dialogical, existential, and symbolic synthesis, or whether instead there remain fissures in his work evocative of the conflicts described by both Fromm and Horney.

Chapter One: The Neurotic Personality in the Monastic Life

In the first paragraph of his posthumously published “The Neurotic Personality in the Monastic Life” (Merton, 1993), Thomas Merton makes two important distinctions which will inform the rest of his psychological writings. First, he observes - citing his experience - that there are many problems in the monastic life which are psychological in nature rather than primarily ascetic. Second, Merton distinguishes between those who are neurotic, being the subject of a serious neurosis, and those who merely suffer from neurotic anxiety. Here the distinction is made for the benefit of the monastic supervisors for whom Merton mainly writes, but will also provide an important indication of what he understands to be the scope of psychological issues and his writings upon them. This - along with the distinction between psychological and ascetic - is something that I will return to, but for now it suffices to note that Merton supposes psychological problems in the monastic life to be “many”, and identifies a phenomenon of neurotic anxiety distinct from serious neurosis (Merton, 1993: 5f).

That Merton is writing in the context of his involvement in the spiritual and psychological formation of young monks immediately has important ramifications for the question of applying Robert Kugelmann’s criteria to Merton’s methodology. First, it is clear that this role has involved both genuine dialogue and existential commitment for Merton, as it can be seen from his reading notes and from accounts of the period in his journals that this was a period of deep learning and struggle (Waldron, 2011: 60ff). It is nonetheless questionable whether this is quite as fruitful for the criterion of symbol, given that his work in monastic formation and in this first paper has the particular purpose of training the monks in the traditions of Catholic ascetical theology. It is true that this qualifies as symbolic as specified by Kugelmann, but it is not clear that at this juncture Catholic spirituality is seen as a symbol system among others, as it

would be in some of the later works we will study subsequently. Moreover this also has important ramifications for the notion of dialogue. Later works will also address the need for the young monk to develop in the direction proper to his true self rather than in accordance with an imposed school of spirituality, in this case the asceticism that Merton will later renounce. The question to be borne in mind in this respect is whether Merton's approach at this stage is more agenda-laden than might qualify as proper dialogue and as immersion in a symbol system properly acknowledged as cultural.

Merton then adds an outline of serious neuroses, stressing that persons suffering from them would not be suitable candidates for the religious life (Merton, 1993: 5).⁷ This includes symptoms of hysteria, neurasthenia, paranoia, obsession, hypochondria, and schizophrenia. Here Merton also touches on the depressive character, who should not necessarily be excluded from the religious life but would find therein many occasions for suffering. Since these serious symptoms are not of particular import in either this paper or the writings which will be subsequently considered, I will merely note them here. This account, however, arguably exhibits a weakness in Merton's account of the neurotic personality, namely his reticence in specifying sources for his often sweeping and vague claims. This is particularly true of his assertion that the suppression of hostility is at the root of the trouble typically experienced by the depressive character.⁸

Merton continues these opening sections of "The Neurotic Personality..." with remarks that are a familiar theme in his writings generally, concerning mistaking immature and childish dependency on monastic superiors with the virtue of obedience.⁹ Here we can glimpse the later personalist and existentialist themes in Merton's writing, and perhaps also the stress on self-realization that he will

⁷ Here religious life signifies the consecrated life of monks, nuns, or friars, characterised by community life and vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience.

⁸ Of course, the force of this objection is mitigated somewhat given that we are not dealing with an academic paper, and by the possibility that much of what Merton writes is based on his notes from the 1956 conference referred to above.

⁹ As an indication of the extent to which Merton's psychological interest of this period penetrates his spiritual writings, see (Merton, 1955).

find in Karen Horney and Erich Fromm. Rather, however, than the mere human development of these authors, he is concerned with the possibility that emotional dependence on another person - characterized by Horney as either masochism (Horney, 1929) or self-effacement (Horney, 1950) and by Erich Fromm as symbiosis (Fromm, 2001 [1941]) - will inhibit the full development of grace in the soul (Merton, 1993: 6).

This issue of the development of grace in the soul arguably reiterates the question over dialogue and the symbolic order relative to the ascetical imperative. Again we must question whether the stress on the particular spiritual discipline of ascetical theology can be reconciled with the type of dialogue espoused by Kugelmann and later that advocated by Merton. Secondly, we can also ask whether the use of a particular theological category of grace - notwithstanding Merton's intended audience - is simply assumed as one which facilitates the development of selfhood and hence true dialogue. This is analogous to certain tensions between Merton and Erich Fromm around the question of God and human alienation which will be discussed in later chapters. Finally, the section concludes with a brief but important anticipation of Merton's later treatment of guilt, since he stresses here that the neurotic - meaning serious neurosis - is not to be treated as guilty or reprehensible. This arguably implies something of the automatic nature of neurotic activity, a theme that we will return to in considering Merton and Bamberger's "The Mature Conscience". For now, however, we move on from the description of serious neurosis to the more general theme of asceticism and psychiatry.

1.1: Psychiatry and Asceticism (Merton, 1993: 6ff)

Merton begins to develop the theme of how neurotic anxiety - bearing in mind its distinction from serious neurosis - inhibits the development of the spiritual life. Anxiety is a central psychological theme in Merton's writings, and later in this chapter we will consider its importance and range, as well as the

consistency of its use. Whilst also noting here his connection between increasing anxiety and the quest for perfection, we must first see how Merton develops the distinction noted above between psychiatry and asceticism.¹¹

Merton stresses first the essentially ascetical nature of the religious life, since its spiritual exercises are intended as training towards “a life of perfection in Christ” (Merton, 1993: 6). Since these points perhaps assume some knowledge of the nature of asceticism, it is worth pointing out that it is traditionally understood to be primarily a matter of discipline in self-denial, by which one is prepared for the life of grace in the soul. Merton stresses elsewhere that he understands ascetical and spiritual/mystical theology to be a unity comprising the initial work of self-denial and the subsequent stage in which the dwelling of Christ in the soul is developed and perfected (Merton, 2008: 15-21). That this privileges a particular notion of perfection is clear, and again raises questions with respect to Merton’s interpretation of the nature of the Christian symbol system, and the purpose of true dialogue. Having established the nature of asceticism, we can now consider the further distinction made between asceticism and psychiatry.

It is important to note at the outset that here we are dealing with a distinction, rather than a separation or opposition. Indeed this is central to the whole possibility of assessing the place of psychological themes in Merton’s thought under the paradigm of integration, since Merton works and writes with the underlying belief that psychiatry and asceticism aim at essentially the same thing, and address the same problem: human perfection, and inordinate self-

¹¹ Merton refers here not to the perfecting impulse in itself, but rather when it is sought or enjoined in inappropriate ways. This observation was subsequently echoed by Adrian Van Kaam and Carl Rogers, contrasting those who merely mimic the perfection or way of life impressed on them by others, and those who develop according to their own nature. (Van Kaam, 1966: 69, 77), and (Rogers, 1980: 5-26). Van Kaam observes – from his professional counselling experience – a tendency in spiritual aspirants to mimic exterior standards found in the lives of saints or theological manuals. In a manner resembling Merton’s theory of selfhood, he contrasts this with the interior discovery of the truth of one’s own being emerging spontaneously from within. Van Kaam’s account of the contrast between genuine existential and dialectical willing and mere wilfulness is also of relevance to Merton’s account of self-will. Rogers, from a secular perspective, describes how he consistently witnesses new life in people when they are simply attended to without an agenda.

love, respectively. Asceticism is said to be the means of enabling one to “grow in his supernatural and spiritual likeness to Christ [and develop his] personality in view of his supernatural end.” This involves elevation above the flesh, the world, the “old man”, and divine union through Christ, and its main methods are self-denial, prayer, and love, based on the New Testament and “Catholic tradition as a whole” (Merton, 1993: 7).¹²

Psychiatry, on the other hand, aims at the “normal, natural maturity of the human soul”, specifically souls in need of liberation from “emotional and mental dysfunctions, resulting from traumatic experiences of the past, and from the wrong attitudes and bad mental habits resulting from these experiences” (Merton, 1993: 7). Here psychiatry involves the quest to be free from dependence on the immature and erroneous attitudes characteristic of psychological dysfunctions, which the person is unable to dispel despite being aware of how they are warping his/her life. Of crucial importance for Merton’s psychological emphases is the claim that ascetical methods are powerless to assist with problems of a neurotic nature. This claim is deeply significant, since it amounts to this: if spirituality is a matter of human growth on a supernatural level, and if there are natural psychological dysfunctions which inhibit this growth, then in such cases psychiatry will be a *necessary preliminary* to ascetical and mystical life. It is also important to note here the implications of this for considering the reflexivity of Merton’s work, particularly in light of his search for neurosis in his own life. Moreover it is generally testament to the integrative flavour of his approach that he is keen to appropriate the findings of other sciences into Christian theology.

Indeed, Merton asserts that ascetical theory and practice assume the normal functioning of a mature soul, for instance in the emotional realm, wherein repressed emotional energy can otherwise masquerade as ascetic zeal. Here we encounter Merton’s hierarchical approach to the unity of psychiatry and

¹² See (Labrie, 2010) for a discussion of Merton’s particular interpretation of asceticism.

ascetical - and subsequently spiritual/mystical - theology, and the unity of the nature and grace in the human soul. The ultimate aim of spiritual life - here union with God in Christ - presupposes a healthy soul which can be raised to sanctity and spiritual union. Psychiatry may then operate with a subsidiary aim, making healthy and mature persons of previously sick ones (Merton, 1993: 7). Quite simply, for an immature or imbalanced person, there is no possibility of spiritual development, since the activity of that person is fundamentally misguided and corrupted by immature tendencies.¹³

It is here, in a dense and not altogether measured paragraph, that Merton begins to reflect in some depth on the extent of the impediments to spiritual living which - in his view - psychiatry addresses (Merton, 1993: 7-8). In order to emphasise the breadth of the claims made in this single paragraph, I have chosen to list them by number and without comment:

1. The neurotic suffers from infantile emotional reactions, judgements, and desires.
2. He cannot practice asceticism because he “does not know what he is doing”.
3. Supposed spiritual attractions and inspirations may be merely the emergence of pent-up emotion, such that the subject is moved not by God but by subconscious anxiety.
4. The desire for prayer, God, and asceticism is really the displaced desire for a mature normal existence. This is thwarted by the attachment to immature attitudes and beliefs.
5. Ascetic intentions are consequently an escape from reality rather than adaptation to it.
6. Even if he indulges his desires, he remains restless and tormented.
7. He either resists authority or complies without interior understanding and assent.

¹³ Here one might approach the matter of the privileged place of self-denial and grace in human perfection from another angle. Merton assumes that only one who conforms to psychiatric standards of health can be a candidate for sanctity, a claim that would later be rendered highly suspect by developments in psychiatric thinking by R.D. Laing (1967) and Stanislav Grof (2000), among others.

8. He lives in fantasy and illusion, and hence is not at peace with reality.

Despite its range, the paragraph contains a brief summary of themes which will reoccur in the first two chapters of this thesis.¹⁴ The neurotic suffers from various infantile traits which can be mistaken for inspiration and spiritual desires, and which function as an escape from reality and result in restlessness. All of these issues can be exacerbated when the pressure of anxiety and the difficulties of the ascetical life prompt the person to turn to a director who diagnoses them as symptoms of imagination and self-love, and prescribes the solution of mere will-power. This stress on willing elicits a crucial observation, and indeed one of the points where we can see most clearly Merton's method of dialogue and integration, as well as his willingness to subject traditional Catholic attitudes to the microscope of new thinking. Merton challenges the stress in traditional spiritual writings on the exercise of the will by pointing out that in the neurotic - serious or otherwise - it is precisely the power of the will that is inhibited and sick.

In order to understand what Merton means by sickness of the will we can recall the citation above in which he describes how psychiatry aims at liberation first from dysfunction in emotion or intellect, and also from attachment to and dependency on erroneous mental habits. Due to these consequences of traumatic experience the will is hindered, the judgement darkened, and the whole person subject to the power of repressed emotion interfering with conscious activity. Hence, in something of a vicious circle, the neurotic may experience his inability to respond to his ascetic formation by will power, and slip further into torment by being prescribed more willing as a remedy.

Psychiatry, then, deals with a problem preliminary to the ultimate quest of spiritual perfection: the development of emotional and mental maturity through

¹⁴ See note 55 for comments on gender-specific language.

the treatment of immature patterns of behaviour and thought. The immediate question which arises in my view concerns the nature of this immaturity, and hence maturity. As we have seen, the concept of maturity is a familiar refrain in the opening stages of Merton's paper, but it is not directly defined. The closest we come to this is in the connection between a mature human soul and ordinary emotional problems. Here Merton writes that if the ordinary emotional problems of life remain unresolved there results the repression of the "emotional energy excited by these problems", which makes asceticism perilous. So, we can see that emotional immaturity prohibits the solution of ordinary problems and results in the failure to discharge emotional energy, but we might legitimately wonder what these ordinary emotional problems consist of.¹⁵ Moreover, this description places the release of emotional energy at the centre of human maturity, which we might suggest is influenced by Merton's reading of Freud. In themselves, the merits of such an account would require separate scientific treatment, but instead I would like to raise - and attempt to answer - the question of whether this is consistent with Merton's approach to anxiety.

1.2a: Anxiety (Merton, 1993: 9-14)

Given that Merton places anxiety at the "center of all psychological problems" (Merton, 1993: 9), we can suppose that his account of it will be central to his writings on psychology. Moreover, because of the arguable interdependence between psychology and spirituality, anxiety will also be of great importance to the spiritual life. Merton begins this section of his paper with what seems like a Freudian definition: "*Anxiety is the psychological tension produced by undischarged emotional energy...which remains pent up beyond the point at which it should normally and naturally be discharged*" (Merton, 1993: 9).¹⁶

¹⁵ Indeed an analysis of (Merton, unpublished) will shed light on this issue.

¹⁶ In fact, the definition resembles the early Freud, where anxiety is caused by repression. Freud later sought to probe deeper into the causes of repression itself, concluding that anxiety was prior in the form of the threats to security posed by the *Über-Ich*. For an account of this transition, see (Kahn, 2002: 105-114), and (Gay, 1988: 484-488). Indeed, as my account of anxiety in (Merton, 1993) will soon show, Merton also attempts to account for the question of the origin of anxiety with recourse to security in our social and existential situation.

Merton then continues with the distinction between felt/conscious and unconscious anxiety. The former is an indistinct feeling of indecision or helplessness relative to some actual or imagined danger. This carries with it a “general sense of fear, foreboding, hesitation, and doubt”, as well as physical symptoms such as thirst, perspiration, trembling, or nervousness (Merton, 1993: 9).

As well as this felt variety, there can be unfeared anxiety manifest in more serious physical symptoms, or in projection. In the latter, the sufferer unconsciously finds cause for distress in their surroundings, in resentment, suspicion, and general discontent with the prevailing order. This provides ostensible protection from the painful process of acknowledging anxiety, which Merton says - without a classification - will also involve the construction of defence mechanisms. Should, however, these defences begin to disintegrate, the subject will be exposed to the forces they have attempted to repress, and hence plunged into panic. This does not entail the discharge of the energy, since the mind is unable to identify its real object.

Merton, continuing to assume that anxiety is indeed the result of repressed emotion, then begins to consider various attempts to identify the particular emotion which is at the root of the trouble. Whilst rejecting any approach centred exclusively on sexual energy, Merton nonetheless acknowledges that repressed and immature sexual energy, “lies at the basis of much nervous and mental trouble in religion” (Merton, 1993: 10).¹⁷ Should sexual energies not find acceptance, integration, and expression, either through sexual activity or cultural sublimation, one's offering to God will not be complete, and life will be strewn with trouble. Again it is important to note the manner in which psychology is envisaged as ordered to a complete offering of self to God, since it is another instance of the ascetical hierarchy employed in Merton's treatment of psychological themes.

¹⁷ Again, Merton refers to the consecrated life of Catholic religious communities.

Having offered this somewhat synthetic - notwithstanding the ascetical hierarchy - approach to the claims of Freudian psychoanalysis, Merton turns to what has elsewhere been called the Neo-Freudian turn (e.g. Rycroft, 1972: 60). Here, in Merton's view, there are specifically human emotions which we might call relational or social, which when repressed are the source of anxiety and hence immaturity and neurosis. Merton describes these primarily in terms of fearing isolation, exclusion, or the loss of respect, or inadequacy around measuring up to the standards of a productive society. Alternatively, the subject may fear the discovery of their repressed hostility and the loss of respect and love that this might entail. In Merton's estimation, then, the emotions at work are primary around our sense of personal worth, maintaining membership of society, and harmony with others. It is important to remember, perhaps in contrast with Horney, that Merton remains committed to the view that it is the repression of these emotions that produces anxiety, rather than the emotions themselves.

Merton then draws a parallel between Erich Fromm's account of the psychology of the flight into totalitarian pseudo-solidarity, and an analogous phenomenon wherein one takes refuge from reality in religious life (Merton, 1993: 11). Here the solution to anxiety is found in conforming to the community, which becomes the main barometer of personal value and a shelter from the responsibility of engaged living. This analysis will have a later parallel in Merton's analysis of the value of existentialism and individual freedom in theology (Merton, 2013), but for now the most important point is that disquiet felt in the face of change is symptomatic of an underlying counterfeit peace. That this peace is found in conformity demonstrates that the person does not make a pure offering of self to God, but merely conforms to the status quo in order to allay anxiety.

Merton now begins to challenge the - somewhat anonymous - idea that the solution to anxiety is adjustment to society. This has also been seen by Karen Horney, Erich Fromm, and others as the corruption of psychoanalysis, in its being

placed at the service of mere social conformity and cohesion. Instead, given Merton's theological world-view and anthropology, to adjust to a disordered - "deranged" (Merton, 1993: 12) - society is actually maladjustment, and a flight from reality. Instead, in such times of disorder, one might *be expected* to feel anxiety, and indeed should see it as a means to spiritual discovery and development. If, that is, we live in an unsatisfactory social order, then we should find that the pangs of discontent lead us on a search for what is real, and ultimately to sanctity. Here, however, we might also raise the issue of adjustment in the writings of Merton, relative to the question repeatedly posed about prejudiced notions of asceticism, human perfection, grace, etc. Notwithstanding the stress on genuine human freedom in Merton's work, the hierarchical approach to psychology and theology invites the question as to whether this is not simply adjustment with a different end, with a spiritual adjustment with particular theological presuppositions replacing social adjustment.

In any case, the main point is that anxiety is not something which is merely to be escaped or discharged, but to be faced. Anxiety on this view is a symptom of a deeper malaise, cured by conformity to reality rather than the structures of mass society. Having critiqued the solution of adjustment, Merton considers a theme which will reappear in the later essay on existentialism: the rationalization of anxiety (Merton, 2013). Here the connection is made between anxiety and the experience of evil, sin and separation from God. Any philosophy, that is, which makes anxiety a basic and unavoidable component of human existential reality may ignore the fact that that anxiety springing from separation from God is something to be met not with mere resignation but with a life ordered to divine union. On this view, anxiety has an antidote in the spiritual life.

Merton concludes his enumeration of some factors engendering anxiety by turning to the purification of faith described in various Christian mystical texts, in which one experiences the anguish of recognising the gulf between self and

God.¹⁸ Again, for Merton, this type of anxiety is to be distinguished from those produced by repressed emotion, since it is an indication of a growing immersion of the soul in the reality of its condition. That said, Merton again demonstrates the extent to which his understanding of traditional texts is informed by more recent thought, in claiming that such purifications might well involve the shedding of traces of the infantile.¹⁹ Furthermore, Merton suggests that there can be confused diagnoses at work here, given that an uninformed director might assume that the anxiety of the neurotic struggle is instead that of mystical purification. Of course, as we have seen, such a diagnosis would fail to see that the treatment of neurotic disorders is prior to the ascetical and mystical life rather than part of its summit.

At this point we might begin to question the coherence of Merton's understanding(s) of anxiety, particularly given this last discussion of moral and spiritual roots. Given the initial definition of anxiety as undischarged emotion, is there some tension with the subsequent emphasis on discord with reality? It is possible to argue that Merton has simply juxtaposed the Freudian account alongside the social and the mystical, and failed to recognise the possibility of tension. Alternatively, we might also argue that each of these is presented as a different species of the same phenomenon of repressed emotion, such that Merton's approach accounts for the complexity and mystery of the matter as well as for the diversity of necessarily provisional psychoanalytic answers to the question. In this case we would have to account for the final instance, in which anxiety is seen as a symptom of separation from God, since here it is not clear where repression is at work.

In general, however, there is the possibility of reading Merton as using a phenomenological methodology, based on both his own experience and his reading. Here Merton's intent would simply be to communicate to his monastic

¹⁸ On the anguish of the beginnings of the contemplative life, see (Merton, 1967: 117f).

¹⁹ We might also ask if the focus on the infantile is informed by reflexivity and Merton's experience of self throughout his existential struggles. The question of Merton's childhood is not an issue in this paper, but has been considered in depth in (Gardner, 2015), and (Waldron, 2011).

peers something of the depth and seriousness of the problem of anxiety and the importance of psychoanalysis, in the hope that this will resonate with their own experience and needs in spiritual direction. Finally, Merton has arguably simply displayed his characteristic breadth in approaching a problem, and perhaps recognised from his own experience that anxiety may have a number of emotional roots over different periods of a person's life.

Returning to the text, we can now focus on Merton's description of the various characteristics of the anxiety experienced by the neurotic. First, given the earlier assertion that "[a]nxiety is universal", a further distinction is in order, between normal and neurotic anxiety. The normal type, experienced at some point by all, normally has a "more or less rational cause" (Merton, 1993: 13). The first characteristic of the neurotic variety of anxiety, however, is that it can be stimulated by innocuous events, and hence is experienced in an entirely disproportionate and more or less ubiquitous fashion. This is a reflection of the fact that "the neurotic is to some extent out of touch with reality" (Merton, 1993: 13), a theme which recurs often in Merton's writings, but must remain peripheral in my account here.

Secondly, neurosis increasingly leads to character disintegration. Once more involving a discrepancy between subject and reality, this means that the neurotic becomes compulsively or obsessively engaged with irrelevant tasks. Merton here includes such general behaviour as counting steps or checking that lights have been switched off, but also such putatively religious phenomena as a compulsive urge to touch a statue. The third characteristic again involves a flight from reality, in that the life of avoidance of neurotic anxiety always manifests some artificiality. This concerns the need to fabricate justifications, denials, or rationalizations for one's behaviour, a phenomena well known in psychoanalytic literature from Freud onwards.²⁰ Of course, this is associated

²⁰ See (Cordón, 2012: 83), (Fromm, 1950: 57ff), and (Horney, 1939: 29-30).

with the false self which is a staple of later Merton texts, and which is our final characteristic of neurotic anxiety.

1.2b: The False Self in Karen Horney

Before considering the false self in “The Neurotic Personality in the Monastic Life”, a brief elaboration of Karen Horney’s account of the neurotic personality and false-self system will enable me to draw both parallels with and distinctions from Merton’s understanding. As we have seen above, Horney’s importance to Merton is confirmed in his description of a second period of his monastic life during which he “began reading psychoanalysis” among other things. Of all the psychoanalysts Merton read, he names here only Horney and Fromm, and, given that this letter was written merely a year before his death, we can appreciate the enduring importance of Horney in his incorporation of psychoanalysis into his world-view (Merton, 2009: 11).²¹ In her *Neurosis and Human Growth*, Horney explains the formation of a false-self system as a response to insecurity and isolation in a hostile world. To cope with these - in Horney’s view a consequence of inadequate nurture²² - the neurotic constructs an idealised self in order to pursue glory and security, and as a safety device to prevent the basic anxiety from emerging into awareness (Horney, 1950: 17-39). As a result of this, the person labours under “the tyranny of the should”, self-imposed standards of excellence which are believed to be necessary for security and affirmation (Horney, 1950: 64-85). Any challenge to these standards (e.g. from insult or from an impossible task or expectation) results in the threat of the collapse of the false-self system and the resultant deluge of the repressed insecurity and consequent anxiety.

²¹ As well as it being clear from his journals and autobiography that he had read Freud and Jung, Merton’s reading journals of 1955-56 also include several pages of notes on each of Otto Fenichel, Agostino Gemelli, Samuel Kraines, and Joseph Nuttin (Merton, 1956).

²² This is contrasted to the work of Erich Fromm, for whom insecurity is – as we shall see in chapter three – a basic existential characteristic of human life and consequence of evolution beyond mere instinct.

In addition to an immediate consideration of Merton's treatment of the false-self in "The Neurotic Personality...", two points are of relevance to this thesis. Firstly, given the importance of alienation in later chapters, it is significant that for Horney the ideal self results in the subject being alienated from the genuine self (Horney, 1950: 177). Hence Horney envisages psychoanalysis as a process of uprooting both the idealised self and the original insecurity at its root, and allowing the genuine self to emerge. Secondly, in Horney's view the failure of the genuine self to measure up to the imposed standards results in self-contempt and guilt, and the deepening of the rejection of the genuine self and entrenchment of the ideal. This second point leads us to Horney's notion of inner conflict, which is ultimately of great relevance in considering David Cooper's account of Merton's development.

As the title suggests, Horney argues that idealised self-structures in one individual can be several, such that there is conflict not only between the ideal self and the real self, but between distinct ideal selves (Horney, 1945). This might involve, for example, a conflict between the self-perception of being a great success in business and that of being present to one's family. Merton himself acknowledges an enduring struggle between the contemplative and artistic aspects of his personality (Cooper, 2008), and describes his struggles with assumed ideals of sanctity (Merton, 1995: 133; 1996b: 121, 134, 154, 170, 230; 1996 184, 214, 303; 1996c: 85, 87; 1998: 124). Whilst it would be presumptuous to apply categories of truth and falsehood to these, I can and will ask whether such conflict remains in his approach to psychology until the end. Regarding the emergence of the genuine self, we shall also see something analogous in the psychological analysis of Merton's later *Introduction to Christian Mysticism*, where he encourages spiritual directors to focus on allowing rejected aspects of the personality to be recovered. Having made this brief summary of the work of Horney and its relevance, I will now consider the place of the idealised self in his paper on neurosis.

1.3: The Ideal Self (Merton, 1993: 14)

Here, Merton stresses the construction of an idealized image of self, within which the symptoms of the neurotic behaviour are located and hence made to seem reasonable. Merton does not give examples here, but we might consider the case of someone who works in an obsessive and compulsive manner, based on the justification/rationalization that they are the only one capable of doing the job. Merton distinguishes between the type of idealized image which is exalted and “mythomaniac”, and - the sense intended here - one which is merely unreal (and not necessarily superior) (Merton, 1993: 14). Secondly, in an account which is more reminiscent of Carl Rogers “self-concept” than Horney’s idealized image, Merton suggests that the self-image might have a negative component which produces guilt feelings when measured against the excellence that the neurotic desires. Merton follows Horney here in introducing the idea that persons with neuroses labour under the impression that they ought (Horney’s “should”) to be able to make their peers recognise their excellence, and suffer under the ensuing guilt from the inability to do so. Merton differs, however, from Horney’s account by supposing that both the guilt and the excellence are components of the idealised image. Finally, Merton suggest that the “guilt becomes a means of continuing to suppose *that this excellence exists*” (Merton, 1993: 14), which arguably differs from Horney’s observation that the guilt (or self-contempt) arises from the failure to achieve the imagined excellence.

Despite these relatively minor differences, Merton shares Horney’s basic thesis: that anxiety - in Merton’s view the result of one of several possibilities of repressed emotion, whilst for Horney rooted in insecurity - results in the creation of an artificial self-image to which a person feels bound to live up to, and from which neurotic behaviour follows. This false self would later become characteristic of Merton’s spiritual writings generally, in works such as *New Seeds of Contemplation*, and *The New Man*. To consider this in the requisite depth would require a dedicated paper, but in the remainder of this chapter we

shall witness the role that Merton ascribes to spiritual direction in response to this, beginning with the resultant problem of self-will.²³

1.4: Self-Will (Merton, 1993: 14)

Merton begins this section by continuing to reflect on the idealized image, here with regard to whether the mature mind also operates with a distorted image of self. Answering in the affirmative, Merton claims that we should not presume to know ourselves “with absolute precision” since such would be rare and everyone has a tendency to exaggerate some quality or other (Merton, 1993: 14). The distinction between healthy and unhealthy, in this context, is that health entails being able both to appraise oneself more or less in accord with reality and to interact sanely with one’s society. The unhealthy mind, by contrast, has an idealised image of self which is immature, as we shall now see.

In a passage which seems closely linked to his understanding of childhood in “The Mature Conscience”, as well as some reading notes on Horney’s theory of narcissism (Merton, 1956), Merton expounds the relationship between immature self-imagining and immature willing. The infant and the neurotic both envisage the world merely in terms of their own needs, viewing events and people through the prism of self. Central here in connection with the neurotic is the feeling of omnipotence, wherein the neurotic believes that their needs and desires are such that the environment should necessarily respond. Whilst this is the natural condition of infancy, in the neurotic it endures as an inner - often

²³ The issue of selfhood in Merton’s work has been considered in depth in (Carr, 1988), (Finley, 1978), and (Shannon, 1981). This matter is beyond my remit here simply because of its range and centrality in Merton’s later works. In my view, however, none of these texts sufficiently acknowledge the possibility that Merton’s encounter with Horney – and Fromm – could have been decisive in the later centrality of false/true selfhood in his work. This question is complicated by references to selfhood in medieval Catholic writers in Merton’s journals before his reading of Horney, and given the diversity of his sources will likely remain mysterious. It is also of great interest that Merton compares his notion of the exterior self that impedes contemplation with Freud’s *Über-Ich*, in *The Inner Experience*. Both are seen as infantile, introjected, inauthentic pseudo-consciences which are at once conscious and buried deep in the unconscious, and which are hence very difficult to shift (Merton, 2003:25).

unacknowledged - state born of a perceived helplessness. It is worth pointing out here that for the first time in his paper Merton hints at helplessness as the origin of immature adult attitudes. In the meantime, though, the most important point is that this (unconscious) feeling of helplessness leads to discord between the inner world and the outer world, which the neurotic sees not in itself but relative to their own childish needs.

Next, the paper begins to draw in what seems like a more explicit fashion on Horney, in its consideration of what the neurotic in their self-idealisation expects from the world.²⁴ Such is the need to mask this deep helplessness that the neurotic might adapt a variety of poises towards the world to remain secure: the demand for exclusive love and attention from all, based on an idea of deservedness, or the illusion of ease, greatness, or strength in any area. Here, again anticipating the later work of Van Kaam, Merton makes what I consider to be one of his most significant spiritual points, concerning a perceived need to live up to ideal standards of sanctity, in prayer, fasting, miraculous powers. This unconscious framework, and the impossibility of achieving it, becomes the occasion of the projection of anger and self-judgement onto the environment, a vain attempt to stop the edifice of sanctity collapsing under self-reproach. Since Merton suggests that failure to achieve such standards is a *source* of anxiety, we might ask whether he confuses the means of defence against anxiety with its source, or whether the source is to be understood in an intermediate sense as the origin of the anxiety coming to awareness rather than the anxiety *per se*. Arguably the latter option is more attractive, since it is clear from the rest of the paper that Merton understands the emotional repression that results in anxiety to be prior to the formation or failure of the unconscious framework.

Nonetheless, what follows is perhaps the most penetrating of all the analyses in this first of Merton's psychological papers, concerning self-will. With what seems to be a direct analogy between, firstly, the relationship between self-will and

²⁴ On the claims upon the environment that become part of the neurotic self-image see (Horney, 1950: 40-63).

sin in the spiritual realm, and secondly, wilfulness and neurosis in psychology, Merton roots the tenacity of the neurotic illusion squarely in the persistence of self-will. By self-will, the neurotic “*clings in desperation to his idealized image of himself*” (Merton, 1993: 16), fighting against God and his peers to uphold his desires, and avoiding acknowledgement of the idealised image. This self-will enables the repression of anxiety and the truth about oneself, but at the cost of producing the emotional tension born of the real nature crying out against its suffocation. Here, argues Merton, is “the cause of most of the nervous tension in the monastic life” (Merton, 1993: 16).²⁵

Again Merton targets any attitude which supposes that the solution to spiritual or moral problems is the strengthening of the will.²⁶ On Merton’s reading, the traditional answer to neurotic (notwithstanding the ostensible anachronism) difficulties involves a vicious circle: the sufferers are told to use the will to liberate themselves, when it is the will that is the guardian of their own self-deception. The will is the means used for defence against helplessness and anxiety by perpetuating the actions designed to confirm the idealised image. Hence, the will is so compromised that further recourse to it is futile. Indeed, rather than a will onerously strong, the difficulty is that it is too weak. In the quest to escape from helplessness, the neurotic fashions and subjects the will to the illusion of omnipotence. The will is then henceforth impotent as a force for genuine spontaneous activity.²⁷

Merton then distinguishes between the mature will, which sins knowingly, and the immature, which errs unknowingly in order to evade responsibility under the burden of its unconscious emotional distress. Merton again locates the origin of this unconscious activity in the neurotic desire to remain infantile, to have needs met without effort or responsibility, and merely to act on emotion and desire

²⁵ It is arguably redolent with implications for any dialogue between moral theology and psychoanalysis, that Merton considers the willing at work here to be largely involuntary (i.e. not willing at all).

²⁶ The fifth chapter of Kugelmann’s seemingly comprehensive account of Catholic attitudes to psychology until the Second Vatican Council is devoted to this topic (Kugelmann, 2011: 165-202).

²⁷ Merton here is indebted to Otto Rank, once a member of the Freudian inner-circle (Gay, 1988: 472-483).

without the complication of judging and willing (Merton, 1993: 17). Finally, ostensibly fatal to the idea that what is being considered here *is* self-will, Merton adds that the actions of the neurotic are designed to secure something from the world around it (e.g. approval, attention, love, etc.), and as such cannot be attributed to will but to compulsive desire.

As a remedy to this, Merton suggests a somewhat confusing mixture of the psychoanalytic theories of Rank - or perhaps later existentialist therapy - and Horney.²⁸ In the first place, the task of the director - who in this case is not a psychoanalyst - is to develop the will of the subject, rather than shatter it through reproach and humiliation. Secondly, here echoing Horney, the director can develop an insight into the variety of neurotic character structures, in the hope of being able to demonstrate to the neurotic something of his self-illusion. The purpose of this approach, in which Merton seems to flirt with recommending that the director assumes the analytic mantle, is that the neurotic might recognise something of their own suffering and the futility of self-idealization. Hence what is sought is ultimately responsibility, or genuine willing in freedom and not compulsion.

1.5: Transference (Merton, 1993: 18-19)

Merton closes this paper by again demonstrating his sensitivity to the need to incorporate the genuine discoveries of secular thought into a Christian world-view, in considering the phenomenon of transference. In this case, the imputation by the client/patient of the characteristics encountered in early-life experience to the psychoanalyst finds an analogy in the relationship between monk and spiritual director. The director becomes the object of subconscious desires, fears, and emotional drives, with the subject seeing in the director some of the central figures of his formative years. This process, in Merton's eyes

²⁸ Indeed the influence of Rank in this section suggests something of an incoherence between the stress on development of will and the disavowal of will-power in the foregoing.

a major hindrance to grace, involves the living out of one's past in present relationships, and the re-experience of suppressed fears, suspicions, and frustrations. Furthermore, Merton says that the process can also be experienced in reverse, this time involving the repressed difficulties of the director being imputed to the monk!

Again, Merton manifests what has been called his "inclusive imagination" (Labrie, 2001), since he not only incorporates the phenomenon of transference into his understanding of monastic relationships but also pleads that understanding of this be a vehicle of compassion for the one afflicted by neurosis.²⁹ And finally, a most important point which merits future attention: seemingly raised as an aside to the concept of spiritual fatherhood in the monastery, Merton observes - reminiscent of Ludwig Feuerbach - that since "[a]ll fatherhood is from God...human beings instinctively tend to act towards God as they act towards their human father. They create for themselves a God made in the image of the father they know on earth" (Merton, 1993: 19).³⁰ The point is made here in the context of the possibility that the image of God be remodelled based on the person of his director, but arguably has major resonance for a Catholic approach to psychoanalysis generally.

1.6 Summary and Comments

Merton's approach to the question of neurosis is based on his experience of the prevalence of psychological problems in the monastery, and the structure of his paper is based on his distinction between psychology and asceticism. Psychology is concerned with the normal maturity of the person, and is seen as an increasingly

²⁹ Two points here are dubious: (i) that the monks of previous ages had an intuitive knowledge of the personality traits discussed in this paper, especially questionable given the treatment of self-will in the foregoing; (ii) that the director refrain from practising psychoanalysis when not qualified, a point not dubious *per se* but in tension with the solutions to self-will also made in the previous section.

³⁰ Again this might point to the reflexive aspect of Merton's work, relative to the rather erratic presence in his life of his own father. This has been discussed in depth throughout (Gardner, 2015) and (Waldron, 2011), and in (Cooper, 2008: 69-95).

necessary prerequisite to the practice of asceticism and spirituality. Given that ascetical and spiritual practice are aimed at the life of self-denial, grace, and perfection in Christ, they assume the normal development of the soul. Hence Merton sees psychology and spirituality as in one sense interdependent, yet also hierarchically orders the former to the latter. I have pointed to a question mark over the nature of asceticism in the light of later developments in Merton's thought and also relative to the question of Robert Kugelman's integrative criteria of cultural symbolism and dialogue. Firstly, asceticism is founded on self-denial, and the conquering of the old man, the flesh, and the world, which is arguably in tension with some of the humanist elements in later chapters. Secondly, arguably contrary to Kugelman's stress on the enculturated nature of symbols, Catholic ascetical theology is envisaged here to be the ultimate end of psychology, seemingly oblivious to the former being a particular spiritual system rooted in a specific time, place, vocabulary, theology, and anthropology. Thirdly, given that this system is a prerequisite of Merton's dealings with his charges at this time, we might also ask what the implications are for real dialogue, especially given later developments towards the flourishing and acceptance of one's genuine self and natural gifts.

Nonetheless, despite not supposing any tension between the maturity of the soul and the subsequent conquering of its natural tendencies, Merton does argue that psychology aims at normal maturity. The impediments to this natural maturity are the infantile traits which lead to illusion, the confusion of emotion turmoil with spiritual inspiration, and the ensuing restlessness. For Merton all of this amounts to a sickness of the will, which is hindered by interference from repressed emotion. These emotions - sexual, social, existential, or spiritual - also produce anxiety (either felt or unfelt), which is characterised by disproportionate reactions to mundane situations and the disintegration of character and self. Merton's false self emerges (at least here) from the need to flee emotional distress, and tends to put the will at the service of its projects, meaning that it is very difficult to engage the will in the process of change. In Merton's view the spiritual director should be able to identify the various neurotic character structures and communicate something of them to his

charges, but arguably Merton is rather vague when it comes to how this can be done in view of the binding of the will to the idealised self.³¹ Given that this is ultimately a question of free will, it is apt that we now turn to a second paper concerned with the relationship between freedom and maturity.

³¹ In Chapter Two I will consider how Merton's *Introduction to Christian Mysticism* addresses the place of counselling in the spiritual life, which should clarify the role of the spiritual director.

Chapter Two: “The Mature Conscience”, and *Introduction to Christian Mysticism*

2.1 “The Mature Conscience” (Merton & Bamberger, unpublished)

Having seen that there is a certain lack of clarity in Merton’s references to maturity and immaturity, we can now turn to his paper “The Mature Conscience” in search of a remedy. In this paper, Merton and John Eudes Bamberger address in more depth the manner in which emotional immaturity hinders spiritual development. In the discussion of his analysis of self-well above, we have seen that Merton concludes by referring to freedom as the purpose of the attempt to help those suffering under neurosis. Here the authors consider in greater detail the nature of freedom, the emotional factors which inhibit it, and the prospects of its enhancement, this time in the context of psychological automatism: “to what extent are we controlled, unconsciously, by an automatic psychic mechanism?” (Merton & Bamberger, unpublished).

Merton and Bamberger preface the discussion by acknowledging that there are certain human functions which are necessarily automatic. Unless, however, we are freed from automatism in non-necessary areas, we will be unable to develop according to the will of God nor will we be able to become independent mature persons. This maturity and development in the will of God is understood as the freedom to love, the perfection of which is sanctity. Should we remain on a merely automatic and passive level, there is no possibility of leading a loving or holy life.³² Here we can arguably see the influence of Erich Fromm on Merton, in the example of the man conditioned by automatic political responses, and

³² Merton and Bamberger add that if we are not elevated beyond automatic responses we will love only ourselves. I would question whether we could even be said to love ourselves given the absence of freedom.

indeed in the statement that “totalitarian states seek to produce automatic men” (Merton & Bamberger, unpublished:1).

Now the crux of the matter begins to emerge, in a point resembling the above claim that the neurotic may mistake the movements of repressed emotions for divine inspiration. Merton and Bamberger define sanctity as “being directed inwardly by the Spirit of God - special inspirations moving us directly”, and warn that we might ascribe such inspiration to what are merely “mechanical impulses” (Merton and Bamberger, unpublished: 1). In fact, rather than being devoted to God, such automatons have a private religion and morality, again reminding us of the counterfeit religion Merton describes above. Here we encounter something reminiscent of Freud’s *Über-Ich*, in persons who have prescribed for themselves strict and superstitious obligations which are a matter of great disturbance if not upheld.³³

This is the infantile and immature conscience, dominated by automatic biological and social responses rather than genuine freedom and inspiration. In an ostensible contrast to my first chapter, Merton and Bamberger here begin to place guilt at the centre of this account of the immature personality. This is nothing more than a pseudo-guilt, however, not born of moral principles but instead originating in the failure to measure up to a self-imposed moral code and illusory self-image.³⁴ In the teeth of these impossible standards, the immature

³³ This phenomenon might well be closer to Horney’s “tyranny of the should”, given that Merton and Bamberger’s character self-prescribes the obligations whereas Freud’s *Über-Ich* is a product mainly of the demands of family and culture. See (Horney, 1950: 64-85).

³⁴ Merton would later distinguish between guilt as anxiety over disobedience to an exterior authority, and genuine sin as a violation of the divine law at the centre of one’s being. Guilt in this account is largely about being exposed, rather than having erred. Notwithstanding the enormous spectrum of Merton’s influences, we might suppose here an example of the penetration of psychological work into Merton’s writings on spirituality (Merton, 2003: 118-119). (Merton, 2003) is also noteworthy for a section on contemplation and neurosis, in which Merton discusses the manner in which neurotic and schizoid conflicts can confuse contemplation with escapism and the obsessive drive for perfection, rationalizing each with contemplative formulae. Merton also discusses how some types of religious experience merely succeed in releasing hitherto unconscious emotions or libido, rather than genuine contemplation. *The Inner Experience* is thus a further example of the manner in which Merton deploys his reading of psychological texts in the service of contemplation, which Merton here understands as the emergence of the inner self which is united to Christ through the Incarnation (Merton, 2003: 27f, 39, 110-114).

person is plunged into inadequacy and ultimately what is supposed as guilt. Here, however, Merton and Bamberger seem to place anxiety as a response to this guilt, which I would argue diverges from both “The Neurotic Personality...” and from Karen Horney’s account (to which the paragraph bears other clear parallels). Arguably this invites the question of why there is a need to measure oneself against a fabricated self-image in the first place, and hence whether there might not be a phase prior to anxiety/guilt which demands consideration.

To guilt is also ascribed the energy which moves the immature person to fulfil the various routines by which adequacy is sought. Since the feeling of inadequacy, however, is rooted far deeper than any observance can touch, the sufferer remains in constant interior struggle, in a battle to be rid of guilt and feel worthy. A vicious circle ensues, wherein the sufferer becomes increasingly anxious by reason of failing to allay the guilt, and hence turns again to futile observances in the vain hope of succour. Again here Merton points to the distinction between felt anxiety and unconscious anxiety, in which the person’s environment might again become the object of recrimination as a result of his “delusions and prejudices” (Merton and Bamberger, unpublished: 2).³⁵

2.2 The Infantile Conscience (Merton and Bamberger, unpublished: 2f)

Merton and Bamberger now turn to a comparison between the person described above and the person prior to the development of reason. The main point is that pre-rational humans are not yet free persons thinking and making decisions for themselves. Instead, they begin in dependency on others, before starting to become individuals in adolescence. Following development from the undifferentiated stage of consciousness and the possession of mere drives, the child begins to perceive itself as distinct, and develop a mechanical and transitory conscience. It lives - and here is the comparison with the character

³⁵ In (Horney, 1950: 110-154) the personages of the environment might also be the subject of imagined recrimination directed towards the person.

structure described above - by a system of internalised dictates to which it responds automatically, instinctively, and passively. Even were it to rebel, at this stage, its resistance would be driven by another outside influence passively absorbed, rather than genuine interior freedom.

Here we begin to see the emergence of Merton's burgeoning immersion in personalist philosophy, in the contrast of good parenting with bad. The latter involves the child merely absorbing the tastes, attitudes, ways of thinking, or rules, of the parents, often by irrational, arbitrary, and capricious means of punishment. By its nascent standards of value and reason, the child is able to sense something of the injustice of inconsistent treatment, but finds its protests unrecognised and can merely store up its resentment and discontent in the depths of the unconscious. Consequently, a theme developed at length in Horney, approval and safety begin to depend on consent to the incoherence of its environment, with tragic consequences for self-worth. Just as tragic is the sort of parenting which projects its own fears or faults onto a child, in the expectation that it will develop particular vices which in turn it feels doomed to actualise.

2.3 The Development of Conscience (Merton and Bamberger, unpublished: 3f)

Good parenting, on the contrary, focuses on developing a climate of freedom and reason, a personal conscience, rather than mere formation by dictate. This personal conscience first becomes a prospect when the child becomes capable of love for neighbour and for God. It is only here that there is the capacity for moral development and for growth. Here the personalist flavour of Merton's thought emerges clearly, since development is said to depend on inter-personal dialogue, between "hearts, wills, freedoms" (Merton and Bamberger, unpublished: 3). This precludes the type of situation wherein the child remains dependent on the parent for everything, passively and mechanically producing the requisite reactions. In a penetrating analysis which is rich with import if a

little brief and unsourced, Merton and Bamberger challenge the assumption that such a parental attitude comprises genuine love or recognises the child as a person, a real being. Indeed, were the parents to do so, they would prize and cultivate the uniqueness of the child.

The authors then point to the tension produced by the internalization - “introjection” - of the standards of the parents. This is the distinction between the love which responds to objective goods, and the subjective pseudo-love which merely performs rituals of self-satisfaction in the demand for approval. In order to stifle feelings of guilt and anxiety, the mechanisms of the internalized conscience eclipse the natural tendency to rational thought, and hence destroy the possibility of love for genuine values.³⁶ Again the question arises as to whether this analysis of the manner in which the mechanisms of approval seek to allay anxiety sufficiently recognises Horney’s understanding of its origin. Here, however, I would merely like to highlight how Merton (with Bamberger) has begun to integrate psychoanalytic and personalist theories of the importance of childhood development with the moral philosophy/theology of love, freedom, and conscience. We might also suggest that Merton’s own experience of authority colours both his approach and his passion for this issue, as well as his own way of being in authority. On the whole this clearly demonstrates reflexivity and a dialogical integration of psychological research into theological writing.

2.4: Mechanisms of Adolescence (Merton and Bamberger, unpublished: 4)

Merton and Bamberger then begin to outline the tensions involved in the transitional stage of adolescence. I will focus less attention on this aspect of the paper, given the interim nature of the adolescent stage. It is nonetheless important for demonstrating the overall place of developmental theory in

³⁶ Incidentally I think that this is in outline a fertile approach to a dialogue between psychoanalysis and the phenomenology of value, particularly considering the role which early development plays in the perception of goods.

Merton's thought, and indeed is a phase reminiscent of the battleground of the stunted conscience described above. This is a period of increased conflict between the series of pairs outlined above, between the infantile and the mature, the mechanical and the free, and subjective and objective love. An adequate conclusion to this stage would see the emergence of a genuine love for objective goods, in contrast to the type of behaviour which we have seen is measured to receive approval and security. To cope with the struggle to develop conscience, we begin the process of intellectual justification of our instinctual drives, whilst at the same time embarking on an erratic quest to master them, and finally increasingly identify with individuals or groups from our environment to secure acceptance. Finally, Merton and Bamberger distinguish the passing and relatively common scrupulosity of the adolescent from the adult conscience which remains marked by scruples characterised either by anxiety, shame, guilt, or disgust (Merton and Bamberger, unpublished: 5). In the first instance, excessive attention to sin is seen as a developmental stage, whilst in the latter is a sign of arrested development.

2.5 The Mature Conscience (Merton and Bamberger, unpublished: 5-6)

Having discussed the infantile conscience and its roots in early development, Merton and Bamberger turn to a consideration of its antithesis and the subject of the paper, the mature conscience. This consists - according to what seems like a scholastic framework - of an act of the practical intellect judging the morality of our actions. According to the authors it has three characteristics: the capacity to evaluate, the capacity for responsibility, and the capacity for self-judgement.

Concerning the first, this consists in understanding "subjective and objective moral characteristics of an action...in the light of truth" (Merton and Bamberger, unpublished: 5). We witness again the willingness to inform philosophy and theology with psychological themes in the integration of this traditional aspect of conscience with the psychological theory discussed above, in which they

stress that this concern with truth is contrasted with the immature intellect merely inhabited by dictates internalised by rote. The capacity to evaluate involves identifying and accepting evil in one's actions without the psychological defences of projection or denial. The mature conscience is aware of the reality of temptation against the moral law and the possibility of erring, but also of his capacity to resist and grow in virtue. This is contrasted with the immature renunciation of freedom, wherein bondage to automatic measures is preferred to the acknowledgement of our potential to be wrong and worthy of blame.

Secondly, the responsible conscience takes one's actions and their consequences upon oneself, accepting their origin in freedom. Here one accept the obligation to be attentive to one's actions, and to learn from mistakes, and finally do not resort to blame of supernatural agencies or plead helplessness. Thirdly, the capacity to judge one's actions again concerns the barometer of self-esteem and whether it depends on the nature of one's activity or on exterior factors like conformity and respect. In this instance, maturity entails an absence of hysterical or exaggerated emotions, since a mature person is able to avoid slipping into depression when erring. Secondly the mature self-judgement is not based on comparison with others because it does not depend on exterior approval. And finally, the mature person uses sin as a stimulus to develop, responding in simplicity and humility so as to undergo real moral change.

2.6 Conclusion of "The Mature Conscience" (Merton and Bamberger, unpublished: 7)

Finally, Merton and Bamberger summarise the foregoing, and attempt to draw out its implications, beginning with a warning against tendencies which make a fetish of the science of psychology, as for instance supposing that there is a series of objective formulae which can be applied to any person to elicit change. Instead, the purpose of the paper is to encourage readers to cultivate genuine human dialectical participation despite the inhibitions of automatic psychic

processes. Instead, knowledge of these processes can help us guard against a false humility which is actually inadequacy, and recognising the complexity and confusion of the infantile mind strive for the development of genuine simplicity of intention and responsibility before God. The conclusion, therefore, continues the general character of the paper in calling attention to the dangers of confusing a mind compulsively or obsessively occupied with its faults and the observance of rules with a genuine mature mind which is able to reach out after true values in simple and free love.

2.7: Comments

In general the approach to freedom in this paper is a clear example of the method of integration and dialogue, as well as most likely having been informed by Merton's own struggle for freedom. Here a personalist philosophy of freedom is informed with insights from psychodynamic theory, namely internalization, projection and denial. In my view the section contrasting the mature conscience with its stunted anti-type is an especially revealing example of how psychological research can be used to illumine moral theology and philosophy. At the same time, however, we are faced with a recurring problem, insofar as the paper also interprets freedom and sanctity as involving direction by the Spirit, and hence subtly answers the question of freedom along the same hierarchical lines as we have seen above. This will be a central theme of the next chapter, in which we shall see how this direction by the Spirit arguably means the evasion of freedom in the work of Erich Fromm. Hence, the surrender to the Spirit espoused here as a paradigm of maturity becomes vulnerable, as the corresponding immaturity begins to be nothing more than a flight from surrender to God.

2.8: Introduction to Christian Mysticism

Whilst master of students (1951-1955) and then master of novices (1955-1965), Thomas Merton was responsible for the spiritual and intellectual formation of those in the first stages of monastic life. Merton's journals and letters of this period attest to his enthusiasm in integrating the findings of contemporary psychology into his own life and the lives of those under his care (with mixed results) (Waldron, 2001: 60ff). Part of this attempt can be seen in his series of conference notes from 1961 published as *Introduction to Christian Mysticism: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition: Bk 3*. The 12th chapter of this text is entitled "Direction and Therapy", and is divided into the subsections 1. "[D]irection as distinct from counselling, psychotherapy, and psychoanalysis"; 2. "[D]oes [the] director have any use for psychology?"; and, 3. "[P]ractical use of this psychological knowledge". These pages, committed to writing some seven years after Merton's initial re-evaluation of psychoanalysis, enable us to see how his understanding of the possibility of the integration of psychology into spiritual life have developed. They are also especially remarkable for the role they occupy in an otherwise fairly traditional exposition of the classics of Christian mysticism, which again demonstrates how Merton - in spite of his formal seclusion and absence of psychological training - lived on the threshold of the cloister and the world.

2.9: Counselling (Merton, 2008: 280ff)

Merton begins this section of his conferences by considering the distinction between counselling, psychotherapy, and psychoanalysis, in order to prepare for a further delineation of spiritual direction. Counselling concerns general advice on the psychophysical aspects of moral problems, especially as these relate to adaptation to a social situation.³⁸ The aim of counselling is primarily personal

³⁸ All the references to counselling are from (Merton, 2008: 280ff). Incidentally, it is not quite clear what psychophysical means here.

balance through practical advice on the typical problems of the day.³⁹ Hence it is only of limited relevance in spiritual matters, since it deals with these inasmuch as they relate to other more general problems. Merton goes onto critique the type of counselling which he is considering by accusing it of aiming at conformity and the preservation of the common mentality. We will see later how this relates to Merton's reading of Fromm, and hence need not consider it here, especially since Merton is rather vague in identifying his intended target.

Next he turns to "counselling in a religious milieu (particularly Catholic)". Something of a remainder concept left over from the sacrament of confession and formal spiritual direction, Merton describes this as primarily ethical but ideally often touching on spiritual matters. It might involve psychological or sociological advice, which should be subordinate to Scripture and Church teaching.⁴⁰ Somewhat enigmatically, Merton concludes this section by suggesting that religious counselling deals in great measure with matters of Church law, without further clarification as to whether this is mainly moral, psychological, or pedagogical. In general since little here relates to the psychological themes with which he is otherwise occupied, there is scant need for us to linger here.

2.10: Psychotherapy (Merton, 2008: 282f)

More importantly, Merton now begins perhaps his most definite discussion of the nature of psychotherapy, distinguishing it first from the type of counselling discussed above. Psychotherapy, in contrast to the relative normality of the counselee, "implies that [the client] (though not 'abnormal') is at least suffering from serious neurosis" (Merton, 2008: 282). Recalling similar assertions from earlier texts, Merton again questions the notion of a strict boundary between

³⁹ Indeed we might be better aware now that certain forms of training in counselling are now deeply concerned with matters more commonly associated with depth psychology.

⁴⁰ We might also ask whether this looks like what Kugelmann depicts as the presence of the Vatican as a third-party in counselling sessions (Kugelmann, 2011: 413).

mental health and neurosis by claiming that even mostly well-functioning people of his time also commonly manifest symptoms of neurosis or problems with personality or emotional life, or psychosomatic difficulties. Bolder still is the assertion that “the proportion of neurotics in our society is so high that it would be absurd to draw a strict line between them and ‘healthy people’” (Merton, 2008: 282).⁴¹ The distinction between the common run of these problems, concerning which Merton assures the hearer/reader that there is nothing seriously wrong, and genuine mental illness, is the ability to handle them in a “valid and mature fashion” (Merton, 2008: 283).⁴² This section is also useful for further clarifying Merton’s working taxonomy of neurotic disorders, including “perfectionism, obsessions, compulsions, scruples, diffuse anxiety, [and] severe uncharitableness” (Merton, 2008: 283).

A further distinction between psychotherapy and counselling helps us to see Merton’s understanding of the former in greater resolution. Because it assumes at least minor neurosis as present in the client, psychotherapy exceeds the range of counselling, and the depth of consideration of the relevant personal problems. Secondly, the therapist has more than an advisory role, working through the particular problems of the client and aiming for a resolution, or at least new insight. Thirdly, Merton perhaps displays an influence from the then-incipient relational turn in psychotherapy when claiming that therapy depends on personal identification of client with therapist. Here the former is opened to the personhood of the latter, and hence liberated from the neurotic tendency to see the world through the lens of self. Finally, and most significantly, a summative definition which is worth citing in full:

The aim of therapy is to ‘heal’ (to some extent) *traumatic wounds* in the psyche by bringing them to conscious awareness and showing the patient how to deal with them in a rational and mature fashion, instead of by

⁴¹ Again we might have expected such a claim to be sourced with empirical research, notwithstanding the originally oral transmission of the text.

⁴² Perhaps we can assume that maturity here carries the same content as in “The Mature Conscience”, i.e. freedom, interiority, responsibility, etc.

subconscious and infantile subterfuges which do not work. (Merton, 2008: 283)

2.11: Psychoanalysis (Merton, 2008: 284-286)

The text now turns to psychoanalysis, in Merton's estimation a form of therapy of deeper reach and longer duration. It is worth noting again here that this text was written in 1961, when Catholic discussions of psychoanalysis were largely critiques of the theories of Freud, again testimony to the scope of Merton's hunger for knowledge (Kugelman, 2011). Psychoanalysis, says Merton, has a more intimate and radical intention, aiming to reshape the personality (rather than simply rebalancing it). In Freud, this proceeds by investigation into the developmental roots of a difficulty, and some attempt at reliving the stages of stunted development to which one has regressed, with the emphasis on sexual development (Merton, 2008: 284). The focus of Jungian analysis, on the other hand, is on the religious symbols inherited by the whole of humanity in our collective unconscious, and the dormant power which can be awakened by bringing these to consciousness. Again the relation between analyst and client is important, and more so given the depth and length of the procedure, but Merton seems unaware of the basic tensions between the stance of relational psychotherapy and Freudian psychoanalysis.

2.12: Spiritual Direction

This stratification of counselling, psychotherapy, and psychoanalysis concludes by distinguishing them from spiritual direction (Merton, 2008: 284). This essentially focuses on the relationship of the person with God, and hence is able to consider, for instance, sin as sin, in contrast to the psychological attention on the maturity with which a person copes with it. At this point a partisan approach

might content itself with the observation that there is a distinct realm for the spiritual director which cannot be taken over by analysis, but Merton also points out the converse. Given that spirituality depends on a healthy psyche, and that psychotherapy and psychoanalysis are concerned with the health of the “psychic and emotional organism” (Merton, 2008: 2004), any approach that rendered them superfluous in the presence of an able spiritual director is simply naïve. Indeed, even an adequate reception of the sacraments depends on psychic health, and neurotic difficulties cannot be resolved by the confession of sin or spiritual guidance.⁴³

In my view this is a major point, again demonstrating Merton’s willingness to engage in reciprocal dialogue even to the extent of using psychology to inform his approach to sacramental theology. I would, however, argue that there is some tension between Merton’s assertion that neurosis prevents the person from judging spiritual matters adequately, and a further claim that therapy and analysis deal with the pre-spiritual realm. If neurosis can hinder spiritual judgement it is hard to see how this coheres with analysis being pre-spiritual. Furthermore, assuming an existential approach to the inextricable embodiment of our concrete lives, and the importance of physical awareness in recent psychotherapeutic theory, that is, I would be inclined to suggest that both embodiment and psychology do necessarily impact on all areas of life.

In the section immediately following these remarks, we can perhaps see a condensed view of Merton’s understanding of the question of integration, beginning with his assertion that the director should know enough psychological theory to see when a person is neurotic (Merton, 2008: 286).⁴⁴ Moreover, psychological knowledge would assist the director in recognising the strictures that character structure places on the ability to absorb information, and hence

⁴³ Merton also reiterates the point made above that self-will can exacerbate neurosis rather than cure it. We are also reminded how Merton is consistently straddling two worlds, since he reiterates the traditional Catholic claim that the director speaks in a supernatural fashion as the instrument of God.

⁴⁴ Merton also cites the permission then required from ecclesial authorities in making a referral to a Freudian psychoanalyst.

in recognising the appropriate level of direction. Psychology here is seen to be of foundational importance to the human ability to communicate and learn, arguably analogous to the way in which the subconscious mind is said to set the scene of the relationship with God in prayer in Merton's *No Man is an Island* (Merton, 1955: 20-45). An important indication of the extent to which he has integrated psychological thinking is given in Merton's claim that the director must be able to recognise unconscious communication, as for instance we have seen in his treatment of transference. He also touches here on psychological defence mechanisms, without naming them, as for instance when a person might conceal their weakest points with a profession of strength.⁴⁵ Next, Merton again exhibits his deep concern for the relationship between psychology and social matters, when advising that the director have a knowledge of group psychology so as to understand when a person will most profit from increased communal activity, and when it might be unproductive (Merton, 2008: 287).

Finally, concerning the role of psychology in the life of the director, Merton turns to the matter of culpability in sin. The director must be aware of the psychological factors which can mitigate responsibility, specifying neurasthenic, schizoid, cyclothymic, paranoiac, and hysterical disorders. These lead into some general prescriptions, concerning the reduced capacity for will-driven asceticism, the possibility that the director might be manipulated by neurotic demands, the danger of jest or posturing, and a warning against adopting the role of psychiatrist (Merton, 2008: 289). Concerning the first of these Merton makes the important point that the spiritual difficulties of the neurotic are often bound up with an inadequate perception of the nature of religion. This interesting and important point is left undeveloped, such that we might wonder what is implicit therein. Perhaps it reflects the ongoing personal transition from asceticism to humanism that we shall see in subsequent chapters, or the related question of the place of the neurotic self-images and search for perfection which Merton adopts from the work of Horney.

⁴⁵ One might compare this with the mechanism of reaction formation, whereby one overemphasises a certain aspect of personality in order to compensate for or mask the absence of an opposed trait. See (Kahn, 2002: 230-32), and (Martin, 2010: 625).

The director should, on the other hand, operate with honesty, person-affirming love, and encouragement which fosters all that is generally human.⁴⁶ In addition, direction should foster realism (in particular surrounding any tendency to confuse repression of instinct with virtue), and oppose obsession and compulsion (Merton, 2008: 290f). In obsession, the issue is with a morbid and narcissistic preoccupation with one's own problems, whilst in compulsion we are reminded of the relationship between self-ascribed duty and the flight from anxiety. Finally the remedy of a genuine appreciation and response to value and persons is again proposed as the real alternative to the infantile mentality.

To conclude the elaboration of this section in Merton's *Introduction...*, a particularly important point is made concerning the overall purpose of the foregoing pages, one which anticipates the later character of Merton's spiritual writings. Whilst it is important to pick up on the point that this concerns the *psychological* function of the director, Merton synthesises this chapter by adding that the director should aim at helping "the penitent fully *to be himself*" (Merton, 2008: 291). This entails a reconciliation of the divisions within oneself, and salvaging any good elements of natural life which he has shunned (perhaps under the burden of a misguided understanding of Christian life). It will be of great importance to this project to note that this stress on genuine selfhood is later to assume central place in Merton's *spiritual* thought, even though it is here framed psychologically and in the context of the previous assertion that psychotherapy/analysis is pre-spiritual. Moreover, the director is responsible for seeing that the "penitent does not compel himself to throw away the best of himself" (Merton, 2008: 292), which again I would argue is a rather progressive approach to Catholic spirituality given centuries of insistence on contempt of nature and self.

⁴⁶ And avoids false supernaturalism!

This stress on selfhood is then put in the context of the transition from secular to religious life, again stressing the need for harmony between the notions of self involved in both (Merton, 2008: 292). Here, the danger of inflated interpretations of the new religious identity is raised, inasmuch as this might develop as an evasion of one's problems, an attempt of sorts at denial or rejection of what is now deemed contemptible. And, closing with this point, Jungian individuation theory is used to sketch the whole passage between pre-religious and religious life, particularly concerning the tendency to initially develop a religious persona to adapt to the new form of life.⁴⁷ This persona can come at the cost of the rejection of those aspects of the personality which are deemed unworthy, but which may indeed be central facets of the real personality. The reconciliation - here attesting to Merton's relevance to the general theme of integration - takes place when those suppressed aspects are rediscovered, and given room to breathe, reconciling the interior self with the social self adopted for adaptation. This is an antidote to the melancholy which can develop in one who is deeply yet unknowingly troubled by the restlessness which comes from the denial of the personality, and results in the restoration of "all that is humanly best and vital in the penitent: warmth, geniality, {an} ability to love and to give" (Merton, 2008: 294).

In my view this last section, concerning the need for psychology in spiritual direction, is a deeply significant and illuminating example of the ongoing transition in the person of Thomas Merton. Here, particularly in the theme of reintegration that draws on the work of Jung, the director is seen as helping the monk to be himself, by rediscovering aspects of the personality rejected upon entering religious life. Moreover it manifests the extent to which psychological ideas of selfhood, and by extension a new openness to the many varieties of human nature, have begun to inform and challenge the previously ascetical emphasis of Merton's work. Without forgetting the ascetical aspects of the

⁴⁷ Merton elsewhere devotes a section of a paper to Jungian analysis, but the focus is largely on Jung's approach to historicity and the question of whether dogma and traditional religious observance can ever be psychologically adequate for the historical person of the time. Merton praises Jung for upholding the Augustinian conception of spiritual order in the soul, but claims that he is wrong in asserting that dogma and observance are obsolete. He gives little justification for this position, and the limited scope of the article renders it largely uninteresting relative to the present project. See (Merton, unpublished).

remainder of the lectures around which Merton's *Introduction to Christian Mysticism* is formed, psychological theory is coming to be increasingly foundational in his approach to spirituality. That this foundational role was also in the case in "The Neurotic Personality..." is clear, however the question is beginning to emerge as to the structure which is erected upon the foundation. What, that is, is an adequate conception of the nature of religion (contrasted to the inadequate perception depicted in this section), and has Merton's own understanding of religion and theology begun to become more humanist, more worldly, and as we shall subsequently ask, more Frommian?

Chapter Three: Erich Fromm on Psychoanalysis, Humanism, and Religion

Erich Fromm was born in Frankfurt in 1900, with both paternal and maternal rabbinical descent. He obtained a doctorate in sociology from Heidelberg University in 1922, before training as a lay (i.e. non-medical) psychoanalyst. For most of his career Fromm taught psychoanalysis in New York and Mexico, before settling in Switzerland for his final years and dying in 1980. The main thrust in his early work lies in exploring the social dimension of the psyche, and the extent to which social factors have to be understood in psychoanalysis and vice versa (Durkin, 2014: 22). In his later works a shift in emphasis can be seen, as Fromm begins to gather together and centralise themes also present in his early work, on the importance of love, living, and being. Fromm's treatment of these issues is arguably given its appeal in juxtaposing them against the analyses of unhealthy character states and socio-economic structures from his earlier writings. Fromm's thought has been described as *radical* humanism, since it focuses on our development *and* our liberation from any freedom-inhibiting political, economic, or psychological forces.⁴⁸ Kieran Durkin has recently argued that Fromm's work is humanist first and foremost, and that it revolves around a core of “spiritual autonomy [and] the idea that man must 'develop his own powers' and reach the goal of complete independence” (Durkin, 2014: 2,50).

I will continue my analysis of psychological themes in the writings of Thomas Merton by focusing my fourth chapter on his dialogue with Erich Fromm. In preparation for this, the present chapter will seek to exhibit and analyse some of the prominent themes in the early works of Fromm first encountered by Merton. Before we turn to consider in some depth Fromm's *Psychoanalysis and Religion*, I will first put that text into the context of some of the central tenets

⁴⁸ Kieran Durkin enumerates a variety of adjectives with which Fromm modifies humanism - “normative humanism, socialist humanism, renaissance humanism, enlightenment humanism, dialectic humanism, and mere humanism” - before his first use of radical humanism in 1966. I will settle for mere humanism, since this is the term used in *Psychoanalysis and Religion* and by Merton (Durkin, 2014: 3).

from Fromm's other major early writings *The Fear of Freedom* and *Man for Himself*. This will allow us to see clearly the guiding principles that penetrate Fromm's early thinking but are in less developed form in *Psychoanalysis and Religion*.⁴⁹

Before approaching Fromm's writings, however, an immediate question arises: given that this thesis is concerned with the work of Thomas Merton, why devote one of only four chapters exclusively to Erich Fromm? This is due to the extent to which Merton's new openness to psychoanalysis is based on his reading of Fromm and Horney, and particularly that it is Fromm whom Merton reads in most depth, and corresponds directly with for almost a decade. Relative to the criteria posed by Robert Kugelman, this exchange is arguably a prime example of Merton's dialogical credentials, the existential impact of Fromm's thought being manifested in his letters, and also his appreciation of Fromm's awareness of the provisional nature of human symbols (reflected in the latter's resistance to idols of a conceptual and political nature). More importantly, Merton repeatedly professes to agree with Fromm on matters concerning psychoanalysis, religion, and humanism, and claims to share Fromm's views on alienation. This includes the assertion of a consistency between the psychoanalyst and Merton's priesthood based on the centrality of humanism in both.

Understanding the salient aspects of Fromm's work will therefore be of crucial importance to considering the development of Merton's attitude not only to psychology, but to religion and the person. Ultimately, however, we are concerned with the question of integration, and, given Merton's repeated attempts to incorporate the work of Fromm into his own thought, a solid grasp of Fromm's consistent body of early work is arguably essential in enabling us to address the consistency of Merton's enthusiasm for Fromm with his continuing

⁴⁹ Durkin's radical humanist reading of Fromm's corpus is based on the existence of a "generally continuous development of a central nucleus of ideas throughout his various writings", and "a core position of great stability" which Durkin locates in the early encounters with Jewish humanism, the psychoanalysis of Freud, and the sociology of Karl Marx (Durkin, 2014: 11, 42). Durkin does, however, identify "subtle shifts" in his summary of Fromm's writings (Durkin, 2014: 17).

commitment to Christian theology. Finally, in considering the transition of Merton - depicted by David Cooper - from a world-denying asceticism to a radical humanism, I will ask whether something of Fromm's dialectic of freedom is manifesting in Merton's own historical journey, perhaps even enduring in the late Merton's approach to integration.

3.1: *The Fear of Freedom*

Erich Fromm's *The Fear of Freedom* analyses the socio-political, psychological and existential factors involved in "the meaning of freedom for modern man", and in the then-typical character structures as Fromm understood them (Fromm, 2001 [1941]: iix, 89ff). Given our limited scope, the socio-political dimension concerns us only indirectly here, since the existential dichotomies that lead to the dilemma of freedom and the possibility of alienation are of primary relevance to the understanding of religion.⁵⁰ Here Fromm argues that the human being is unique amongst animals, since the evolution of self-consciousness and moral freedom mean that we have lost our original instinctual harmony with the natural world (Fuller, 2008: 196).⁵¹ Hence we no longer feel merely a part of nature, are free as well as instinctual, lost as well as at home, and have the consequent need to fashion an orientation for ourselves in the world. This is the ground for Fromm's theory of dialectical freedom, involving the relationship between freedom from primary ties (natural, family, and socio-political) and freedom to develop oneself.⁵² I read this dialectic as the central category in *The Fear of Freedom*, and one which founds his work on psychoanalysis, religion and humanism, and hence will dwell on it a while longer (Fromm, 2001 [1941]:1-32).

⁵⁰ Fromm elaborates his understanding of our existential needs in his later (Fromm, 2002: 27-66), as relatedness, transcendence, rootedness, identity, orientation, and devotion. I cannot consider these in depth here, but they are discussed in (Thomson, 2009: 27-30), and (Durkin, 2014: 79-80). Thomson (2009: 128) agrees that the existential needs and paradoxes are Fromm's starting point.

⁵¹ Thomson (2004: 68) also questions whether Fromm leaves enough instinct to account for the findings of evolutionary biology.

⁵² According to Fuller, primary ties are those existing prior to individuation, whilst secondary ties are formed to compensate for the absence of prior ones (Fuller, 2008: 199).

Fromm situates his work in the aftermath of the battles for human freedom in the early modern period, the liberation from oppressive political and religious structures, and the acquisition of “freedom from”. Fromm sees the great mistake of interpreting this period in assuming that mere emancipation from external structures is freedom in itself. Instead, this is only the first stage of freedom, a necessary but insufficient condition. Freedom is also endangered by our internal tendencies, mainly that of evading the question of freedom by divesting our own powers and responsibility to an exterior power in order to find security (Fromm, 2001 [1941]: 18). Fromm roots this in the idea that the human place in the cosmos is deeply threatening and confusing, and the question of freedom a terrifying one. Hence, rather than simply being liberated from oppressive regimes, we must recognise our own unconscious tendency to seek out tyrants or mass conformity in order to escape from the unbearable agony of being alone and confused in the cosmos (Fromm, 2001 [1941]: ix).⁵³

Once the insufficiency of mere “freedom from” - or negative freedom - has been established, we can turn to “freedom to”, or positive freedom (Fromm, 2001 [1941]:221ff). Presupposing negative freedom, this is the process by which we become creative, productive, rational, and relational, and so unite ourselves with our world and species. This is the freedom to realise self, to take responsibility and possession of one’s powers and use them lovingly, and so fashion a home upon the earth.⁵⁴ Here we face the problem of freedom rather than evading it, and take possession of our own powers rather than renouncing them.

⁵³ Fromm would later say that all our anxiety is sourced in isolation, and that our deepest need is to overcome it. (Fromm, 1957: 15). Durkin agrees that *The Fear of Freedom* and Fromm's work in general are characterised by the analysis of aloneness and its avoidance (Durkin, 2014: 28-29).

⁵⁴ Durkin's radical humanist interpretation of Fromm affirms his work relative to what he describes as an anti-humanist turn in the philosophy and social science of the latter half of the 20th Century. Part of this involves endorsing Fromm's work on selfhood over methods that subsume the self in language, history, society, etc. Clearly this is beyond the remit of this paper, but it is worth bearing in mind that Fromm assumes that the concept of self is a fruitful one (Durkin, 2014: 129-164).

3.2: Man for Himself

In his *Man for Himself*, Fromm attempts to make this basic thesis on positive/negative freedom a foundation for an ethical theory maintaining both subjective and objective poles.⁵⁵ First the political examples of tyranny have an ethical analogue in the authoritarian conscience, wherein moral responsibility is ceded to an exterior power (Fromm, 1949: 143ff).⁵⁶ Obedience then becomes the foundation for human activity and identity, as we find security in the evasion of freedom. Here Fromm develops Freud's *Über-Ich*, where a system of exterior dictates - from parents or church or state for instance - becomes internalized as an irrepressible code of conduct (Fromm, 1949: 34). The person is then protected from the burden of existing by ceding moral responsibility to this internalized authority. For Fromm this is alienation, wherein the person becomes estranged from self (Fuller, 2008: 198).

Fromm, however, is no anarchist, being careful to distinguish between rational authority and an irrational authority consisting in obedience for the sake of security. In the former, the authority is at the service of human development. Hence, the human becomes an end for itself, as in the title *Man for Himself*. This is anthropocentric not in placing us at the centre of the universe with complete moral licence, but instead in rooting judgements in concrete human existence and the conditions for human well-being. Again this self-development is the ethical aspect of positive freedom, and the basis for Fromm's humanism. He argues, finally, that this is rooted in empirical science, since on the basis of adverse psychological reactions to conditions unfavourable to positive freedom Fromm concludes that the natural tendency of humanity is towards well-being in

⁵⁵ Fromm justifies his exclusive use of the masculine 'man' and its correlates with reference to the German neuter *mensch*. Like Durkin, I will largely retain this form in direct citations, but replace it where possible with gender-neutral terms in my own writing. See (Durkin, 2014: 15), for an account of Fromm's approach to this matter.

⁵⁶ Thomson points out that Fromm's work with the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research involved an early study of the authoritarian character (Thomson, 2009:10).

the development of reason and community.⁵⁷

This is an important point, since it purports to ground Fromm's humanism on empirical foundations. It will therefore be implicit in Fromm's humanistic interpretation of religion, where it is contrasted to religion built on metaphysics, supernatural revelation or ecclesiastical authority. Here Fromm is arguably in the Kantian tradition of religion subject to reason and follows Feuerbach in making human powers the object of religion, but seeks to develop this with existential, psychological, and sociological analysis. Annette Thomson comments that Fromm works with “the assumption that it is possible to specify what our human needs are and under what conditions we flourish” (Thomson, 2009: 49).⁵⁸ This then forms an empirical premise upon which to ground the conclusion that moral - and religious - good pertains to human development and moral evil is that which stifles it. Fromm sees this as objective, but not absolute, since it is always subject to new empirical data.⁵⁹

3.3: Characterology

Before moving on to consider Fromm's explicit analysis of the religious types, it is necessary to grasp something of his early understanding of character. Durkin - also drawing on other texts from the period - writes that “character forms the basis of the human personality, providing the generally unconscious motivation that is crucial in the shaping of thought and action” (Durkin, 2014: 83). Fromm treats this motivation in some depth in *Man for Himself*, defining character as a “system of strivings which underlie, but are not identical with, behaviour”

⁵⁷ See (Durkin, 2014: 33-34, 144, 152, 154, 189f) and (Fuller, 2008: 210) for consideration of this empiricism in Fromm's writings.

⁵⁸ Thomson also suggests that Fromm's empirical method would be judged insufficiently rigorous today (Thomson, 2009: 49).

⁵⁹ Nor does Fromm see human nature as static or trans-temporal, in the manner often pejoratively labelled essentialism. Nature, instead, develops in dialectic with culture, whilst remaining “structured in specific ways” (namely the dynamism towards self-development and the existential paradox resulting from the evolution of the brain). See (Fromm, 1949: 22f), (Durkin, 2014: 143ff), and (Burston, 1991: 87).

(Fromm, 1949: 54). This non-identity is seen where two opposed character structures behave in similar ways, as in when courage can be motivated by selfish ambition or devotion to an ideal. Character is a particular form of relating to the world which channels energy in pursuit of a goal, and which structures adjustment to society whilst retaining some individualised aspects (Fromm, 2014: 59-60).⁶⁰ As we shall see, the role of psychoanalysis is to unearth these hidden character structures - such as receptive, exploitative, hoarding, marketing, masochistic, sadistic, destructive, indifferent (Durkin, 2014: 90) - and disclose them as regressive or progressive responses to the dilemma of freedom.

3.4: *Psychoanalysis and Religion: Psychology and the Soul* (Fromm, 1950: 1-9)

Having seen how Fromm places the existential dialectic of freedom at the root of his ethics, we can now consider how this functions in the relationship between psychoanalysis and religion. I will briefly summarise the first two chapters of Fromm's *Psychoanalysis and Religion*, before concentrating on the third and fourth, and in particular the themes of authoritarianism, idolatry, and masochistic alienation. I have elected to focus on these not because they are necessarily more important, but because they arguably render Merton's reading of Fromm vulnerable. Their humanist correlates - which Merton claims to share - are arguably less complex and controversial, and thus these will be merely expounded and borne in mind throughout the chapter.

Firstly the aim of *Psychoanalysis and Religion* is to recover what Fromm sees in ancient philosophy as a harmony between ethics and psychology. Ethics - the practical science of happiness in Aristotle - drew its main premises from the

⁶⁰ See also (Burston, 1991: 67-68).

study of the psyche, with the latter ordered towards the former.⁶¹ Fromm briefly charts the flourishing of this mentality - through the renaissance and early modernity - and its demise with the advent of mechanistic and technological rationalism. The main aim of this sweeping genealogy is to establish the premise that the mechanistic turn in philosophical and scientific modernity entailed that psychology view its object as a machine, and hence develop a method based on the mere observation and stimulation of behaviour patterns (Fromm, 1950: 1-6).

Fromm sees Freud - inheriting this mechanistic world-view - as both scion and scourge of the Enlightenment, simultaneously assuming its rationalist optimism and unleashing upon it the ghosts of irrationality by unearthing unconscious phenomena like repression and rationalization (Fromm, 1950: 6-9).⁶² This is important to my study in both respects, firstly because Fromm argues that Freud anticipates his humanist psychoanalytic concern for human well-being and freedom from illusion; and secondly Fromm emphasises and develops Freud's analysis of religion as informed by unconscious motives, in this case the unconscious need for security and the corresponding character structures behind the various responses to freedom.

The purpose of this historical sketch, therefore, is to attempt to rethink the relationship between psychoanalysis and religion by envisaging them not simply as enemies or allies, but to see psychoanalysis as beginning to inhabit a vacuum left by the 'Death of God'. Primarily this concerns reclaiming the sphere of human flourishing, by retrieving the notion of soul and ascribing to it the themes associated with humanism. Psychoanalysis then emerges as "cure of soul"

⁶¹ Fromm's retrieval of Aristotle here resembles Kugelmann's adoption of the method of *ressourcement*, in which ancient sources are mined for their relevance to psychology and for the re-interpretation of human selfhood (Kugelmann, 2011: 407-411).

⁶² Thomson notes how Fromm claims to have become fascinated by irrational phenomena as a school pupil during the 1914-1918 war. In addition she shows that this desire to explore the conflict between rational and irrational aspects informs Fromm's understanding of psychoanalysis until his last years (Thomson, 2009: 5, 83).

(Fromm, 1950: 7, 65).⁶³ This is of relevance to the question of religion because we see Fromm attempting to secure for his humanist psychoanalysis some of the ground traditionally claimed by religious teaching in its claim concerning - and over - a soul.

In the second chapter Fromm briefly situates both Freud and Carl Jung within this paradigm. Despite Freud's critique of traditional religion and its supposed basis in helplessness and regress to the infantile need for authority, Fromm argues that Freud's thought is actually religious, providing we understand religion properly. Fromm's Freud rejects the supernatural-theistic core of religion and its assumed foundation in authority in order to make way for the ethical: "knowledge (reason, truth, *logos*), brotherly love, reduction of suffering, independence, and responsibility" (Fromm, 1950: 18). Religion thus conceived, Freud is proposed as an exponent.⁶⁴

This is re-emphasised with Fromm's short critique of Jung, which again aims at challenging the assumption that Jung's depth psychology is sympathetic towards religion, since Jung's conception of religion is actually one of surrender to unconscious forces (Fromm, 1950: 16ff). The importance of this will emerge when we consider Thomas Merton's attitude to God, but in the interim we can see its significance with recourse to *The Fear of Freedom*. Here Fromm characterises surrender as a compulsive, masochistic, and self-annihilating phenomenon, in contrast to one rooted in human freedom and self-realization (Fromm, 2001: 130,138). Jung, then, is tenuously posited as an historical anti-type to Fromm's humanist religion, and we can now turn to the next chapter of his text to see Fromm's basic religious distinction.

⁶³ Fromm justifies his use of soul on the basis of its connotations of the "higher human powers...love, reason, conscience, values" (Fromm, 1950: 6). I will not be concerned with whether this is an appropriate usage, but in the absence of a definition these powers should be borne in mind whenever soul is used.

⁶⁴ Clearly a deeper understanding of Fromm's relationship with Freud is necessary, but beyond my remit here. See (Fromm, 1992) and (Burston, 1991: 189-206).

3.5: Types of Religious Experience (Fromm, 1950: 21-64)

Fromm's third chapter is central both in his own text and in this chapter of my thesis. Here he begins to develop the critical function of his psychoanalytic theory, in order to expose the characterological roots of authoritarian religion. This critique, however, transcends mere negation in also arguing for a humanistic core in genuine religion, akin to his revision of psychoanalysis. Firstly, it is important to point out that Fromm begins with an acknowledgement of the methodological difficulties in speaking of religion. Despite the number of non-monotheistic religions, we tend to assume that religion refers to "a system centred around God and supernatural forces", and hence the discussion of religion always assumes a monotheistic referent (Fromm, 1950: 24). I mention this since I will later ask whether Fromm is not in fact guilty of an analogous assumption, inasmuch as his understanding of religion shelters a number of prejudiced interpretations of notions such as power, transcendence, freedom, and God.

For the time being, however, I will continue with a selective exposition of this chapter, beginning with Fromm's rather broad definition of religion: "*any system of thought and action shared by a group which gives the individual a frame of reference and an object of devotion*" (Fromm, 1950: 21). Fromm assumes that all cultures have such structures since this need for orientation and devotion is existential, inasmuch as it is rooted in our human condition and consequent needs. Fromm's existential analysis of human life is central to a number of the points made in my third chapter, as it grounds the basic humanistic-authoritarian taxonomy of religious types, and with it the themes of authoritarianism, surrender, alienation, and idolatry. Given this, it is useful to recount here how Fromm interprets the biblical narrative of Eden as a depiction of our existential dilemma.

As we have seen above, the emergence of self-awareness, reason, and

imagination have disrupted the animal harmony, such that humankind is an anomaly, a “freak of the universe” (Fromm, 1950: 22). In Fromm’s view the story of Eden is a symbolic representation of this evolutionary process, in which the consumption of the fruit of the tree of knowledge is not a theological transgression but our embracing of moral freedom and emergence from the chains of mere instinct. Henceforth, we are subject to the physical laws of nature yet also transcend them. Our problematizing of existence and our development are not the result of an innate drive for progress, but are instead rooted in the need for an answer to our contradictions. We have lost paradise, and now wander alone, “tormented by a craving for 'absoluteness', for another kind of harmony” (Fromm, 1950: 23). This drive results in our constructing an all-inclusive mental picture of the world as an existential and ethical reference-point, and results in religious - again defined broadly - feeling and devotion as an expression of this.

Fromm argues that there is no one without this need for orientation and devotion, and hence religion is ubiquitous. This, however, is merely formal, since there can be a variety of responses. The issue, therefore, is not whether one is religious, but whether religion develops our powers or hinders them (Fromm, 1950: 26). Enter the psychologist, who - given Fromm's conception of the harmony between psychology and human flourishing - is interested both in the psychological roots of religion and its value (or effect on our powers). It is important to point out here that religion is a consequence of the psychological disequilibrium of Fromm’s Eden, and I see it as rather ambiguous as to whether it can hence be called natural (given that we are both natural and a “freak of nature”).

3.6: Humanistic and Authoritarian Religious Types (Fromm, 1950: 34ff)

Fromm then arrives at the distinction which grounds the whole text and which he claims penetrates all religious traditions: religion is either authoritarian or

humanistic (Fromm, 1950: 34). Since I will argue that the nature of authoritarian religion is of immense import for the Merton-Fromm relationship, and also a point of contention in my own critique of Fromm, it is here that I focus, having first briefly presented Fromm's understanding of humanist religion. This is "centered around man and his strength", and the development of our powers of reason, our relationships with others, our recognition of truth, and our powers of love and solidarity (Fromm, 1950: 37). The aim of this sort of religion is to develop our strengths, typified in the essence of virtue as self-realization rather than obedience. Crucially, God here is a mere symbol of our powers, rather than a "power over man" (Fromm, 1950: 37).

Fromm's case against authoritarian religion - anticipated in his treatment of Luther and Calvin in *The Fear of Freedom* (Fromm, 2001 [1941]: 33-88) - is given immediate force through an (unreferenced) *Oxford Dictionary* definition of religion as "recognition on the part of man of some higher unseen power as having control of his destiny, and as being entitled to obedience, reverence, and worship" (Fromm, 1950: 34). Fromm emphasises that the external higher power is considered entitled to obedience, reverence, and worship on account of its exercise of control (Fromm, 1950: 35). What is crucial here is that this type of religion justifies entitlement in terms of control and power rather than any moral qualities or value. Hence, authoritarian religion supposes the right of God to force humanity into worship, and sees sin as our failure to comply.

From these analyses Fromm elicits the essence of authoritarian religion, and its central virtue-vice distinction. It consists in "the surrender to a power transcending man" (Fromm, 1950: 35), meaning that obedience and disobedience are opposed as the marks of sanctity and sin respectively. This model, according to Fromm, necessarily conceives humanity as powerless and insignificant, only strong through submission. This is the theological correlate to the existential and ethical flights from freedom, by which independence and integrity are traded for a feeling of security. Ultimately, to avoid the dilemma of existence, the authoritarian conscience masochistically subsumes itself into an -

imagined - awesome power. In such theology - and its secular analogues - the rationale of worship is again not merit but entitlement based on power.

We now witness an important shift in method, and the introduction of the particularly psychoanalytic flavour of the text. Rather than being content with a mere description of religious types, the psychoanalyst must “proceed...to the analysis of their dynamics” (Fromm, 1950: 49). This involves unearthing the processes - especially unconscious - which lead to the development of a religious attitude. Contrary to the humanistic religion in which God symbolises the potentiality of the higher human self, authoritarian religion entails the projection of the best of the human - “his reason and his love” - outward and the consequent impoverishment of self (Fromm, 1950: 50). I cannot overstate the importance for the present thesis of the specific psychoanalytic aspect of this claim: this religious attitude is mirrored in masochistic and submissive personal relationships, where the masochistic character is blinded by awe to the extent of the attributing of “his own powers and aspirations to the other person” (Fromm, 1950: 50). Surrender to God - conceived in authoritarian terms - is therefore a theological instance of masochism.

3.7: Dynamic Psychology - Progressive and Regressive.

Central to Fromm's argument is his understanding of the dynamic structure of the psyche, for which we can draw on *The Fear of Freedom*. Human persons have an interior dynamism, comprising inherent properties and laws towards development (Fromm, 2001 [1941]: 11). “Life”, that is, “has an inner dynamism of its own; it tends to grow, to be expressed, to be lived” (Fromm, 2001: 157). This drive entails a tendency to seek a satisfactory solution to the dilemma of life (Fromm, 2001 [1941]: 205) and hence is the power behind the positive approach to freedom. As is foundational for Fromm's later elaborations of humanism, “positive freedom is identical with the full realization of the individual's potentialities, together with his ability to live actively and

spontaneously” (Fromm, 2001 [1941]: 232).⁶⁵

This dynamism, however, can also be the source of our submission, since it can be expressed in a regressive fashion as well as progressive. The need for security can also make us want to surrender our freedom (Fromm, 2001 [1941]: 4, 12), and adapt to social or interpersonal structures which offer refuge from isolation (Fromm, 2001 [1941]: 256). Hence our psychological dynamism can also lead to the development of the masochistic character. Fromm distinguishes between the phenomenon of masochism in sexuality and a more general masochistic character structure which he sees as the root of the former (Fromm, 2001 [1941]: 126). The core of both can be found in the desire to experience weakness and dominion in order to flee from feelings of aloneness and the burden of responsibility by being subjected to an overwhelming other. The masochistic character is thus envisaged as a response to the need to eliminate the burden of the self and the anxiety of isolation (Fromm, 2001 [1941]: 130, 133). Fromm calls this process symbiosis. This is arguably implicit in Fromm's critique of authoritarian religion, and involves the loss of integrity through the self being swallowed up and dissolved in dependence on another (Fromm, 2001 [1941]: 136).⁶⁶

3.8: Authoritarian Religious Dependence (Fromm, 1950: 50-53)

The main import of this for our treatment of religion in Fromm and Merton is found in Fromm's interpretation of religious dependence as a masochistic and symbiotic phenomenon. Here, life is determined by forces outside the self, and happiness found only in submission. This characterises the authoritarian mentality, in which “activity is rooted in a basic sense of powerlessness”, and

⁶⁵ Burston describes this as “a continuing search for communion with humanity and nature mediated by the development of one's powers of love and reason” (Burston, 1991: 71).

⁶⁶ Fromm claims that sadism is an analogous and inverse example of symbiosis, in which the self is swallowed up by absorbing another (Fromm, 2001: 136).

“means to act in the name of something higher than one's own self”, such as God (Fromm, 2001: 147).⁶⁷ The importance of the notion of masochism in *Psychoanalysis and Religion* thus mirrors that of alienation in *The Fear of Freedom*, and Fromm continues the former by putting authoritarian religion in the context of the relationship to self. Since authoritarianism surrenders one's powers outward, it entails separation from self, or alienation. Since everything has been given to God, the dispossessed person must then turn to God to find self. Subsequent surrender in worship of this sort is thus an unconscious attempt to recover the lost self (Fromm, 1950: 50). However, since God is conceived as an absolutely superior power, authoritarian ‘worship’ necessitates a human demonstration of worthlessness. Fromm argues - perhaps failing to consider some of the nuances of religious humility - that this turns us not only against self but also against other humans, whom we view through the same miserable lens.

To restate the significance of this treatment of authoritarian religion, Fromm concludes that the “real fall of man is his alienation from himself, his submission to power, his turning against himself even though under the guise of his worship of God” (Fromm, 1950: 53). The implications of this could barely be more severe relative to the work of Merton, as will be brought out in the following chapter: to turn to a divine power beyond the person is to turn away from self. I will, however, ultimately ask whether Fromm universalises a historical interpretation of power, since it seems that he is unable to conceive of a transcendent God being worshipped willingly based on worth rather than compulsion or evasion of reality.

⁶⁷ Here Fromm refers to Friedrich Schleiermacher's feeling of absolute dependence, having also interpreted Martin Luther and John Calvin in a similar fashion (Fromm, 2001: 55-88). There are question marks, however, over whether divine dependence is necessarily absolute, or whether some middle ground is possible. I will raise analogous issues in the conclusion to this chapter.

3.9: Rationalization (Fromm, 1950: 55f)

Fromm subsequently develops the particularly psychoanalytic aspects of his method, emphasising the analysis of “the validity of thoughts and ideas” (Fromm, 1950: 55). Freud has shown human thought processes to be deeply ambiguous by unearthing unconscious dynamisms operating beneath seemingly transparent and sincere statements. Chief among these dynamisms for Fromm is rationalization. This involves the use of “thinking to rationalize irrational passions and to justify the actions of [a] group”, such that obvious truths may be denied or distorted in order to maintain a façade of reason around behaviour (Fromm, 1950: 57-58). Whilst a traditional understanding of truth considers the content and coherence of belief systems, psychoanalysis seeks to determine whether a thought “accurately expresses one’s true inner state” (Fuller, 2008: 209).

From our particular perspective the otherwise important phenomenon of rationalization is of relevance only insofar as it pertains to Fromm's understanding of religion. Here, he argues that this “new dimension of truth” (Fromm, 1950: 60) is a compromise between the human needs for society and independent thought. Hence, rationalization results from the need to see our allegiances as reasonable in order to reduce the risk of isolation. It is thus an “expression of a basic dichotomy in man, the co-extensive need for bondage and freedom” (Fromm, 1950: 59).⁶⁸ The resultant contribution of psychoanalysis to the study of religion follows from this: what matters is not merely to understand a person’s conscious belief structure, but to uncover the unconscious processes at work in its formulation (Fromm, 1950: 60).

Here the main point in Fromm's argument begins to emerge, concerning

⁶⁸ Fromm's sociology emerges again here, since he claims that because of this herd-nature of most humans, rationality depends on a social order in which reason is normalized and thought can flourish unhindered and without manipulation (Fromm, 1950: 59).

precisely the validity of beliefs. The psychoanalyst searches for the “*human reality behind thought systems*” (Fromm, 1950: 62), namely whether they are “expressive of the feeling which [they portray] or whether [they are] rationalization[s] hiding opposite attitudes” (Fromm. 1950: 62). In sum, this approach seeks to understand whether a professed belief does not in fact mask feelings and attitudes which are contrary to it. Contrasted to humanistic religion and its striving for truth, the human reality underlying the authoritarian religion is “submission to power and lack of love and respect for the individual” (Fromm, 1950: 63). We can see clearly here that Fromm's analysis of religion gives central importance not to conscious confession of belief, but to uncovering the basic reaction to the dichotomies of human existence, and whether this reaction cultivates freedom or evasion. Rather than supposing that worship of God is based on corresponding human realities such as love, faith, knowledge, or truth, Fromm's psychoanalysis attempts to uproot the unseen, unspoken, unacknowledged motivations behind it. The worship of (an authoritarian) God, thus viewed, perhaps begins to seem like an exercise in unconscious mendacity.

I have gone to some length in elaborating Fromm's analysis of rationalization because he sees it as the primary psychoanalytic contribution to the study of truth (Fromm, 1950: 60). It is important to the present study since it provides an account of why the masochistic character structure we have considered above might frame its surrender in a structure of religious practice, or dogmatic or metaphysical theology, for instance. Rather than simply acknowledging symbiotic submission, surrender is veiled in rational justification. Our analysis of the authoritarian themes therefore depends on Fromm's understanding of the centrality of rationalization. I will, however, suggest that Fromm's work here is important insofar as we are dealing with a particular type of character, and a distinct type of theology and religion, and that Fromm might be accused of ignoring the alternatives. First, however, we will continue with Fromm's fourth chapter and its demarcation of the role of psychoanalysis within genuine concern for the soul.

3.10: Psychoanalysis as Cure of Soul (Fromm, 1950: 65ff)

Having set forth his understanding of the basic religious types, and the role of psychoanalysis in illuminating the psychological roots of authoritarianism, Fromm now turns to a discussion of the place of the psychoanalyst in establishing the proper religious attitude in the soul. Since we have seen the early Merton's hierarchical view of psychoanalysis and religion, it will be of key importance for any harmony between the two writers to consider the place of psychoanalysis in humanistic religion. Secondly this will prove illuminating in considering the place of the Fromm dialogue in Merton's eventual attempt at a revised, integrative position, as narrated by David Cooper. The particular goal of Fromm's psychoanalysis relative to religion is for a person to see the extent to which any symptoms - e.g. compulsive or obsessive behaviour, anxiety, depression, or masochism - are rooted in the character traits of their fundamental response to the dilemma of existence. Rather than adjustment to social norms, then, what is needed "is someone who can help [the person] uncover the reasons for this waste of his best human powers and regain their use" (Fromm, 1950: 73). Consequently the genuine aim of therapy is "optimal development of a person's potentialities and the realization of his individuality" in order to aid the development of freedom (Fromm, 1950: 74).

Extending the empirical meta-ethic in *Man for Himself* into the sphere of religion and psychoanalysis, Fromm claims that "there are immutable laws inherent in human nature and human functioning which operate in any given culture [and which] cannot be violated without serious damage to the personality". These laws are humanist since they concern the need and freedom to achieve our aims: "independence, integrity, and the ability to love" (Fromm, 1950: 74). Whilst this is left on a vaguely formal level, it is clear that Fromm situates religion, psychoanalysis, and humanism in the context of what he sees as a natural human tendency towards self-realization, which each should nurture

rather than inhibit.⁶⁹

Having posited this natural tendency, Fromm comes to the main point of his fourth chapter: given the understanding of humanistic religion and the flourishing of natural powers, psychoanalysis *is* religious (Fromm, 1950: 76). Since Fromm's view of religion focuses on human development and solidarity rather than transcendent powers, genuine psychoanalysis and genuine religion are in harmony. Any hierarchy - *contra* Merton - is teleologically humanistic rather than theological. To pave the way for a deeper comparison with Merton, we must briefly turn to the way that Fromm envisages the space that remains between genuine analysis and the authentic religious attitude.

3.11: The Psychoanalytic Threat to Religion (Fromm, 1950: 99ff)

With the utmost import for a *critical* dialogue with Merton, Fromm considers the extent to which psychoanalysis is a *threat* to religion. Psychoanalysis as cure of soul threatens authoritarian religion but nurtures the humanistic, whilst psychoanalysis as mere social adjustment extinguishes the humanistic but may be at the service of authoritarianism.⁷⁰ Given this basic framework, there are also four different aspects of religion that the question must address: the experiential, scientific-magical, ritualistic, and semantic. I will discuss experience and ritual as the most important examples of these, before moving on to consider the dialogue between the two writers and eventually critique both.

⁶⁹ Clearly many would question the existence of such a tendency, but this is again well beyond the scope of this project.

⁷⁰ The merits of psychoanalysis as adjustment are relative to the structure to which one adjusts, but it is clear for both Merton and Fromm that it is typically employed in the service of authoritarian power structures and conformity to mass society.

In this final chapter of *Psychoanalysis and Religion*, Fromm takes experience to mean religious feeling and devotion, the genuine humanistic object of which is not a transcendent God but the human soul and its powers (Fromm, 1950: 99). As we have seen this is shared by psychoanalysis, and Fromm argues that humanistic religion is thus immune from any attack by natural science.⁷¹ Fromm does not dwell on this point, but it can be clarified by remembering *Man for Himself*, where the true science of humanity is based on an empirical observance of our reactions to restrictive conditions. Hence authentic scientific work stimulates human growth, and only psychoanalysis conceived as adjustment to regressive socio-economic structures is a threat to this type of religious experience.

Secondly, the prospects for ritual in a religion inspired by humanistic psychoanalysis depend on the distinction between rational and irrational ritual, which we have also witnessed in Merton's psychoanalytic writings. Here the irrational is marked by compulsion and anxiety, whilst genuine ritual is a necessary and free expression of shared value structures and strivings. Humanity still needs ritual to express solidarity, but psychoanalysis is essential in uncovering the human reality behind it and whether its essence is the escape from freedom or the cultivation and expression of value and solidarity (Fromm, 1950: 106ff).

Hence, the question of psychoanalysis and religion turns on what aspect of religion is taken as paradigmatic, and in what form. The ultimate function of psychoanalysis with respect to religion is then both negative, dismantling and reconstructing. Psychoanalysis ultimately reshapes the theism/atheism dilemma into the question of humanism or idolatry (Fromm, 1950: 118-119). Thus reimagined, idolatry unmask not material objects but the psychological attitudes which renounce freedom by projecting it upon external powers. A critical psychoanalysis thus exposes idolatrous impediments to true humanistic

⁷¹ Again it is assumed that natural science shares the humanist concern of Fromm's psychoanalysis. A different interpretation of natural science might well disagree.

religion, and is in a sense a new and inverted negative theology transcending not the conceptual eclipse of the absolute but the alienating structures which hinder freedom. The central aim of this - and of all Fromm's work on religion - is thus that we cease wasting time and energy on questions of metaphysics and theology and instead unite in condemnation of theological, economic, political, and interpersonal alienation, and thus emerge into genuine freedom. I will subsequently question whether Fromm is not in fact vulnerable to his own critique, having first turned to the dialogue between both writers.

Chapter Four: Thomas Merton's Reading of Erich Fromm

4.1: Merton-Fromm Correspondence

Merton begins his correspondence with Fromm in October, 1954, writing that he had read *Psychoanalysis and Religion*, and half of Fromm's ethical study *Man for Himself*. The occasion of Merton's wish to write, in addition to his reading of these texts, was an encounter with the writings of Karen Horney, which has prompted Merton to reconsider his prior evaluation of psychoanalysis.

Recognising that he has failed to appreciate the best of current psychoanalytic theory, Merton writes that he now notices a

profound agreement between the psychoanalyst and the Catholic priest on some very important points. I believe that this agreement ought to be noticed and emphasised, because I feel that our two vocations in a sense complete and assist one another. I also feel that there is much in Christian tradition that fits in very well with the general tendency of writers like Horney and yourself. (Merton, 1985: 309)

Since this passage is arguably the first portrayal of Merton's new - and abiding - openness to psychoanalysis, it is worth examining it, as it forms the basis for much of the work I discuss in this thesis. Most significantly, it both anticipates and sources the approach to a practical - and hierarchical - synthesis between Christianity and psychology.⁷² It is important to emphasise that Merton sees the role of the psychoanalyst as complementary to that of the Catholic priest, which is actually completed by the analyst.⁷³ Moreover, the assertion of some harmony between Christian tradition and psychoanalysis would then have

⁷² In my estimation it is not the case that Merton's approach loses its hierarchical quality, but rather than the main pole of it changes from Catholic ascetical theology to religion conceived in a more humanistic, integrative fashion and incorporating a variety of new strands of thought.

⁷³ Of course, the converse also applies.

remained deeply controversial to many in both camps.

This harmony introduces us to the first of this chapter's main themes: the "fundamentally humanistic" character of Christianity, inasmuch as it aims to enable us to be the persons we are "made to become" (Merton, 1985: 309). The salvific fulfilment of the Christian is found in an elevated and divinised freedom before God, contrary to any soteriology or metaphysics of absorption into non-being. We have already seen the importance of freedom in the foregoing chapters, and will see it repeatedly in the following, but for now it is important to emphasise freedom in its eschatological dimension, where Christian life culminates in eternal freedom before God. I will examine the matters of humanism, freedom, and eschatology in more depth throughout this chapter, merely noting here Merton's claim that he is in "full agreement with [Fromm's] basic thesis on the humanistic conscience" (Merton, 1985: 309).

This letter continues by further exhibiting Merton's turn to humanism, as he agrees with Fromm that doctrinal divergences should not stand in the way of the solidarity of all of those who believe in the basic dignity of humanity, in the face of the debasing socio-political circumstances of the time.⁷⁴ It is significant to note here that the standard of unity is love of "the value and nobility of the human spirit" (Merton, 1985: 309), since I will subsequently ask if the doctrinal differences in question actually entail a basic rupture in the understanding of our humanity.

Anticipating, and perhaps providing a genealogy for, the themes that we have encountered in "The Mature Conscience", Merton shares with Fromm his concerns and frustrations over the monastic attitude to conscience, and commends Fromm's wisdom "about types of conscience formation and

⁷⁴ See (Fromm, 1950: vii), where Fromm calls for the abandonment of framing human division along dogmatic lines and rather placing in the centre the question of care for humanity.

malformation” (Merton, 1985: 310).⁷⁵ The difficulty for Merton in his monastic experience is the existence of a formalistic notion of obedience. Here some monks conceive obedience as entirely about winning approval, in contrast to the personalist approach we have already seen in Merton’s writing. With some difficulty - and an admission that the problem may seem fatal to Fromm - Merton strains to find this personalist attitude in his monastic rule, which he claims should not be understood in the authoritarian light critiqued by Fromm, but instead as spiritual, humanistic, and mystical (Merton, 1985: 310). Authority and obedience are not to be taken as the end, but as means to it. More controversial is Merton’s suggestion that the emphasis on obedience should be understood as pertaining mainly to the initial years of monastic formation, to guide the monk in his lack of knowledge, since the mature monk will be integrated and live in freedom rather than servility.

In acknowledging the tension here, it is important to attempt to understand Merton’s predicament, since he is arguably dealing with one of the true paradoxes of Christian life and thought: how the notion of obedience - here obedience to God mediated through the monastic structure - can be synthesised with that of freedom. It is not my intention to probe the fundamentals or history of this problem but merely to point out that it is precisely the notion of ceding one’s decision-making powers to another that might evoke comparisons with Fromm’s understanding of idolatry.

Nonetheless, Merton does also take issue with Fromm on obedience, suggesting that Fromm’s experiences with Nazism might have led him to be too absolute on the notion of authority *per se* (Merton, 1985: 310). The monk is actually freed from menial decisions by obedience and hence is better able to concentrate on higher ends. Lest it be assumed that the prior paragraph on the Benedictine rule is an attempt to evade controversy we should acknowledge here that Merton *is* comfortable disagreeing with Fromm. Nonetheless, the picture Merton paints

⁷⁵ On conscience in Fromm see (Fuller, 2008: 212f).

here - freedom from menial responsibilities - is merely one aspect of obedience, which had been traditionally conceived not as liberation from tasks but from *self-will*.⁷⁶ That this is an issue with regard to Fromm's humanism will soon be clear, as with Merton's insistence here - at the close of his first letter to Fromm - that a robust evaluation of the mystical life depends on the existence of God, not as object but as "the source of our own being." (Merton, 1985: 311).

Fromm response to Merton's first letter was swift (27th October, 1954), and contains clarification of his critique of authority, and hence an answer to our obedience-humanism question. As we have seen, Fromm distinguishes between two diametrically opposed notions of authority, the rational and the irrational. Authority which is ordered to human spiritual development is rational, whilst irrational authority is exploitative in pursuit of its own ends. Furthermore, Fromm - reflecting his commitment to democratic forms of government - finds agreement with Merton that human development actually depends upon authority (Fromm, 1954). Hence Merton is correct to protest against an anarchic denial of properly understood authority, but also correct in rejecting obedience when it is not at the service of human development. Arguably, however, it is instructive that Fromm had to refer Merton to *The Fear of Freedom* to point this out, since the rational-irrational distinction is not clear in the texts to which Merton had access at this time (*Psychoanalysis and Religion*, and *Man for Himself*). Merton has clearly been a perspicacious reader of Fromm's early writing, a point echoed by Fromm in his first response.

I have elected to dwell on this first exchange, given that Merton's initial letter is programmatic for his treatment of psychoanalysis and religion. This is especially the case regarding the themes of humanism and obedience, and implicitly - although with some tension - on the central issue of alienation. Merton's correspondence with Fromm then becomes increasingly focused on war, since both writers shared a passionate opposition to the American-Soviet conflict of

⁷⁶ See, e.g., (Garrigou-Lagrange, 1947: 365-378).

the time, but there remain some points which are directly important to the theme of this paper. First (18th March, 1955), Merton states that without love of humanity there is no love of God, again demonstrating the non-negotiable place of humanism in his thought (Merton, 1985: 311). Secondly, in the same letter, Merton touches on the theme of automatism, this time pointing the finger at the “several centuries of more and more abstract thought” by which humanity has lost its grip on reality (Merton, 1985: 311).⁷⁷

Merton continues this theme in his next letter (12th September, 1955), describing how he is concerned by the “falsity...superficiality and...fundamental irreverence” of the putative “return to God”, in which he sees the centrality of word and cliché, marginalizing “the Living God” (Merton, 1985: 313). This is immediately followed by praise of Fromm’s take on idolatry in *The Sane Society*, which although brief and unspecific will again be important for a critical consideration of the dialogue. The letter concludes with an important point on dignity - adjacent to Merton’s suggestion that Fromm’s historical account of religion is too generalised - with Merton arguing that Christian theology, and in particular the doctrines of incarnation and recapitulation “substantiate[s] Fromm’s] idea of the dignity of man” (Merton, 1985: 313). Again given what we have seen of Fromm’s work on humanism, I will argue that such Christian ideas are in fact contrary to Fromm’s humanist philosophy and understanding of authentic religion.⁷⁸

In December, 1961, Merton writes again to Fromm, touching on a variety of points concerning automatism, political tyranny, the threat of war, and the response of ecclesiastics who prefer theological trifles over genuine resistance (Merton, 1985: 317-319). Relative to analysing the coherence between Fromm’s humanistic psychoanalysis and Merton’s understanding of religion the most

⁷⁷ This is also an early indication of Merton’s burgeoning interest in both existentialist philosophy and Zen Buddhism, in the emphasis on concrete experience over conceptual thought. Of course this might also be traced to the centrality of mysticism in his life, stretching back to his encounter with Aldous Huxley and his friendship with the monk Bramachari whilst a student in New York (Merton, 1975: 202, 204, 212-217).

⁷⁸ Indeed Merton suggest somewhat boldly here that Fromm’s work might well depend on a monotheistic foundation, without specifying why this is the case.

salient point concerns Merton's remarks on the renunciation of freedom. Merton laments the Christian rejection of the promise of liberation in favour of surrendering their freedom to new tyrants, before writing that only in the service of God is true freedom. Fromm's first response to Merton (28th October, 1954) had made it clear that the correspondence between the two will probably always be in spite of differences around the objective existence of God, but nonetheless this point on freedom deserves comment.

Given that Merton has claimed "full agreement" with Fromm's humanistic notion of conscience and "profound agreement" (Merton, 1985: 309) between priest and analyst, we can legitimately ask whether the idea that freedom comes in service to God actually threatens such agreement. Fromm himself would perhaps formally concur, but to suppose that this was a genuine agreement involves equivocation. This is because Fromm's God is symbolic of human powers, and a conceptual expression of human experience which develops throughout time.⁷⁹ Again, I do not mean to dismiss the dialogue, but simply to expose seemingly unseen tensions between Merton's theology and his supposed commitment to a humanism compatible with Fromm's.

With regard to this, it is interesting to note that Fromm writes (10th September, 1963) of a meeting with a variety of Catholic theologians, and reports of a "growing understanding for what you might call, in psychological terminology, an unconscious faith in God which you might find in the atheist" (cited in Merton, 1985: 320). Merton's next letter (8th October, 1963) describes how he "agrees with [Fromm] perfectly" on this point, but it seems to me to be a further point of contention whether Merton assumes that this is Fromm's position or merely something that Fromm has observed among theologians (Merton, 1985: 321). There is nothing in Fromm's letter to suggest anything more than the latter, but

⁷⁹See (Fromm, 1967). In this text Fromm argues for a humanist reading of Hebrew Scripture, which manifests a struggle between a conservative-nationalist current of thought, and a liberal-universalist one primarily concerned with the unity of all humankind and the critique of illusion. Merton, writing to Fromm on 13th October, 1966, says that he is greatly interested in Fromm's reading, and that a radical hermeneutic of the Old Testament is timely (Merton, 1985: 324).

it is also unclear whether Merton actually attributes this position to Fromm. Fromm's position on God in these early writings will be critiqued towards the end of the chapter, but for now I shall turn to another aspect of the Fromm-Merton dialogue, this time Merton's response to Fromm's *War Within Man*.

4.2: War Within Man

In 1963 Erich Fromm published a pamphlet entitled *War Within Man: A Psychological Enquiry into the Roots of Destructiveness*, containing responses by six authors (including Paul Tillich and Thomas Merton), and concluding with a final response from Fromm (Fromm, 1963, 1963b; Merton, 1963). Fromm outlines his account of two contradictory human drives, attraction to life (biophilia) and attraction to death (necrophilia), before arguing that these - including their socio-economic development - are pivotal factors contributing to the threat of global war.⁸⁰ I will focus here on Merton's response, in order to attempt to illuminate in more depth the question of psychoanalysis, religion, and humanism.

Since Fromm's paper discusses his understanding of the way in which social factors - including early development - lead to the personality types which are the conditions of war, and therefore involves his psychoanalytic theory, I will discuss Merton's response in some detail. This is also a key example for the main trend of the first two chapters of this paper, reiterating the hierarchical relationship between psychoanalysis and religion (including spirituality) and the centrality of love of God in human freedom. Merton begins his response with the assertion that

I fully accept Fromm's analysis of alienation as it is hinted at here and

⁸⁰This should not be understood as a metaphysical dualism of necessary principles, since necrophilia – not to be confused with the sexual phenomenon - results not from nature but from inadequate nurture. Neither should they be understood as biological principles, but as character structures.

developed more fully in his other books. But I think this concept needs a great deal of further exploration, beyond the limits of sociology and psychology, even depth psychology. (Merton, 1963: 45)

This profession of agreement arguably demands an analysis of whether the theological and spiritual content of Merton's response actually destroys rather than develops Fromm's theories of humanism and alienation. In light of this it is also of great importance to the question of a transition analogous to the ascetic-humanist one argued by David Cooper.

The basic point made by Merton throughout the response is that human fulfilment comes only with the integration of our potential for spiritual transcendence, rather than the mere mechanical exercise of biological functions. Our human capacities require the exercise of transcendence (to be clarified presently), since if "man acts *only* as a member of the human species within his limits as an individual subservient to the inescapable finalities of his common 'nature', he is still subject to the deepest and most radical form of spiritual alienation" (Merton, 1963: 45). This raises profound difficulties relative to Fromm's radical humanism, which sees us *precisely* as mere members of the human species. Secondly - an at once more important and subtler tension - Fromm envisages humankind as fettered, conditioned, and impelled to act by a series of existential dichotomies which seem to me to resemble the inescapable limits referred to by Merton.

Merton continues by commenting that without orientation towards and discovery of the true self, "beyond and above levels of mere empirical individuality", love of life is absent (Merton, 1963: 45). Genuine selfhood is perhaps the key feature in Fromm's writing, but there must arguably be a point of contention amongst our protagonists here: Fromm's approach renders the belief in and devotion to a transcendent God one of the factors involved in the "false personalism" that Merton merely locates in biological reductionism (Merton, 1963: 45). Again this may seem an obvious point, but it is clear that to Merton it is not obvious to

concede that the admitted theological differences also entail a fundamental disagreement in the concept of humanism.

The force of this objection is strengthened by Merton's disavowal of the possibility of "finding life and joy in the mere *processes* of natural existence" (Merton, 1963: 46). This is perhaps of contentious relevance given that Merton refers to natural processes rather than merely natural existence, since it is arguably ambivalent as to whether existence transcends process in Fromm's view. Nonetheless the fact that Fromm posits human uniqueness in terms of evolutionary development merits at least asking whether he would accept that there was anything beyond merely natural processes, and whether fulfilment was merely the development of a natural evolutionary process of self-realisation.

Indeed, I would argue that there is a tension in Fromm's thought between the idea that development of self-consciousness and reason makes the human a "freak of nature" and the claim that we still have a *natural* tendency towards the development of rational and specifically human powers. Perhaps the question of the adequacy of merely natural processes turns on the concept that would be paired with nature. If the evolution of rationality is a breach with nature, as Fromm suggests, then perhaps there is room for agreement with Merton's claim about transcendence of merely natural processes. If, on the other hand, Merton's "natural existence" is opposed to something beyond the natural world, "Transcendent" as Merton states later, then agreement on what constitutes life and joy is impossible. That Merton opposes the "empirical ego" (Merton, 1985: 45) to the true self perhaps only confuses matters further, because it is not clear that the former has a correlate in Fromm's thought.

In any case, the hitherto nebulous matter of transcendence is now made clearer, and with it our task, as Merton specifies two senses. First is the transcendence

of “the empirical self” in awakening and emptiness, the true self.⁸¹ Second, opposed to mere immanence is the “Transcendent”, a paradox by which we go beyond ourselves whilst yet discovering our ordinary self. Both the “Transcendent” and going beyond self would arguably be anathema to Fromm. In sum, Fromm’s concept of love of life entails for Merton not merely awakening but “unity not only with all beings but with the very source and finality of Being” (Merton, 1963: 47). Again it may seem trite to highlight differences which both Merton and Fromm acknowledge, but I do so in order to argue that these differences entail an unspoken fundamental rupture in understanding the roots of human alienation and hence humanism. Furthermore, we have begun to point to an enduring tension along the lines of the mainly historical one argued by Cooper.

Finally, this tension is reiterated in Merton’s suggestions, first, that “man is not alone”, and secondly, that we can “respond to the mysterious grace of a Spirit...infinitely greater than [our] own” (Merton, 1963: 49-50). From Fromm’s response, we shall see that these two points encapsulate the tensions that lurk below the surface of the dialogue. First, it is clear that Fromm is deeply appreciative of Merton’s reading of his paper, finding him clear, fair, and insightful. Fromm comments that Merton is a “true religious humanist”, who has seen the importance of the human spirit in driving change (Fromm, 1963b: 55). Finally, he also applauds Merton’s insight into the idolatry of material consumption, and the dangers in believing that mere technological and material abundance is sufficient for human satisfaction.

It is, however, on the matter of human solidarity that Fromm takes issue with Merton’s comments, specifically around the idea that the human person is not alone. Fromm gives formal assent to Merton’s proposition “[m]an is not alone”, but ascribes to it a different meaning: we are not alone because we are many,

⁸¹ This emphasis on awakening anticipates Fromm’s later work on Zen Buddhism. Thomson locates Fromm’s first interest in Buddhism during his days at Heidelberg University between 1919 and 1922 before being re-ignited in the 1950’s (Thomson, 2009: 6, 16).

sharing in a common humanity (Fromm, 1963b: 55). In light of this difference, in my view, Fromm's claim that in humanism he and Merton share an experience beyond verbalization and doctrinal differences appears vulnerable and perhaps platitudinous: the distance between Merton and Fromm involves precisely the matter of what a human being is and is for. Hence, in differing theologically, they differ anthropologically and ethically. That Merton's recourse to an infinitely greater Spirit would perhaps exemplify Fromm's masochistic submission - the idolatrous surrendering of one's powers into the hands of another - arguably confirms this rupture.⁸²

4.3: Christian Humanism

To penetrate deeper into this issue, we can now turn to Merton's dedicated contribution to the topic of humanism, in a 1967 essay entitled "Christian Humanism". This work is particularly illuminating because it exhibits Merton's attitude and methodology towards the relationship between history and the present, and hence his attempt to outline the conditions for a progressive Christian humanism based on current questions and concerns (Merton, 1979: 137). Merton begins by framing this in terms of an ambiguity, largely based in the tension between secularisation and theological tradition. Christianity finds itself in the dilemma of wanting to be faithful to its own historical sources and yet living in an increasingly secular world by which it is rejected as an ossified irrelevance. Consequently, it lives in a culture which denies that anything Christian can be authentically devoted to human development. Here Merton sees the temptation to retreat into a ghettoized adherence to the past to produce an easy answer - for instance, that the medieval theologians were the genuine humanists - which fails to provide the solutions sought by the people of today. Rather than merely retreating into an erstwhile harmony, Christianity

⁸² It is not difficult to verify the place of surrender in Merton's spirituality, both from his texts and his journals of this and the subsequent period (Merton, 1973: 5, 46, 70, 76, 80, 87-8; 2003: 44, 129; 1996b: 78, 214, 277, 290, 303; 1997: 67, 188-9, 207, 218, 226). In actual fact this is ambiguous since we shall see he also writes of human creativity with God. Of course, with Merton I am unable to answer the question of divine and human freedom.

must instead wrestle with the “much more disquieting task of inquiring under what conditions Christians can establish, by their outlook and their action in the world of today, the claim to be true participants in the building of a new humanism” (Merton, 1979: 137). Central to this is Christians asking whether they are even suitably poised to understand the new questions of the day, let alone possessed of original answers.⁸³

Merton’s solution is something of a synthesis between tradition and the creative work of contemporary Christians (Merton, 1979: 138). Central to the importance of this essay for our present question on psychoanalysis, religion, and humanism, is Merton’s claim that Christianity has something *unique and essential* to contribute to the ethical, political, and economic question of the day. Decisively, this contribution is the Christian approach to human dignity and freedom, built on the idea of redemptive love in Christ. The problem of love, however, can no longer be met on the basis of individual activity or charity, since the answer must expand in proportion to the question: the scope of Christian love must grow to meet the global dimensions of modern crises. In support of his plea, Merton cites the Second Vatican Council, in its call for a new humanism based on fraternal responsibility and Christian participation in the building of a humane world. Analogous to our first two chapters, we might again see this relationship as hierarchical, given the centrality and necessity of Christian sources, and it is in this light that we must view both Merton’s humanism and his relationship with Fromm.⁸⁴

First, however, Merton displays his historical sensitivity, criticising any interpretation which identifies Christianity with Christendom and hence neglects to appreciate flux and growth in theological and sociological thinking. Pivotal to this concern is a critique of any notion of divine providence which undermines

⁸³ This demonstrates Merton’s’ methodological inclusivity, and is arguably influenced by the correlative theology of Paul Tillich in its concern to draw the interrogative structure of theological discourse from contemporary concerns. Merton repeatedly attests to the influence of Tillich throughout his journals (Merton, 1996: 193,298,321; 1996c: 174; 1997: 317).

⁸⁴ Merton actually draws on Fromm’s analysis of love in this essay, but to consider this in the depth it deserves would take us away from the present question of rupture.

the possibility of human creativity, instead understanding the task of humanity in the world as simply one of conforming to a predetermined narrative. Christianity - particularly in its biblical sources - is a dynamic religion, characterised by self-realization and newness (Merton, 1979: 140). It is in this context that we must place Merton's approach to humanism, since he firmly rejects any classical theological model - or theological humanism - which is simply a matter of conformity to a static and pre-established divine and eternal order.

Merton subsequently begins to draw on his reading of Karl Marx, seeing Marx as justified in denouncing a Christianity which is fixated on a mythical future rather than a concrete and urgent present. For Merton, however, Marx is only correct insofar as his critique pertains to a legalistic and isolationist pseudo-Christianity which decadently renounces the practical and humanist imperative of its sources (Merton, 1979: 141ff). Instead, true Christian humanism rejects any luxuriant retreat into theological abstractions and merely trans-temporal horizons in favour of collaboration with real people and problems. Indeed, it does so on the basis of the New Testament itself, in which God is manifested in human activity. Up to a point Merton agrees with those who find human alienation within Christianity, but rejects the idea that this is essential, since it is found only in the legalistic deformity of Christian freedom.

Here we come to the crux of the matter relative to the question of humanism, alienation, and the exchange with Erich Fromm, since Merton reads the texts of the New Testament as *the* antidote to religious alienation (Merton, 1979: 142f). Christian humanism consists in divine adoption in Christ, by which humans are made children of God and promised the transformative power of the Holy Spirit (Merton, 1979: 144). The genuine cessation of slavery is this liberation of humanity from enslavement to evil through the power of divine forgiveness. In sum, and indeed encapsulating the nub of the relevance of this essay to the present thesis,

The whole meaning of Christian teaching is precisely that man is *not*

alienated from himself by this new relationship to God, but on the contrary, everything that is God's becomes ours in Christ. We discover our true selves in love. (Merton, 1979: 145)

We have arguably now entered the epicentre of the fissure I have identified in Merton's dialogue with Fromm, and which I argue cuts through the idea of a shared humanism. Fromm holds that the concept of God symbolises human power and experience, whereas for Merton it seems more apt to suggest that humanity is a symbol and manifestation of the sonship of Christ, since the human "has now become Christ the Son of God" (Merton, 1979: 145). Humanity becomes a participant in something else, a divine reality, which arguably epitomizes Fromm's alienation. Of course, a theology of theosis, for instance, might argue that this need not be something extrinsic, but nonetheless the fact would remain that in this transformation humanity relies on something beyond itself, both in the sense of metaphysical transcendence (i.e. a power which is not to be identified with mere human power) and in the necessary for a revealed teaching. In a word, Merton's Gospel essentially involves a rupture with the unaided exercise of human power - even if one ever-intended in the divine order - and hence any humanism patterned on it is simply inconsistent with Fromm's radical humanism.

Secondly, and further illuminating this tension, Merton himself concludes the paper by turning the lens upon secular humanism, at least to the extent which it locates human fulfilment in the "purely objective application of science, without any consideration for living human values" (Merton, 1979: 149). Whilst it is clear that Fromm is exempt from this criticism by his concern for the living human, his understanding of humanism is entirely vulnerable to Merton's solution: "[n]o humanism has retained the respect for man in his personal and existential actuality to the same extent as Christian humanism", since God "has given Himself without reservation to man" (Merton, 1979: 149).

Of course, I should again state that Merton and Fromm clearly acknowledge serious theological distance between themselves. My point is to demonstrate that the theological chasm is also a humanistic one, which renders Merton's affirmations of agreement with Fromm on humanism and alienation seriously vulnerable. To buttress this point, we can briefly consider Merton's theological treatment of alienation from another text written during the period of his Fromm correspondence. As presented in the entry entitled "Alienation" in *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia*, Merton's *The New Man* sees alienation as the disunity with God wrought by the original sin of Adam and Eve (O'Connell, 2002). Only in Christ and in contemplation can humanity rediscover its lost unity. This is a clear contrast with Fromm's humanist hermeneutic of Eden, in which alienation results not from disobedience but from the emergence from our primal instinctual ties with nature and the evolution of self-awareness and reason. Clearly we have two separate - even mutually exclusive - understandings of human alienation, and hence arguably two separate conceptions of humanism. Before turning the lens back to Fromm, however, I will continue this by describing how the conclusion of "Christian Humanism" - written little more than a year before Merton's death - reinforces the tension, and indeed situates it in the Christian sources that Merton claims are authentically humanist.

4.4: Christian Eschatological Humanism

Merton concludes with a restatement of the transformative call of Christianity, of human participation in God's creative activity, by which we can become divine and transform the world in divine power. Merton suggests that this "perennial language" of Christianity - though it is not quite clear whether this is linguistic figuratively or merely in a textual sense - is trans-historical, in two senses. Firstly, it is not beholden to any "limited historical world view", since it can transform and elevate any human philosophy. Secondly it is "timeless and points *beyond history*" (all Merton, 1979: 150, emphasis added). On Merton's own admission this places the question of progress and human destiny squarely in the realm of eschatology. This destiny involves "full and conscious collaboration of

all man's resources of knowledge, technique, and power". This much remains consistent with Fromm's humanism. However, Merton adds that this also demands "the deepest and most unifying insight that has been granted to man: the Christian revelation of the unity of all men in the love of God as His One Son, Jesus Christ" (both Merton, 1979: 150). So, not only does Merton's humanism point beyond history, it depends on the entrance into space and time of Jesus Christ.

To elaborate on the ramifications of this for humanism, I would like to anticipate my analysis of another Merton text to illustrate how deep this eschatological fissure runs. In his "Final Integration: Towards a Monastic Therapy", Merton describes how Christian eschatology entails "a disintegration of the social and cultural self, the product of merely human history, and the reintegration of that self in Christ" (Merton, 1988: 211). Hence, Fromm's self, born of the dialectic between positive and negative freedom, but also the product of interior dynamisms and exterior social forces, arguably lies sundered in the wake of Merton's eschatological narrative: not the narrative of the progress of merely human freedom, but that of the transformative and disintegrative encounter between humanity and a transcendent God. Hence the key rationale for my having placed Merton's humanistic dialogue with Fromm in the context of his essay "Christian Humanism" and these passages on alienation and eschatology is that Merton's humanism is built on Christian language and a Christian eschatology which is 'trans': trans-historical, trans-scientific, trans-temporal, trans-philosophical, and ultimately trans-human. Merton's human person is ever contextualised by theologies of revelation, soteriology, and eschatology, which for a radical humanist are alienating, a sundering of the self rather than its realization. Humanity for Fromm is fully humanized in and for history, and by the mere exercise of human powers.⁸⁵ Merton's reliance on a power beyond time and space, beyond humanity, will remain for Fromm - even if the point remains lost

⁸⁵ Durkin shows the extent to which Fromm's secular messianism is indebted to the Hebrew Prophets and Marx (Durkin, 2014: 41-70).

in the mist of mutual appreciation - simply masochistic and hence subhuman.⁸⁶

4.5: Critique of Erich Fromm

However, from the issues that remain - and must remain whenever one is confronted with central theological questions - I would like to finish this chapter by finally questioning the adequacy of what I have suggested are Fromm's philosophical and theological assumptions. Until now I have merely pointed to a silent fracture beneath the avowed agreement between Merton and Fromm, illustrated by Merton's theology. This has been a necessary in addressing the integration of psychological themes in Merton's work. There is, however, scope to ask whether this divergence is also grounded in limitations in Fromm's method. In the foregoing chapter, I have left my critique of Fromm to a minimum, and, as previously stated, I will avoid the sociological, economic, and political merits of his thought.⁸⁷ Instead I would like to approach Fromm critically by identifying some mere whispers which challenge his commitment to radicalism and reason, and ultimately aiming to propose an approach which is properly radical.

First, we have noted how Merton wonders whether Fromm's approach to authority in itself is not coloured by his outright rejection of its degenerate totalitarian form. This arguably prompts an analogous question concerning the attribute that most informs Fromm's authoritarian theology: power. Fromm operates on the assumption that observation of an historical character structure connected with the surrender to a transcendent God necessitates that any sort

⁸⁶ This is a crucial point relative to my use of Cooper's argument, since whilst the language of world-denying asceticism is by this time a distant relic of Merton's traditional past, I will argue in my conclusion that in a certain way the logic of world-denial remains in this and other examples of Merton's eschatology.

⁸⁷ Thomson raises a number of points which specialists in other disciplines would be able to probe. These include questioning the process of characterising a relationship as symbiotic (2009: 70); Fromm's particular notion of scientific plausibility (2009: 131) and evidence base; whether Fromm aims at scientific rigour or writes to inspire individuals (2009: 138-9); and on tension between Fromm's liberalism humanism in ethics and his socialism in economics, education, and politics (2009: 139-40).

of relation to a power beyond humanity is a manifestation of this character structure. The authoritarian character structure is thus assumed to be exhaustive of those who conceive a transcendent God. Arguably this is question-begging, since if assumptions around the (non)-existence and nature of a transcendent God are based on the epistemological limitations that Fromm concedes (Fromm, 1950: 118), then any characterology based on these limitations is at best provisional and subject to these limitations being shattered from without, as is any theory of idolatry based on it. Fromm assumes that our present epistemological limitations are psychologically definitive, when in fact the limits of psychology are arguably empirical and restricted to the observation of a certain type of character structure in certain subjects. Instead Fromm's argument rests on characterological absolutes based on a particular understanding of transcendence, a conditioned hermeneutic of power, and an historical theory of knowledge.

I would therefore argue that Fromm's method is vulnerable to its own limitations, since the question of the truth of character structures associated with a transcendent God is relative not to our limited epistemological methods, but instead to the reality which on Fromm's account would be beyond name. There is consequently a gap in Fromm's characterology: between humanistic religion and pseudo-religious authoritarianism there remains a space for a humanism premised not on independence from the transcendent but on the hypothesis of non-masochistic union. Otherwise, we arguably yield prematurely to a prejudiced notion of transcendence, freedom, power, and ultimately humanism.

About the existence and nature of any "Transcendent" I will opt for silence, acknowledging it as a mere possibility, but to do so must arguably leave the question of a psychologically sound character structure related to God also hovering between affirmation and denial. To say otherwise is to elevate a temporally conditioned notion of transcendence into a place of privilege and historical ultimacy beyond its scope and merit. More importantly, perhaps, is

that in Fromm we have arguably seen a major category error, a drift from the observation of a certain type of character and its relation to imagined transcendence to a further demarcation of the notion of power. It is assumed that any transcendent power could only operate in a fashion which despoils the person of responsibility and freedom. The objection that to state the converse submerges human reason in antinomy is in my view an indictment merely upon human reason rather than the possibility of an alternate power dynamic. In a word, Fromm's characterology rests on assumptions in metaphysical theology which assume the finality of his own epistemology, and which ignore the possibility of a divine power transcending the human and at the same time not necessitating symbiosis. That Fromm has observed authoritarian theologians and authoritarian gods belonging to the chronicles of tyranny in practice and in the history of theology is by no means fatal to the possible existence of sound characters relating to (a) sound transcendent G(g)od(s).

Fromm's psychoanalysis claims to study the hidden reality behind thought systems by analysing the correspondence between sociological examples of character structure and historical examples of religion. This betrays a deep limitation which arguably should be associated with more metaphysical modesty on Fromm's part. Does there not remain, that is, a possibility of a yet further hidden reality underlying human motivation, entailing a yet further possible character structure relating to the transcendent? As to this I remain merely wondering, but Fromm does not, and consequently outruns his own limitations. In doing so he also assumes and arguably universalises a historically conditioned notion of freedom.⁸⁸ Hence Fromm's radical humanism is not quite radical enough - if at all - since it operates under the veil of an unacknowledged ideology of autonomy. And secondly his theology is not quite negative enough - if at all - thanks to the strictures it places around the concept of divine power.

⁸⁸ Thomson (2009: 140) questions whether Fromm's humanism does not in fact group too diverse a range of thinkers under the same libertarian banner. Clearly more attention to and expertise with the sources than is possible here is necessary to address this hermeneutical question.

Having outlined a critical reading of Fromm's theology I do not thereby mean to propose that Fromm is wrong, since to do so would arguably fall into an analogous trap. Instead, I merely suggest that Fromm's philosophical theology and religious characterology depend - inasmuch as they go beyond the empirical - on a justification he cannot provide. Moreover, inasmuch as his assumptions on authoritarianism and masochism depend on notions of power and transcendence which have been exalted above their merits, these are vulnerable too. More seriously, in the ensuing vacuum we might be left to wonder whether it is not Merton and his eschatological transcendence which best befits the reality beyond our naming, and hence is properly humanistic. Again I am bereft of answers as to this or as to what any alternative notions might be, but to concede stupefaction is arguably genuinely radical, properly negative, and perhaps - but again only perhaps - radically humanistic.

4.6: "Final Integration - *Toward a 'Monastic Therapy'*" (Merton, 1993b)

Before attempting to bring together the most important of the themes discussed in this thesis, a consideration of one final text is in order to help us see the position of the mature Thomas Merton on psychology in its clearest form. In the final volume of his published journals, Merton refers to an "excellent" work by the Persian psychoanalyst Rezah Arasteh, and notes that he is writing a review of the text (Merton, 1993b: 70). This review, later printed in *Contemplation in a World of Action* (and to which I have referred above), is an important contribution to the material relevant for this thesis for several reasons. First, it is one of few dedicated considerations of psychoanalytic theory that Merton actually published. Second, it was written less than nine months prior to Merton's death, and hence can arguably stand as our most reliable testimony of his eventual approach to psychology. Thirdly, from my particular perspective here, the text clearly manifests the development in Merton's thinking away from traditional ascetical theology and towards the inclusivity emphasised by Ross Labrie and the secular humanism centralized by David Cooper, whilst at the same time posing arguably fatal problems for both. Finally, the text also echoes the

existential approach to anxiety in “The Neurotic Personality...”, and indeed further solidifies the distinction between this anxiety and neurotic anxiety by seeing the former as a sign of health. This aspect of the review arguably epitomises Merton’s method of viewing psychology through a spiritual lens in order to communicate its significance to his readers, and again indicates that the only true antidote to anxiety is a genuine spirituality based on selfhood.

Arasteh’s book, *Final Integration in the Adult Personality*, is based on a similar method - perhaps accounting for its appeal to Merton - in which the spiritual element which orders and completes humanistic psychoanalysis is the tradition of Sufism, particularly in the writings of Rumi (Arasteh, 1965). Psychoanalysis and mysticism ultimately share the same end in the final integration of the personality. This involves a preliminary disintegration, in which the bonds of merely social selves and identities are dissolved, leading to a period of crisis which only the emergence of the true and trans-cultural self can surpass. Merton’s reading of the text attempts to place it in the context of Christian monasticism, for instance in his call for the monastic community to re-evaluate its present neglect of the existential crisis and its consequences for full participation in the structure of monastic life (Merton, 1988b: 209).⁸⁹

So, in his “Final Integration: Towards a Monastic Therapy”, Merton commends Arasteh’s text as a model for the monastic ideal of human maturation, self-discovery, and rebirth. He is most interested in the use of Sufism to sculpt a psychological-mystical synthesis in which the aim is “the final and complete maturing of the human psyche on a transcultural level” (Merton, 1988: 203). Again contrasted to the view of psychoanalysis which sees therein a mere method for adjustment to social structures, this maturing involves “psychic rebirth into a new transcultural identity...entirely personal, original, creative, unique”, and which is a necessary component of the fully developed human (Merton, 1988b: 205). Noting that Arasteh’s analysis is purely psychological and

⁸⁹ Again this is judged a matter of the reluctance of monastic hierarchy to accommodate individual needs and circumstances within a generic understanding of spiritual development.

hence avoids theological notions such as sanctity, Merton relates the idea of full integration - perhaps cursorily - to that of the supernatural maturity of the Catholic saint for whom integration is supposedly assumed, before proceeding to describe what this final, transcultural, integration comprises.

The integrated person apprehends life “fully and wholly from an inner ground that is at once more universal than the empirical ego and yet [is] entirely [their] own”, and which is cosmic and universal (Merton, 1988b: 206). This new and complete identity involves the identification with and acceptance of the whole of humankind, in appreciation of all genuine values and participation in the joys and sufferings of the world (Merton, 1988b: 206). This is the abandonment of a partisan and limited perspective, and sees truth, whilst one, as having many manifestations which can be unified “in a dialectic or an insight of complementarity” (Merton, 1988b: 207). It is this that Merton finds most relevant to monastic life, in its freedom from partiality and a fragmented perspective and in the development of a “fruitful existence in peace, in wisdom, in creativity, in love” (Merton, 1988b: 203).

However, it is the context in which Merton views this incorporation and appreciation of human values which raises some questions relative to my own approach and sources, in its treatment of personhood and history. This unification of the various manifestations of truth is seen by Merton as a matter of docility to “the Spirit”, since its openness is also an emptiness and poverty which allows one to become “a potential instrument for unusual creativity” in non-action (Merton, 1988b: 207). Ultimately this liberation from a fragmentary perspective involves the disintegration and annihilation of the self, “a real spiritual death” (Merton, 1988b: 209). Of course, there are a variety of interpretations as to what this entails, and the motif of spiritual death is a common one. However, to demonstrate that this has problematic ramifications for the question of Merton’s humanism and affirmation of the world, we can simply consider Merton’s interpretation of how this mysterious dissolution of self relates to history, time, and culture. This is because final integration, viewed

from a Christian perspective, cannot simply be psychological: it must be eschatological.

Echoing my earlier use of Merton's "Christian Humanism", his disintegration, integration, and rebirth culminate in "the transformed and redeemed time, the time of the Kingdom, the time of the Spirit, the time of 'the end'" (Merton, 1988b: 211). Again, it might be argued that there are ways to reconcile this eschatology with humanism, but the situation is arguably made critical when Merton states that final integration also involves the "disintegration of the social and cultural self, the product of merely human history, and the reintegration of that self in Christ, in salvation history, in the mystery of redemption, in the Pentecostal 'new creation'" (Merton, 1988b: 211). This clearly has serious implications for any humanism which sees persons and selves as forged in history, culture, and society, and ultimately again renders Merton as trans-historical, trans-cultural, and trans-social. That Merton argues in his conclusion that the true solution to the questions of his time can come only from the Spirit must now prompt the conclusion of this thesis, in which I will consider whether this shattering of history also renders Merton trans-dialogical, trans-symbolic, and - perhaps most complex - trans-reflexive.

Conclusion

I began with the intention of addressing whether the psychological writings of Thomas Merton could be said to integrate psychology and religion. Before concluding my attempt to do so I will reiterate the themes we have studied in these writings, emphasising the characteristics which are present throughout as well as any tensions. Subsequently, I will recall the criteria of integration proposed by Robert Kugelmann, the narrative elaborated by David Cooper, and the inclusivity argued by Ross Labrie, to ask how my study of Merton relates to each of these. Since Kugelmann's approach is a general one considering the integration of psychology and Catholicism in the 20th century in the writings of *psychologists*, he will provide merely the framework of integration. Cooper and Labrie, on the other hand, each construct a hermeneutic by which Merton can be read, and hence function not merely as framework but as dialogue partners.

The first chapter of this study focused on several Merton papers or chapters either dedicated to or explicitly drawing on psychology. Firstly, the posthumously published and somewhat frenetic "The Neurotic Personality in the Monastic Life" sees Merton consider the question of how spiritual direction in monasteries might utilise psychology. We saw how the paper is mostly concerned with recognising the symptoms of neurotic personalities, focusing particularly on anxiety, wilfulness, and the tension caused by the idealised self. These themes must be viewed in light of the main claim made by the paper, in which psychology is seen as a propaedeutic for ascetical theology. Hence, I have emphasised throughout this paper that - notwithstanding the problem of dating "The Neurotic Personality..." - Merton's method is consistent with his early approach to theology, inasmuch as psychology is seen as a tool ordered towards self-denial and surrender to God, and the mortification of the flesh and the "old man". The paper, nonetheless, is arguably commendable for its openness to psychological research and hence its willingness to inform and challenge traditional themes in spiritual direction with scientific theory previously considered anathema.

Secondly, in “The Mature Conscience” we see this trend continued in the incorporation of theories of child development and philosophical personalism into an examination of freedom of conscience and willing. The paper attempts to integrate findings from developmental psychology into Catholic moral theology, operating with the basic distinction between the mature and infantile conscience. In the latter, the subject acts according to the internalization of rote dictates, finding its acceptance and value purely in the fulfilment of these commands. Conversely, the origin of guilt is seen as failure to live up to the standards imposed. Crucially, from the perspective of Catholic spirituality, this produces an automaton who responds not to God but to these interior dictates. The mature conscience, on the other hand, has been formed - either by parents or having later entered religious life - in love, responsibility, dialogue, and in appreciation of its uniqueness and value. Hence such persons can act freely from the centre of their own being, rather than for the sake of maintaining security and approval. Again, this paper manifests Merton’s method of using - with Bamberger - both contemporary psychology and personalist philosophy to contextualise Catholic theology, at once deepening it and diagnosing its flaws. Once more, however, we can also see the hierarchical method at work, since the paper operates on the assumption that love and sanctity comprise inward direction by God. I have repeatedly argued that raises questions both for Merton’s dialogue with Erich Fromm and for the question of integration generally.

Merton’s growing interest in and use of psychology is perhaps clearest in his 1961 series of monastic conferences later published as *Introduction to Christian Mysticism*, featuring a chapter devoted to the relationship between spiritual direction and therapy. Mainly concerned with communicating the distinctions between counselling, psychotherapy, psychoanalysis, and spiritual direction for his audience, I have argued that this text is particularly remarkable for two reasons. First, the work stands out for its claim that in many cases psychology occupies an indispensable place in spiritual direction, such that the role of the director is incomplete without it. This highly progressive approach to Catholic

spirituality is supplemented with another claim no less radical, since Merton suggests that part of the work of direction is to enable the person to rediscover and accept natural gifts which may have been rejected on entering the religious life. Here, we arguably witness a development in Merton's psychological writings, insofar as we see the emergence of a hierarchy not of self-denial and sanctity but of appreciation/affirmation and genuine selfhood. This is one example of a recurring theme in Merton's thought contrasting the interior self with the social self of adaptation or adjustment, and is perhaps of all our examples the most integrative. Again, though, the consistency of this new hierarchy is arguably rendered questionable by its place in an exposition of traditional ascetical and mystical themes.

My third and fourth chapters focused on Merton's reading of the work of Erich Fromm and his endorsement of Fromm's humanistic psychoanalysis. I first gave sustained attention to the salient themes in Fromm's work, emphasizing his dialectical account of freedom and its application to the symbiotic or masochistic aspects of authoritarian religion as contrasted with humanistic religion. In the latter, psychoanalysis emerges as a method of curing the soul and facilitating the development of the full spectrum of human powers. Consequently, it aims at the cessation of the human alienation which results from subjection to the idols of politics, economics, personal relationships, and theology. That Merton at various points attests to being in full agreement with Fromm on alienation, humanism, and psychoanalysis, again demonstrates his thirst to inform his work with an enormous variety of thinkers and topics. Ultimately, however, my aim is not to establish this, but instead to argue that this *prima facie* agreement shelters a fissure which is fatal to it and perhaps to any secularising hermeneutic of Merton: his continual stress on surrender to a power transcending humanity, history, and culture. Having also asked questions of Fromm's theological method and assumptions, the concluding parts of my fourth chapter reiterate the question of rupture with recourse to Merton's papers "Christian Humanism", and "Final Integration: Towards a Monastic Therapy". In both of these, Merton's incorporation of modern themes is again structured by Christian symbols, and in particular eschatological ones. Both

humanism and the place of psychotherapy in the emergence of a new and universal identity will be transcended, passing away with history and culture amid the coming of Christ. These papers are arguably of critical import, since they involve, respectively, the provisional nature of merely human world-views, and the disintegration of the cultural and social self. Rather than hierarchy, these manifest the rupture of human power and the power of God.

Having emphasised the most salient points of my study of Merton's writings, I can now turn to my interlocutors, beginning with Robert Kugelmann. In his *Psychology and Catholicism*, we saw Kugelmann's four paradigms of relationship: separation, hierarchical integration; the second case employs a hierarchy in which psychology is ordered to the Catholic faith; psychology based on scriptural 'data', and psychology as a substitute. I have attempted to locate Merton in the second of these, with further employment of Kugelmann's criteria of dialogue, existential reflexivity, and symbolic mediation. Bearing these criteria in mind, then, I would at last like to approach this question of integration from the perspective of David Cooper's historical reading of Merton: is the narrative of the transition from the world-denying ascetic to the radical humanist synthesiser visible in Merton's psychological writings?

Here it is important to point out that in reading Cooper we are dealing with a particular model of integration, in which the ascetical animus of the early Merton is tempered by his later love for humanism, personalism, and existentialism. Analogously we will be talking of the integration of Catholicism with a particular type of psychology, itself informed by the humanism of Fromm and others. Cooper argues that Merton develops a critique of an earlier attitude of contempt for the world, which becomes not an abstract and degenerate locus of the rejection of God, but instead an object of choice, concern, and solidarity (Cooper, 2008:141-417). Here secularisation is understood not merely as an historical collapse of religious authority structures but also as choosing the world, and acknowledging a legitimate non-religious cultural and social sphere. On this reading Merton undergoes a radical reorientation, in which he abandons

contempt and sees Christianity as compatible with a critique of modernity grounded in radical humanism (Cooper, 2008: 193,200). Crucially, this involves a synthesis of Christian humanism with the modern world, of which Merton now sees himself a part rather than charged with tearing down (Cooper, 2008: 207).

Before attempting to apply this narrative to the texts we have studied, it is necessary to acknowledge that Cooper sees something of the chameleon in Merton, since he adopts a variety of guises depending on his audience (Cooper, 2008: 218f). This proposed reconciliation is thus also seen as an ongoing struggle, and one which is consistently ordered by the idea that there is no humanism without God (Cooper, 2008: 193, 234). Nonetheless, we can arguably see evidence of this transition in the passage from “The Neurotic Personality...” (assuming its historical priority) to “Final Integration...”. This is clearly manifest in the mutual dialogue between theology, personalist philosophy, and developmental psychology, in “The Mature Conscience”; in the incorporation of a variety of psychological themes in the task of developing full selfhood in *Introduction to Christian Mysticism*; and in Merton’s new appreciation of a putative humanistic harmony and complementarity between religion and psychoanalysis in his dialogue with Erich Fromm. In each of these and in the later texts “Christian Humanism” and “Final Integration...”, Merton incorporates a new openness to non-Christian writings, and - arguably more importantly - gradually adjusts his hierarchy. This revised scheme now orders psychology to a religion emphasising the full development of human nature, rather than its mortification in surrender to God.

That said, as well as corroborating this thesis, each of these texts arguably also supports a counter-thesis: rather than expunging contempt for the world from Merton’s thought, world-denial simply evolves, inversely adapting itself to the development of his humanism. This can arguably be seen in seed form in the manner in which Merton and Bamberger’s mature conscience is but an instrument for God, and in placing the development of genuine selfhood within the ascetical framework of Merton’s conferences on mysticism. Furthermore, we

have seen that Merton's continued reliance on the "Transcendent" is not merely a theological fissure with Fromm but also an anthropological one. These, however, are simply glimpses of the tension that is fully exhibited in "Christian Humanism" and "Final Integration...", a mere murmur of what I suggest is the lingering logic of contempt for the world, long after the language of ascetical theology has been abandoned. Juxtaposed with the emphasis in Fromm's humanism on the liberation from surrender to idols, Merton continues to hold the world in contempt inasmuch as his humanism relativizes the very things which Fromm prioritises.

In "Final Integration..." we see this tension most manifest in two models of humanity. In the first, therapy elicits a new and complete identity, psychic rebirth, identity with the cosmos, and the fulfilment of human powers. In the second, however, the human is but an instrument, which ultimately disintegrates and is annihilated by the levelling of human culture, society, and history under the pressure of Christian eschatology. In order to begin to answer the question of integration, therefore, I would like to ask: do we see here in a single text both poles of Fromm's dialectic, both humanistic freedom and its evasion in symbiotic surrender? In other words, does Merton - both here and in similar fashion in his "Christian Humanism" - propose both emancipation from *and* surrender to powers which transcend humanity and human culture? Returning to Kugelmann's criteria of integration, the Christian symbol system remains - relative to the world - regulative, final, absolute, and immediate. This means that even the psychoanalytic humanism of Fromm and Arasteh become subordinate to eschatology, since although the vocabulary of contempt is gone the logic and metaphysics remain: the destiny of human culture, society, language, and history, disintegrate and are consumed by a reality which eclipses even Arasteh's new trans-cultural identity as something entirely unprecedented.

This questioning of the symbolic mediation arguably also renders the dialogical character of Merton's work in this field vulnerable. Although Merton clearly intends to both write and counsel dialectically, correlatively, synthetically, the

dialogue can arguably be seen to collapse under the eschatological pressure.⁹⁰ Dialogue, and with it the possibility of integration, are hampered by the symbolic assumptions to which they must give way - like the young monks under Merton's charge and the imperative of asceticism - and which shape the dialogue and ultimately reshape the attempt at synthesis. Before addressing the question of existential reflexivity - clearly the most opaque of all given its essentially interior nature - I will consider the approach of Ross Labrie, who sheds a different light on the place of the psyche in Merton's work.

In his *Thomas Merton and the Inclusive Imagination*, Labrie emphasises Merton's enduring engagement with romanticism, and the concern for unity that he found and developed there. Whilst an in-depth analysis of this text is beyond us, there are several points which can deepen our understanding of Merton's psychological writings. First, Labrie distinguishes between reaching out to another so as to foster unity between persons, and intuiting the unity of being. In Merton he identifies a deep desire for each of these, as well as clear development in both. This framework is useful for us, again helping to illuminate the tensions that dissect the writings we have studied. First, we can see clearly that Merton continually reaches out, to new correspondents, incorporating new themes, being immersed in new ideas, and eventually new religions and a new continent in the twilight of his life. Indeed, Merton's dialogue with Fromm epitomises this reach, as most clearly seen in Fromm's appreciation of Merton's reading of *War Within Man*. Secondly, however, the aspect of unity concerned with the intuition of being arguably reiterates the difficulty we have already encountered concerning the relationship between world and eschaton, as we can also see in Labrie's consideration of how the unconscious and the psyche figure in Merton's work.

Drawing from citations scattered across a variety of Merton texts, Labrie makes a number of points which are of great interest concerning the psyche and the

⁹⁰ I will prescind from any comments regarding eschatology and secularism generally, and merely discuss these in Merton's work.

fall. We encountered Merton's interpretations of the fall but briefly in this thesis, not least because he is silent on Fromm's reading, and we are limited here to a brief consideration based on Labrie. The key points concern Merton's understanding of the fall as an inclination towards sin which is inherited through socialization (Labrie, 2001: 73). Prior to society, that is, Merton - at least in places - supposes a pristine psyche, which it is the function of spirituality to recover. The fall then becomes the sundering of a primal unity, which nonetheless remains latent in the ontological substratum of the unconscious (Labrie, 2001: 65, 74). In other words, to emerge from the fall is to rediscover Paradise as a seed planted in the psyche, "the radical self in its uninhibited freedom", where the voice of God resounds (Labrie, 2001: 120, 133f). In my view this understanding of both psyche and fall reinforces the basic ambiguity between eschatology and world that I have been upholding throughout this conclusion. If the origin of sin and disunity is located in socialization, and Eden is rediscovered through the journey within, then arguably the psyche becomes - like eschatology in my other examples - a levelling of the social. What, we might ask, is unity, inclusivity, integration? Are these found in the sort of just world envisaged by Fromm, the transcultural person envisaged by Arasteh, or alone with God in the Eden of the psyche, where particularity and the effects of the social, the cultural, and the historical, are abolished?

Of course, this tension I have found most clearly in Merton's "Final Integration", but arguably this is simply the most explicit declaration of a dialectic that runs through the works I have studied, and arguably remains unresolved. Here, the rupture is between time, culture, society, humanism, world, and their disintegration in God, Christ, the "Transcendent", and the eschatological. The criteria employed by Robert Kugelmann are thereby rendered somewhat suspect and ambivalent when applied to Thomas Merton. The concept of dialogue, whilst clearly an intention of Merton's throughout his life and work, might be said to suffer from both ascetical imperatives and eschatological assumptions. This, secondly, is a matter which redounds on the adequacy of Merton's awareness of the conditioned nature of symbolic mediation. Although he is clearly deeply sensitive to the need to and the difficulty of understanding different cultures,

the Christian symbol ultimately renders all others relative, subordinate, and transitory, in its eschatological absoluteness.

Concerning Kugelmann's final criterion, however, I have largely operated with the idea that Merton's existential reflexivity is beyond reproach. This is without doubt the greatest mystery, requiring insight into Merton's inner world that I do not possess, and thus I have refrained from any analysis of this sort. Perhaps, however, my consideration of Merton's *work* might shed some light on the depth of the reflexive aspect. I have alluded above to the possibility that the Fromm's dialectic of freedom can help us interpret Merton's psychological writings. I will conclude by leaving the analogous possibility lingering that Merton's attempt to integrate psychology and religion is also haunted by Karen Horney's dialectic of inner conflict: the struggle to reflexively reconcile in himself the roles of eschatological prophet and cosmopolitan humanist.

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