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## CULTIVATING SOLITUDE

### THOMAS MERTON'S FORM OF MYSTICISM

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#### Abstract

The paper highlights the principles of naïve world perception by Christian people. On first appearances solitude might strike us as loneliness, egoism, narcissism, self-sufficiency. But by reading Thomas Merton (1915-1968) we may find the opposite. Contrary to what many believe, it is a way of fighting loneliness and self-sufficiency. The article further shows that Merton in his views on solitude is in tune with prominent critiques of modernity in 19<sup>th</sup> century philosophy. However, while Ludwig Feuerbach criticizes modernity from a societal or philosophical perspective, Merton's perspective is religious. According to Feuerbach and Merton, to cultivate solitude is to be in relation to others. In Merton's case it has to do with becoming a fully-integrated monk. In Feuerbach's case it has to do with opposing the Christian concept of the individual, as he perceives it, in order to become a person through loving relationships with others. It might be argued that Merton is nurturing the self-sufficiency of the monk which is exactly the target of Feuerbach's criticism of Christianity. Merton's recipe is a philosophy of solitude aiming not at loneliness but at unity with mankind and a deeper sense of 'community'.

*Keywords:* Christianity, Merton, mysticism, solitude

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#### 1. A monk of many faces

“Hence the vocation to solitude is not a vocation to the warm narcissistic dream of a private religion. It is a vocation to become *fully awake*.” [1] These are words written by the American Cistercian and Trappist monk Thomas Merton (1915-1968).

Merton lived half his life in a monastery dedicated to the Virgin Mary deep down among the knobs and rolling hills of Kentucky, USA. He became known to a large audience through his autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 1952. In this book Merton pictures himself as a person at first forgetful of his transcendent origin. But once aware of it, he turns into a devoted Christian modelled in a traditional monastic culture. He was to become the modern hero of monasticism, a role which he both loved and abhorred.

Here is the dilemma or the paradox of Merton: he seeks solitude while at the same time also being drawn to the pleasures of being the focus of secular attention. This dilemma became amusingly obvious when later in life he sought

even more solitude than the immediate monastic setting could offer. He was allowed to move to a small house of his own, a hermitage. Even though here he nurtured a solitude contemplating in the woods, he was more in the midst of the matters of the world than ever. He had a telephone installed. He became a voice to be reckoned with. Paradoxically, thanks to this solitude he became at home in the world. When Anne Carr reflects upon Merton's famous move to his hermitage, she points to something important, in spite of it being a paradox:

However, this new realization ultimately does not change the value of solitude for Merton but intensifies it. Although it brings a new kind of struggle into his life, it eventually deepens his sense that his own solitude belongs to others, especially through his writing [2].

In what follows I will argue that solitude may be both a vital component in mysticism and an existential need. In order to understand 'solitude' both in a monastic setting and as a broader concept I will use Thomas Merton as my main source. However, I will also broaden my presentation with reflections on what characterizes a mystic and mysticism in general.

## **2. The solitary explorer**

Richard Cashen has explored the theme of solitude in Merton, both as it is linked to Merton himself and in his writing. Cashen holds the opinion that solitude is the recurring theme in Merton's life. It is, he writes, integral to his over-all thinking.

In his last years Merton was fond of the expression 'the solitary explorer'. It captured for him the service of love which the contemplative rendered his fellow man. The monastic life, he said, always had about it this element of exploration by which the monk, in one way or another, pushes to the very frontiers of human experience and strives to go beyond, to find out what transcends ordinary existence [3].

Merton is a prolific and influential writer in the spiritual domain. He has been and still is an important source for reflections on contemplation and spirituality. The historian Bernhard McGinn presents Merton in the following words: "Merton was neither a systematic theologian nor a historian, but he was certainly a major spiritual – indeed, mystical – author, as well as a theological essayist of originality and profundity. His influence, widespread during his lifetime, has shown no signs of abating since his death." [4]

In Merton's own words he is a *monachos* or one who is isolated, alone. Monasticism is a word derived from the Greek word 'monachos' and in today's world it refers to the institution, that is, a monastery. While as a young monk Merton upheld the view that the vocation to monastic life was of a special kind, later in life he changed his opinion about this; for the Roman Catholic Church of his day this was a controversial matter. Merton came to believe that although a solitary spirit is essential to the monastic view of life, it is not confined or restricted to it. It is not even restricted to men and women who have consecrated their lives to God by vow [1, p. 163]. It is, then, possible to conclude that even

though a “solitary spirit” or solitude is essentially connected with monasticism, it is more encompassing. It could be interpreted as an existential need or a prerequisite for becoming a fully human being.

Solitude, or being a solitary person or explorer is then, according to Merton, linked to being a monk; and in that sense Merton connects it with his Christian belief, but in his view it is also a general existential phenomenon. All people are solitary in a deep and inevitable sense. Merton writes: “The solitary is one who is aware of solitude in himself as a basic and inevitable human reality, not just as a something which affects him as an isolated individual. Hence his solitude is the foundation of a deep, pure and gentle sympathy with all other men” [1 p. 174-175]

Whatever Merton experiences and understands, he does so as a monk. He has but one over-arching perspective, which, however, does not mean that he is conservative or single-minded. His religious outlook is Christianity but in a way that offers him an ecumenical and all-embracing idea of the relatedness of everything: “There is One Solitude in which all persons are at once together and alone” [5]. From this understanding of solitude springs Merton’s ‘theory’ of the human being, which he predominantly codes in a distinction between ‘the true’ and ‘the false’ self. This distinction cuts through or transcends both religious and secular barriers. Having a true self implies being grounded in solitude. A true self is undivided while the false self is fragmentized and often alienated. To Merton solitude means that the monk has a share in the solitude of God. Even though Merton has this profound Christian understanding of these concepts and phenomena, he is not an exclusivist. What he believes about the true self and solitude is relevant also in a more general and existential sense: “What is said here about solitude is not just a recipe for hermits. It has a bearing on the whole future of man and of his worlds: and especially, of course, on the future of his religion.” [6] These are grand words written by the young monk. But they communicate something important for Merton. He was seriously concerned about what he experienced as an unhappy situation of the people and society in his time. Society was all too materialistic and noisy and human beings had lost their true sense of identity. Merton felt strongly that he wanted to convey a recipe for recovery. His philosophy of solitude reflects his fundamental view of what the modern person needed. Merton’s reflections on solitude and the true self stem above all from his own experience. Cashen has a perceptive understanding of Merton; he writes: “Thomas Merton’s thought on solitude takes on added richness when we root it in his life. It is above all a humanistic theory, because Merton, speaking out of solitude, expressed an understanding of man in relation to self, God, and fellow man in terms of solitude. It is a theory which comes from a definite standpoint.” [3, p. 7]

What is particularly interesting is that Merton moves from an exclusively Christian understanding to a more inclusive understanding enriched by his studies in Zen Buddhism in later years. This move from religious exclusivity to inclusivity might be looked upon as superficial. But in Merton’s case it is actually a deepening of his understanding of the human being. I would say that

for Merton solitude has a quality of its own, at the same time as it is a necessary prerequisite for spiritual experiences.

Merton has written extensively on solitude, as well as on silence and the contemplative way of living. He himself was not satisfied with the degree of solitude in his own coenobite life. He sought more. This search resulted, as we saw above, in his move from his brothers in the monastery to a little house where he lived on his own. Here, in the solitude of the woods, he cultivated an inner solitude which he found necessary for his life as a contemplative being in relation with others. This perception of solitude is of vital importance. Solitude is not a narcissistic condition or situation. It is something which is necessary for a human being to be able to apprehend one's self and others and to see the unity between 'me' and my 'fellow-human beings'. Solitude, according to Merton, is also *the* possibility in which we perceive our existential situation:

For when we come face to face with ourselves in the lonely ground of our being, we confront many questions about the value of our existence, the reality of our commitments, the authenticity of our everyday life [5, p. 39].

### **3. Monasticism and mysticism**

To cultivate solitude has, as we have already seen, a definite ring of religiosity to it. Looking into any religious tradition one might find texts on the value of solitude, inner and outer, predominantly in literature referring to monasticism. Why then is solitude regarded as so valuable? Is it a necessary condition for being religious or for living a religious life? How is it connected with mysticism? Is cultivating solitude to be conceived of as a way of living? Might it also be valuable outside a religious context?

In his book on mysticism Anthony Steinbock writes: "While one cannot say that monasticism is essential to the Christian mystical experience, it was so tightly intertwined with mysticism historically that one can hardly conceive of Christian mysticism developing, let alone flourishing, without it. It was nothing less than monasticism itself, McGinn explains, that virtually provided the context for cultivating the knowledge of Scripture, the life of penance, and the practice of prayer that prepared the Christian for intimate contact with God. Combining austere existence and often ascetical self-mastery with the knowledge of God, it was the monastics, both men and women, who became ideal Christians." [7]

So, what has historically been formative in a traditional understanding of mysticism seems to be dependent on a monastic culture or ideology. But that is not to say that mysticism may not also flourish outside the monastic setting, although I will not occupy myself with that here and now.

If we are to reflect upon what mysticism is and what constitutes a mystic, we therefore have to look into the monastic tradition, at least if we are, as I am, working within a Western context. It is not possible to think about mysticism apart from monasticism. Why is this so? One simple and straightforward answer is that monasticism aims at union with God. Anne Carr, for example, writes:

“All the asceticism of the monastic life is ordered toward disposing oneself for this union with God” [2, p. 37]. This union is what a mystic strives towards, according to themselves and most interpreters, and tries to express in words and deeds [8]. To facilitate this union, solitude is to be cultivated. The solitude asked for is both external and internal. Living a contemplative life in a monastery is above all to practice an inner and outer solitude. What, then, does this mean?

In his book *The Growth of Mysticism*, Bernhard McGinn reflects upon the meaning of silence. According to McGinn, early medieval times were characterized by the tension between the wish to flee the world and the duty to stay put and save the world [4, p. 120]. He argues that silence is an important quality especially when it comes to medieval monastic life. There are, according to McGinn, three central themes for nuns and monks: *solitudo/silentium*, *lectio/meditatio*, *oratio/contemplation* [4, p. 127]. In these Latin verbs solitude and silence come together, as do spiritual reading and meditation and finally prayer and contemplation. McGinn writes that solitude is connected with *competens silentium*, that is, a fit or relevant silence [4, p. 130]. This kind of silence is necessary for achieving contemplation. I will not elaborate here upon a deeper distinction between ‘silence’ and ‘solitude’. For my purposes it is enough to say that ‘solitude’ is above all a spiritual or mental condition while ‘silence’ predominantly refers to behaviour and a social context.

The tension of fleeing the world and the duty to stay and save the world has been implicit in the understanding of monasticism, for better or for worse. For some monasticism has been considered as contrary to the saving grace of God, while for others it has been the peak experience of conducting a religious life. It has, further, for some indicated a narcissism and egoism; for others it has represented complete sacrifice. Merton’s life and thinking represents both these positions; he himself experienced precisely this tension. As a young monk he fled the world. As a mature monk he stayed in the monastery in order to be united with everyone, regardless of whether people were inside or outside the monastery. Merton was in search of his own solitude but realized that true solitude has to do with being *one* with everyone. His studies later in life of other religions, especially Zen Buddhism, brought him a new openness. Anne Carr writes: “The study and practice of Zen... meant for Merton a new context in which to understand his own monastic and solitary vocation, not as a separation from the world but as a ‘oneness with all that is’” [2, p. 78].

Merton’s understanding of monasticism and of what it is to be a monk contrasts sharply with his perceptions of modern society and the materialistic world of his time: “The monk is not defined by his task, his usefulness. In a certain sense he is supposed to be ‘useless’ because his mission is not to *do* this or that job but to *be* a man of God. He does not live in order to exercise a specific function: his business is life itself. This means that monasticism aims at the cultivation of a certain *quality* of life, a level of awareness, a depth of consciousness, an area of transcendence and of adoration which are not usually possible in an active secular existence.” [9]

The focus for Merton's overall critique of modern society is its instrumentalism, its tendency to value everything from a perspective of what is useful in a rather narrow sense. The counter-model, according to Merton, is the monk whose life is without purpose in the sense of secular use. The monk is not occupied with what he needs and his solitude is not a means of getting something in this world [6, p. 103].

One of Merton's more substantial books on contemplation is *New Seeds of Contemplation*. The book is actually a revised version of *Seeds of Contemplation* written in 1947, six years after he entered the monastery. The revised version, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, was written twelve years later when Merton was an experienced monk. In his introduction Merton writes:

The book (*Seeds of Contemplation*) was written in a kind of isolation, in which the author (Merton) was alone with his own experience of the contemplative life. And such a book can be written best, perhaps only, in solitude. The second writing has been no less solitary than the first: but the author's solitude has been modified by contact with other solitudes... [10].

Merton is aware of his change from an isolated, perhaps lonely, monk to one who is in contact with others. We find here an important difference between being lonely and being in solitude.

There is a difference in English between 'loneliness' and 'solitude'. The difference cannot be captured so accurately in Swedish. 'Loneliness' brings to mind a state of misery, a dreary existence. Loneliness is not a desirable condition and in most cases it is permeated with negative associations. The human being is cut off from his or her surroundings and other people. Solitude, on the other hand, is something that the human being needs to have in order to be able to create healthy relations and to function in a community. While loneliness implies isolation, a deficiency, solitude tends towards being a fulfilment. While loneliness stresses the autonomous self or subject, solitude may stress the relational self or subject. Or at least, this is a distinction we find in Merton.

#### **4. Solitude as the ground of being**

To be silent, to live in solitude and practice or perform contemplation is more often than not, as we have already seen, associated with the Christian monastic life. This solitude implies a silent setting which is not to be found everywhere, but it is the natural atmosphere in a monastery. Life within a monastery is in a deep sense a silent life, a silent community [1]. In order to obtain and preserve silence the days in a monastery are carefully regulated. *Ora et labora*, pray and work, is the famous expression for the essential regulation of the monastic daily life formulated by the grounding father of Western monasticism, Saint Benedict of Nursia (480-543).

Once solitude is obtained it might grow into a permanent state. If this is acquired the person need not be permanently silent in order to uphold an inner solitude. Merton writes: "But in moments of silence, of meditation, of enlightenment and peace, one learns to be silent and alone everywhere. One

learns to live in the atmosphere of solitude even in the midst of crowds.” [5, p. 21]

One of Merton’s favourite expressions is ‘the ground of being’, which he has taken from the theologian Paul Tillich and his much-debated concept ‘the ultimate concern’. Merton connects solitude with ‘the ground of being’. Even though this formula has its given Christian interpretation, Merton extends the value of solitude beyond the monastic life: “For when we come face to face with ourselves in the lonely ground of our own being, we confront many questions about the value of our existence, the reality of our commitments, the authenticity of our everyday lives” [5, p. 21].

Merton is a fervent criticizer of modern society as has already been indicated. A large portion of his reflections on solitude is worked out against the backdrop of modern society and its failure, according to Merton, to create conditions for solitude, silence and the finding of the inner or true self. Just as Merton is engaged in a critique of modern technological society, he is equally concerned with what he labels the monastic crisis. In his view modern society is no longer a home for humankind and modern monasticism has degenerated in a similar sense. But if a monastic renewal were to be brought about, then this would have consequences even for society, according to Merton: “This is the real problem of monastic renewal: not a surrender to the ‘secular city’ but a recovery of the deep desire of God that draws a man to seek a *totally new way of being in the world*” [9, p. 43].

Silence may be looked upon as an exterior circumstance while solitude is predominantly of an inner kind as I mentioned before. Solitude appears to be necessary within the monastic life to promote the ability to live that kind of severe life. The monastic person is in a special situation. He or she has taken three vows; the vow of obedience, the vow of chastity and the vow of poverty. These vows are made possible to keep, thanks to a life in solitude. You can live in solitude and with solitude. But it is not possible if you have the dreadful experience of feeling lonely. Loneliness brings or delivers a barren spirituality. Solitude on the other hand is life-giving in contrast to being lonely, which brings inertia. This is how I interpret Merton. The following words by Merton are revealing: “True solitude is the home of the person, false solitude the refuge of the individualist... Without a certain element of solitude there can be no compassion because when a man is lost in the wheels of a social machine he is no longer aware of human needs as a matter of personal responsibility. One can escape from men by plunging into the midst of a crowd! Go into the desert not to escape other men but in order to find them in God.” [10, p. 53]

Solitude is not only a state, it is a condition; it is a way of being and living: “Solitude is not withdrawal from ordinary life. It is not apart from, above, ‘better than` ordinary life; on the contrary, solitude is the very ground of ordinary life.” [5, p. 23] It is not something to gain. It is in a certain sense what everyone already possesses. The idea is to discover what we already have: “When solitude was a problem, I had no solitude. When it ceased to be a problem I found I already possessed it, and could have possessed it all along.

Yet still it was a problem because I knew after all that a merely subjective and inward solitude, the fruit of an effort at interiorization, would never be enough. Solitude has to be objective and concrete. It has to be a communion in something greater than the world, as great as Being itself, in order that in its deep peace we may find God.” [6, p. 53]

Merton was a communicative monk and his capacity to communicate with others was developed and deepened by way of cultivating solitude. His enormous bulk of texts are, to say the least, a testimony to that. The overall imperative for monks is to be silent and to live in solitude. But Merton is well aware of the danger of this: “The need for true solitude is a complex and dangerous thing” [10, p. 53]. Merton knows that many are highly suspicious of monastic life. He is therefore careful in saying what solitude is, and is not. Above all, solitude is not separation, writes Merton in his revised book on contemplation. This is an important remark, as the solitary person is frequently accused of narcissism. In expressing his point Merton may sound contradictory: “Unity implies solitude, and hence the need to be physically alone” [10, p. 52]. In order to cultivate true solitude the person has to be on his or her own. If solitude aims at isolated distinction it will not come about. Solitude aims at unity, meaning that all living beings belong together, according to Merton.

Intriguing as it is, in solitude the person experiences a shift in values and gains new perspectives on the understanding of one’s self, others and the ultimate meaning of everything. Merton writes: “Mere withdrawal, regression, leads to a sick solitude, without meaning and without fruit. The solitary of whom I speak is called not to leave society but to transcend it.” [1, p. 168] This can be interpreted along different lines. But in my overall understanding of Merton it has to do with gaining a new perspective on society. That is how I interpret the word ‘transcend’ in this context.

## **5. Mysticism as a case of solitude**

Having come this far in presenting Merton and his philosophy of solitude, let me say something about my understanding of mysticism.

There are three dominant discourses on mysticism in research today. I have no ambition to go deeper into them, only to present them very briefly. The first one might be called contextualism and its most prominent representative is Steven T Katz. His main idea is that mysticism - in general - is not radical compared to religious tradition, as is often claimed, but conservative. The mystic reinterprets what the tradition says and has no way of transcending it, according to this view. Katz’ adversary is Robert Foreman who defends the uniqueness of mysticism as a ‘pure consciousness event’. Foreman is influenced by Buddhist experience and argues that the mystic consciousness has no object. It is a non-intentional state, that is, a consciousness without an intentional object. The third standpoint refers to different kinds of ecstatic experiences. The main representative is the highly acclaimed William James and his much read book *The Varieties of Religious Experience* [12].

From these three approaches two more recent theories have developed. They are not in opposition but rather are aspects of these three. Bernhard McGinn, who has written instructively on Western mysticism from a historical perspective, accentuates the concept of *consciousness*. He defines mysticism in the following words: “the mystical element in Christianity is that part of its belief and practices that concerns the preparation for, the consciousness of, and the reaction to what can be described as the immediate or direct presence of God” [4, p. xvii]. Anthony Steinbock, who deviates from McGinn, writes that he instead prefers the term ‘experience’. Anthony Steinbock studies mysticism from a phenomenological vantage point and a first-person description. He also gives a definition focusing on *experience*. Steinbock wants to avoid the language of consciousness, which McGinn uses, as, according to Steinbock, it indicates psychologism and reduces mysticism. By experience Steinbock means “the givenness of something... as ‘it’ is lived... by mystical experience ... I mean the self-givenness of the Holy *qua* personal presence as this presence is lived. The self-givenness pertaining to the Holy is a vertical mode of givenness, namely epiphany.” [7, p. 24-25]

My own apprehension of mysticism is rather non-dramatic and avoids getting stuck either in the concept of consciousness, or in the experience of ecstasy. In my interpretation I draw on Merton when he considers what mysticism is, and what it is not. Merton writes: “Contemplation is not trance or ecstasy, nor the hearing of sudden unutterable words, nor the imagination of lights... Such manifestations can of course accompany a deep and genuine religious experience, but they are not what I am talking about as contemplation.” [10, p. 10-11].

I equate ‘contemplation’ with ‘mysticism’ which is a common move in the literature on mysticism. So, mysticism does not refer primarily to ecstatic experiences. I further like to avoid ‘consciousness’ although Merton uses the word now and then. Cashen comments on Merton’s use of ‘consciousness’: “The monk seeks to realize in himself a kind of universal consciousness which could speak to the common problems of humanity. It is, according to Merton, the monk’s task to develop this universal consciousness and to inject it, as far as he can, into the communal consciousness of man which is above individual and national differences.” [3, p. 127]

Consciousness here is used as a means of unifying humanity. It has an ecumenical feel about it. If people could see what they had in common, the problems of humanity might be resolved or at least moderated.

I do not wish to focus on the concept and phenomenon of consciousness for two main reasons. First, the use of ‘consciousness’ might lead in the direction of the debate between Foreman and Katz about ‘pure consciousness event’ as opposed to contextualism, which no longer strikes me as fruitful. Secondly, the talk of ‘altered consciousness’ seems misleading as I am of the opinion that each change in consciousness implies an altered state. Instead of ‘consciousness’, I prefer ‘awareness’ in the sense of a discernment which is generated from cultivating solitude. In solitude, which is not of the narcissistic

kind, discernment comes to the fore and it induces a perspective on human life which brings about a particular way of being and living. Discernment requires withdrawal. My understanding is that mysticism requires this withdrawal in order to discern. Mysticism in my formula is: leave the 'world' or withdraw in order to understand the world. The understanding is action-compelling.

Solitude in the sense I have apprehended Merton is then a presupposition for acquiring a new perspective. This is an aspect that is vital in my understanding of mysticism. In that respect mysticism does not differ from any other belief system or conviction. Our way of looking upon life depends on a perspective, a certain stand-point. In Merton's case it is the standpoint of a Trappist monk. The standpoint is a contemplative or, if you wish, a mystical one which calls forth a certain view of life. It involves the way in which you perceive yourself, others and reality.

My interest is in the purported *meaning* of a contemplative and mystical discernment and what characterizes a mystical person, that is, a person who is living a contemplative life. A person in a monastic community is, by definition, supposed to have a mystical life. What is it about the monastic way of living that brings about a mystic life? According to Merton, the explanation seems to be that in solitude you communicate with Being. This communication is not possible without solitude. What is this solitude then? It is a paradoxical state, necessary for finding your true self which in turn is necessary for true communication with others. Solitude is the prerequisite for acting out a relation, a communication. Merton writes: "Unity implies solitude, and hence the need to be physically alone. But unity and solitude are not physical isolation. He who isolates himself in order to enjoy a kind of independence in his egoistic and external self does not find unity at all, for he disintegrates into a multiplicity of conflicting passions and finally ends in confusion and total unreality. Solitude is not and can never be a narcissistic dialogue of the ego with itself." [10, p. 52]

Solitude brings unity and reality. Unity means that the human being is in a relationship with others. The meaning of reality in turn follows as a consequence of experiencing unity. Reality stands for the authentic or true quality of being a human being.

## **6. Intriguing comparisons**

As I read Merton's reflections on solitude, he is in line with a critique of modernity. A prevailing view in this criticism is how modernity has separated person from person. The human being is isolated, alone in a world without true communication with others. Merton as a monk and mystic is saying much the same: to live in the midst of others but sharing nothing "isolates a man in the worst way, separates him from reality" [10, p. 55]. One interpretation of Merton's mysticism then is to read it as an implicit critique of modernity, of technology and of the lonely subject.

In her book on Wittgenstein (1889-1951) Alessandra Tanesini argues that the state of being lonely in modern times is a consequence of a wish to be autonomous and independent. According to Tanesini the ‘moderns’ proposed a new view of what it is to be a human being. It is that of an autonomous, self-sufficient human subject, which is to be challenged by many philosophers among them Wittgenstein [13]. According to my reading of Merton, he also challenges this view. Merton argues that the world of today has alienated the individual. What a person assumes to be real and true is, according to Merton, now illusory, false and imaginative. Instead of solidarity with a community, the person is alone and cut off. In fact Merton reasons along similar lines as Wittgenstein. Tanesini writes that Wittgenstein in his work shows that “the modern quest for autonomy and independence is shown to generate loneliness and separation from other human beings. What the moderns perceive as liberating, he experiences as a prison.” [13].

Another interesting philosopher in this context is Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872). He formulates a far-reaching critique of Christianity and its views on the individual. Feuerbach aims at “rejecting theology and metaphysics for failing to keep their feet in the real world”, according to his translator James A. Massey [14]. Feuerbach’s main argument is that “the emphasis of modern Christianity on the individual self betrays the essential continuity between humans and their terrestrial environment and therefore blinds Christians to the value of life” [14, p. xi]. The individual has been cut off from their natural surroundings. James Massey in his excellent introduction to Ludwig Feuerbach brings loneliness to the fore: “Feuerbach connects the modern emphasis on the immortality of the soul with our culture’s change in perspective on the most important source for human meaning: it is now the individual, and no longer the community, that is absolute... Once this sense of communal identity was rejected, the individual was cut off from seeing value in a reality other than the isolated self, and therefore the new culture focused on an unreal goal, the immortal individual of the hereafter...” [14, p. xxxiii]

I find it intriguing that although Merton and Feuerbach have different views on the Christian belief system, they end up with a similar conclusion on the status of the modern human being. “Being is community”, writes Feuerbach [14, p. 122]. Though Feuerbach was indeed critical of Christianity as it appeared in his time, he advocates solitude. However, he does not argue on behalf of a religious need, but rather because he believes there is a natural, human need for solitude. Loneliness, on the other hand, is another matter. He argues that people’s loneliness – in his time – is a consequence of the break of Christianity with nature and the collective. The individual is left to their own devices, being self-sufficient and independent. It is a solitary existence.

Thus, according to both Feuerbach and Merton, to cultivate solitude is to be in relation to others. Contrary to what many believe, it is a way of fighting loneliness and self-sufficiency. In Merton’s case it has to do with becoming a fully integrated monk. In Feuerbach’s case it has to do with opposing the Christian concept of the individual, as he perceives it, in order to become a

person through loving relationships with others. It might be argued that Merton is nurturing the self-sufficiency of the monk, which is exactly the target of Feuerbach's criticism of Christianity. But the self-sufficiency Merton advocates is more complex than that, as I have shown.

Tanesini writes that Wittgenstein is of the opinion that "loneliness and meaninglessness are results of the struggle for transcendence" [13, p. 53]. This is what Feuerbach says too. In his early book *Thoughts on Death and Immortality* (1830) he tries to show how destructive the Christian doctrine on immortality has become for the human being. Christianity, according to Feuerbach, has degenerated in its view on the collective. The individual is independent, caring only for their own salvation. The only focus is the immaterial soul. This is motivated by the belief in an everlasting life.

Reading Merton's views on solitude, Feuerbach's analysis of Christianity appears to be accurate. Merton is stressing the solitary person; what could be a clearer target for Feuerbach's criticism? But does Merton actually refer to the same concept as that criticized by Feuerbach? When Merton speaks of the solitary person, he is indeed referring to a person who has stepped out from the crowd, from society. Merton argues that the contemplative is called into silence, solitude, emptiness, poverty. But by this he is aiming at something new – a true 'togetherness'. According to Feuerbach, the individual must rediscover their original connection with the surrounding world. According to Merton, this rediscovery comes about precisely when the person lives in solitude. The way out of loneliness, according to Tanesini's interpretation of Wittgenstein, is to accept death; to accept the limits of our joint reality. This acceptance brings freedom. Even more so, it connects the person with other persons. The human being is no longer lonely but capable of seeking solitude. Solitude then is a state where the person is *not* lonely. He or she thrives in solitude. Bringing Merton, Feuerbach and Wittgenstein together shows that solitude might be understood as an existential need. The idea of solitude becomes something different from loneliness; it depends on an understanding of the human self as not being self-sufficient.

Merton's remedy is to restore solitude; to bring the human being face to face with one's self and one's Creator. This is done by going back to medieval theological and patristic sources; those which have formulated Christian monasticism. Feuerbach's remedy is to take the human being back to their original relationship with nature and society; a relationship which, in his view, has been broken by Christianity because of the emphasis on the individual and on individual salvation. Wittgenstein's remedy is that the human being must accept the state of immanence, that is, the limits of their being and cognitive capacity.

Feuerbach argues against the backdrop of a critique of Christian Theology. Wittgenstein argues from the way in which he perceives immanence and transcendence. Merton argues from his perception of the modern world and its forgetfulness of God. They each have different perspectives, no doubt, but provide a similar critique of modernity and unite in a defence of solitude.

## 7. Conclusion

On first appearances solitude might strike us as loneliness, egoism, narcissism, self-sufficiency. By reading Merton we may find the opposite. Interestingly enough, we have also found that Merton in his views on solitude is in tune with prominent critics of modernity in 19<sup>th</sup> century philosophy. However, while Feuerbach and Wittgenstein criticize modernity from a societal or philosophical perspective, Merton's perspective is religious. In its eager defense of autonomy, independence and self-sufficiency, modernity has brought people into an unhappy state of loneliness. Merton's recipe is a philosophy of solitude aiming not at loneliness but at unity with humankind and a deeper sense of 'community'.

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