

# LOGOS

A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture

cu bla pat. 7 Sic car. Et recitat. a. Velle aut sabbi. post sacros die  
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LOGOS: A JOURNAL OF CATHOLIC THOUGHT AND CULTURE

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## CONTENTS

- 5 Preface
- 15 BENNETT ZON, Anthropology, Theology, and the Simplicity  
of Benedict XVI's Chant
- 41 MICHAEL MARTIN, Criticism and Contemplation:  
Steps toward an Agapic Criticism
- 57 AARON K. KERR, Borgmann on Merton: Exploring  
the Possibility of Contemplation in a Technological Age
- 79 ANDREI GOTIA, Blessed Vladimir Ghika: Prince, Priest,  
and Martyr
- 98 KEN COLSTON, Sacramental Usury in *The Merchant of Venice*
- 130 KATHLEEN E. URDA, Eros and Contemplation:  
The Catholic Vision of Terrence Malick's *To the Wonder*
- 148 FRANTIŠEK BURDA, The Fundamental Starting Point  
of Transcultural Communication
- 167 JAMES MATTHEW WILSON, The Formal and Moral Challenges  
of T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*
- 204 Contributor Notes

AARON K. KERR

## Borgmann on Merton

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### Exploring the Possibility of Contemplation in a Technological Age

IN WHAT FOLLOWS I attempt to do two things. First, I want to explore the relationship between contemporary technology and the possibility of contemplation today. To appreciate technology I have relied upon Albert Borgmann, particularly his insistence that our current technological culture and way of life is conditioned almost exclusively by what he calls the device paradigm, a pattern of commodification and consumption that leads to disengagement. To appreciate contemplation, I have relied primarily on Thomas Merton, a prophetic American voice of religious consciousness and practice who invites the non-specialist into the depth dimension of human experience by way of his writings on contemplative life and vision. Though contemplation can be an obscure term, it resonates with both philosophy and theology and can serve as a bridge between the two disciplines. Second, I hope to illuminate in an explicit way the enduring inter-relationship between prophecy and philosophy. Albert Borgmann begins an essay on Merton with a brief yet concise set of propositions about that relationship and in what follows, I hope to demonstrate the important relationship between the prophet and philosopher, between faith and reason.

### *Contemplation and a Human Future*

The word contemplation is a compound word, literally translated as "with an open space." It can mean to think or observe with an open space, a space marked in the sky, a temple—to think with the heavens. The way of contemplation, the intentionality of contemporary forays into its orbit, brings with it these two derived metaphors from the Latin compound: contemplation involves openness and ultimacy. The vitality of contemplation for both Merton and Borgmann is the conjunction, "with" (con). To think with God is the classical province of contemplation, but for Borgmann and the later Merton to be with others in a contiguous arrangement or relation resulting in deepened awareness of self and the world is also contemplative being-with. Merton and Borgmann share a concern about the deterioration and possibility of contemplation in a constantly changing culture conditioned by technology. They are not alone. Annette Holba shares this concern, focusing particularly on how the structuring of our time might develop in us contemplative modes of being for the purpose of becoming responsible engagers in the communicative task of political process and democracy. Josef Pieper, a German philosopher writing after the fall of Nazism and the anxious malaise of German reconstruction, warned of the tendencies to reduce life to the drudgery of work and production, dehumanizing the population because of the dearth of moments of celebration and contemplation. His considerations describe in great detail the modes of thinking operative in those times of celebration and contemplation and he pursues an explication of receptivity as understanding, distinct from rational striving and deductive precision. For all of the above thinkers and writers modes of openness resulting in knowledge and understanding of ultimate things have been, or are, squeezed, mitigated, or nearly eliminated from culture. In each author we find varying degrees of analysis expressing the problem.<sup>1</sup> For both Merton and Borgmann there is an interactive relationship between technology and contemplation. Not only do Merton and Borgmann share a grasp of the dynamic be-

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tween contemplation and the use of technology, they are partners in their different modes of prophetic and philosophic expressions, thus demonstrating distinct domains of speech and thought, and perhaps more importantly, the historical-intellectual economy between the prophet and philosopher, faith and reason. For a more human future, one in which the breadth and openness of reason and spiritual longing might remain mutually enhancing and life-giving actions of learning, it is necessary to understand how technology and contemplation interact—technological action and its effects, and contemplative space or time and its fruit. Thus we connect concretely and realistically to the modes of being that secure a reasonable future of capable human actors and speakers.

### *Borgmann's Work: An Overview*

Though Albert Borgmann has self-identified as a Christian, I sense that he sees his work in strictly philosophical terms. In post-modernity, the term "Christian philosopher" could have multiple, complex meanings, so it is better to allow Borgmann's work to speak for itself. His thought is conversant with both Continental as well as American and British analytical traditions. In this sense his philosophical reflections are never explicitly aligned with schools or trends in philosophy—although his early work and his subsequent analysis on "technology" seem to have come from his studies of Heidegger. Borgmann has published six books and over one hundred articles mostly dealing with the question of technology in relation to specific areas of concern such as: globalization, nature, virtue and morality, ideological movements, design, human personality, modernity/post-modernity, commodification, and other matters. His reflections on technology took center stage after an initial 1974 book on the philosophy of language.<sup>2</sup> He is considered a contemporary American philosopher of technology, carrying forth Heidegger's analysis of technology critically, while revealing the way devices function in our daily lives. Part of his task is to invite society to consider just how

everyday life is oriented to technology—in short to inspire a more intentionally aware approach to technological usage, making it secondary to other practices involving more communal, conversational, and contemplative activities.<sup>3</sup> This personalism or idealism certainly explains an interest in Merton, and also opens Borgmann to a dialogue with religious concerns.

As a philosopher we can rely on Borgmann to be both systematic in his approach and careful and disciplined in his expressions. In three major works in the philosophy of technology or what might be called the philosophy of culture, Borgmann explores and explains the shape of technological culture, its philosophical and ideological roots—particularly its American roots—and the foundational logic that produced the computer and our information age.<sup>4</sup> Borgmann's work is technical, but because he unearths the suppositions and values that ground much of our every-day use of technology, this theoretical structure is concerned very clearly with concrete daily events and practices. In *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life: A Philosophical Inquiry*, he makes a helpful distinction between things and devices. I share that distinction below because I think it is a helpful way to access his thought, and it will become a lens through which we will view his later reflections on Merton, particularly Merton's considerations of the tractor, a commodity that exemplifies for both Merton and Borgmann the subtle insinuations of instrumental reason replacing contemplative existence.

#### *Distinction: Thing, Device*

For Borgmann, a "thing"—"is inseparable from its context, namely its world." A thing necessarily provides more than one commodity—it involves "manifold engagement"—the stove not only heats the house, it becomes central to activity; the cutting of wood, the tending of fire, the telling of stories. To become an efficient way to heat a house, the wood stove employs the cutter, the fire-starter, the wood stacker, all working together, and then experiencing the warmth of

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their labors as community. The machinery of a device, on the other hand, makes no demand on our skill, it comes from somewhere else, it has no context excepting its utilization in the disburdenment of our struggles with darkness, cold, and food. The purpose of the device is "relatively fixed"—the device can come in different forms, but its end purpose is always consistent and unchangeable—the television is an exemplary device in this regard.<sup>5</sup> This device distances us from reality, it mediates our engagement with the way things are, and in the words of Borgmann, "degrades the natural symmetry between humanity and reality."<sup>6</sup> The technological economy, once a way to liberate us from hunger, illness, cold, and immobility is now a paradigm: the "initial feats of liberation appear to be continuous with the procurement of frivolous comfort."<sup>7</sup> Disburdenment can be good, but it comes with certain inevitable disengagements—most notably the context out of which the device was made, the makers, and the consumer. In sum, devices tend to alleviate the need to engage in social interactions, and in nature as well. Things, on the other hand, provide various ways of interaction, they become the focal point for different ways of connecting with both others and nature. Borgmann's conclusions about how to remain connected to alternative visions of human culture in a culture of technology have to do with the development and engagement in what he calls focal practices; active communal engagements that rely on and guarantee human skill and participation. In his article on Merton, the conclusion points to the family meal as a preserve of human participation by way of both conversation and contemplation.<sup>8</sup> His conclusions regarding the need for focal practices fit nicely into a more explicitly religious communication concern, namely, the receding capacity of technological persons to open themselves toward particular times and places where listening and speaking, curiosity and encounter might transform existence. The most conspicuous form of exercising this capacity has been in worship. In this way, both Merton and Borgmann inform the question of the generative connection between the "cult" and culture.



### *Merton on Contemplation*

Thomas Merton, always religious in his writing but never triumphalist and rarely without some form of skepticism, was comprehensive not by purpose and method, but by duration, encounter, and engagement; this is because of his relationship with God. As a writer, his work is rich and relevant because like Augustine and other writers, Merton was a great student of his own sin, since his life was wrapped in a particular religious vision, conversion being the fundamental purpose of monastic life. This naturally made Merton a student of the tragic nature of human striving and culture. But as a priest his work is also wrapped in a comprehensive concern with everything human, ultimately concerned with God and God's role in human flourishing. As a poet his work is deeply touched by the human emotional experience—how the emotions in all their variety might be touched, and more mysteriously, how they might be articulated.<sup>9</sup> These dimensions of his writing and thought place him in the camp of a prophet, meaning one whose integrity will never allow him to deceive—either himself or another. Whereas the philosopher relies on reason not to deceive, the prophet cannot deceive because of his communion with the Divine—since God will never be deceived and the truth allures the person toward integrity. Merton's writing warns of the foibles that befall a person or culture seeking fulfillment in anything but the love and mercy of the divine life.

In remaining true to his contemplative vocation, as Robert Inchausti has said, Merton, "translated the 'insider' speech of Catholic monasticism into the 'universal' language of personal candor and existential revelation."<sup>10</sup> Not unlike Borgmann, Merton's awareness was enlightened by history. Merton's historical sense was largely theological due to his biblical sense of time. For both thinkers, the study of origins and historical developments provide explanations for contemporary experience. For Merton this meant a consistent turning toward the original encounter with God in order to derive

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authenticity. With regard to contemplation it meant exploring the ancient monastic intention or way.

In the essay, *Contemplative Life in the Modern World*, published in both *Faith and Violence* and as a preface to a Japanese translation of *Seeds of Contemplation*, Merton wrote: "Thus the contemplative way of ancient Christian monastic tradition is not simply a way of good works and loving devotion, fine as these are, but also a way of emptiness and transcendence in union with the crucified Christ."<sup>11</sup> Later in our discussion, *emptiness* will prove to become a connecting metaphor for faithful prophecy and philosophical exploration. For Borgmann, a historic sense means seeing contemporary existence in light of ideological and philosophical developments, and seeing technological structures as deriving from particular mathematical, physical, and metaphysical discoveries or re-discoveries. If we can understand the premises at the start of technological innovation, we can perceive the limitations written into the present. For the meaning of contemplation, of course, Borgmann goes back to Merton, as we will see. This shared concern with historical appreciation runs counter to a culture allured primarily by the present and the future. We see that both Merton as prophet and Borgmann as philosopher point to the necessity of appreciating the past in order to fully comprehend the present. Borgmann's descriptive account of technology's development provides the fundamental logic on which technology rests. This sort of analysis conveys the limitations of instrumental reason at the point of its concrete invention. But he is less interested in speculating on grand pronouncements about the meaning of history, this because our capacity to understand the implications of our concrete experience needs much more attention. In theological terms Merton is fed by the revelatory, the practical encounter in contemplation to bring back the authentic self, but no doubt his vision is given over to what theologians might call an apocalyptic vision, meaning an emphasis on communicating what is hidden—an unveiling. But it is not a fanciful form of apocalyptic discourse, meant to scare and to evoke anxiety. Though Merton's writings may prick the conscience, according to

Christopher Pramuk, Merton's apocalyptic has this sense of everyday things being revealed in their truest expression. In the crisis of our time, when many aspects of life are superficial or fake, how do we move into deeper truths; "the deepest truth of things in the present historical moment"?<sup>12</sup> Merton suggests, tentatively, that human encounter and engagement with others is a way toward deepening our sense of the way things are. "If we love our own ideology and our own opinion instead of loving our brother, we will seek only to glorify our ideas and our institutions and by that fact we will make real communication impossible."<sup>13</sup> Merton senses, and Borgmann illuminates, the necessity for un-mediated encounter with reality. For Merton it is in faithful solidarity with others, for Borgmann it is extricating ourselves from the established device paradigm in order to pursue focal practices that enrich the social, conversational sphere.

Yet, to define this experience of contemplation, or contemplative existence seems to betray it. Merton says: "For Contemplation cannot be taught. It cannot even be clearly explained. It can only be hinted at, suggested, pointed to, symbolized. The more objectively and scientifically one tries to analyze it, the more he empties it of its real content, for this experience is beyond the reach of verbalization and of rationalization."<sup>14</sup>

Though it cannot be defined (as the philosopher would like) it can be reflected upon and considered—even though Merton suggests the experience of contemplation is beyond verbalization and rationalization, that does not stop him from trying to describe aspects, dimensions, or what contemplation is not.<sup>15</sup> Some of the aspects of this experience are "... life itself fully awake, fully active, fully aware that it is alive. It is spiritual wonder . . . gratitude. . . . It is a vivid realization that life and being in us proceed from an invisible, transcendent and infinitely abundant Source." His later reflections on the possibility of contemplation push us to reflect on that which may get in the way of such awareness, of that which comes between us and our encounter with our Source. In his article on Merton, Borgmann defines the fundamental principle of our culture: "The crucial feature

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of the technological culture is the insertion of machinery between humanity and reality.<sup>16</sup> This description is simple and clear and might serve as a starting point for a lecture on the history of technology. But within the context of contemplation and Merton's experience and expression of it, it takes on a more pronounced tone. Since for Merton, contemplation is the encounter of the human being with reality and the Source of that reality, the simple feature Borgsmann explains above has profound implications not only for our capacity to experience the sacred, but with all other manner of perceptual accuracy or inaccuracy. With the contemporary emergence of this exponentially expansive technology inserted daily within our common life, how can we touch, as it were, the really real? Contemplation as unmediated encounter is more and more rare for most of us, and Merton's prophetic sense of human habit and the ease with which we skim on the surfaces of the deeper waters of experience led him to write pointedly about the ostensible value of the practice of watching the news or reading the daily paper:

What was on TV? I have watched TV twice in my life. Certainly I do not pretend that by simply refusing to keep up with the latest news I am therefore unaffected by what goes on, or free of it all. . . . Nine tenths of the news, as printed in the papers, is pseudo news, manufactured events. Some days ten-tenths. The ritual morning trance, in which one scans columns of newsprint, creates a peculiar form of generalized pseudo-attention to a pseudo-reality. This experience is taken seriously, it is one's daily immersion in "reality." . . . My own experience has been that renunciation of this self-hypnosis, of this participation in the unquiet universal trance, is no sacrifice of reality at all. To "fall behind" in this sense is to get out of the big cloud of dust that everybody is kicking up, to breathe and to see a little more clearly.<sup>17</sup>

The machinations of the newspapers, and now twenty-four hour news machines, provide ample evidence of Merton's prophetic

accuracy. And Merton is pointing to an irony here, an American, technologically driven irony, that the more one is in touch with "what is going on" the less one is in touch with reality as such. This has important implications for practices that separate us from the mediations technology daily presents to us, one of which is to appreciate that manufactured events are not necessarily real events. But more, it challenges our glib use of the word contemplation; that it is not "time away for thinking" or critical analysis, or something that can be possessed and then left upon return to more conventional sources of discourse, like news analysis or political opinion. No, once practiced, contemplation places all other modes of discourse and meaning in proper perspective, especially if we assume, with Merton, that contemplation springs from the Source of all that is, the divine ground. This premonition of Merton's, that technological mediations are a diversion from reality and contemplative experience, is the starting point for Borgmann's reflections on what he has learned from Merton.

#### *Diachronic Reflection on the Prophet and Philosopher in Contemporary Culture*

Both Merton and Borgmann, as we have seen, are diachronic thinkers in the sense that they trace ideas back in history in order to understand the current context. Merton was especially adept at naming the times and unearthing the chronic patterns of human existence. As Borgmann points out in his article on Merton, the contemplative critic was one who continues to challenge his readers because he had a deep understanding of the intertwined nature of human glory and misery. In addition Merton challenges us to look into the depths of modernity, and to acknowledge the human ambivalence inherent in the use of, and the glories of, technology.<sup>18</sup> Borgmann's analysis of Merton is quite explicit in its assumption that the twenty-first century is markedly distinct from Merton's time primarily due to the ubiquitous technological patterns through which we unthinkingly live. He encapsulates the contrast by suggesting that Merton was a

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prophet who went from a definite appreciation of the meaning of contemplation to a more ambiguous, or less defined appreciation; a prophet whose interpretation of the technological and consumerist patterns went from vague and tacit to a more clear outline, on the way to a definite shape of a technological culture. Contemplation and technology, in Borgsmann's estimation, mitigate one another, and Merton's premonitions of those technological contours of culture have spun exponentially so that, according to Borgsmann, communal practices are a vestige and preserve through which the humanizing states of contemplation might be recaptured and renewed—these are the focal practices; a family meal is an example of such a practice. The prophet and philosopher are connected by their modes of discourse and their role in the explication of the meaning of history. The prophet warns and rails, critiques and tells the hard truth about what is coming, the future. The philosopher waits and reflects, abstracts and moves toward generalized truths. The philosopher understands historical developments in order to think clearly about current existence. How might the philosopher account for the prophet?

Before Borgsmann tells us what he has learned from Thomas Merton, he explains that "prophecy and philosophy are kindred disciplines. Both are devoted to seeing and telling, but there is a division of emphasis."<sup>19</sup> I wonder what kind of discipline prophecy is? Perhaps Borgsmann means that prophecy takes discipline; that is, the very contemplative practices that allow us to perceive more accurately are those disciplines of the prophet, the seer. Merton celebrated Mass daily, as well as participated in the Divine Office, focal practices that immerse participants in Scripture and contemplative modes of action and encounter. A prophet, in this case, is certainly distinguished by the discipline of their religious praxis; actions that are ostensibly irrelevant to our cultural pragmatism and its worship of results. The results in Merton's case, and many before him, seems to be true speech. It is not very fair for me to raise these questions because Borgsmann's article on Merton does not set out to expound on the relationship between the philosopher and prophet, it rather

actualizes that relationship in its method. I would say, however, that, just as Merton lived, the prophet has to live and work in some degree counter to the predominate culture. And I would say the same for a philosopher, who can never let her reason become beholden to ideology. But the philosopher's work and practice also seems irrelevant in the prevailing culture, for the inquiry of the philosopher initially has no purpose but the inquiry itself.

Borgmann explains that both prophet and philosopher are committed to "seeing and telling." These are exacting and taxing tasks. Often we fail to tell what we see, or see accurately what we talk about. It may be that in the telling we see more clearly—certainly that may be the reason a prophet would write or a philosopher might speak. There is a difference for the philosopher in that process. The philosopher tells, and that tentatively, only after carefully thinking and tending to what his or her assumptions are, expressing with great precision reason's findings. The prophet reports and speaks from a dimension of depth due to the unfolding encounter with the divine ground. True to the philosophic form, Borgmann distinguishes the emphases a philosopher and prophet place on their tasks. But I wonder if, by the end of the article and in some of his other writing Borgmann does not himself blur the lines of prophetic and philosophic discourse. Given the ultimate questions the prophet and philosopher share, a case could be made that a prophetic philosopher or a philosophical prophet is rather inevitable. The contours of these distinct emphases of the prophet and philosopher are marked out by Borgmann himself as he discusses Merton. Before exploring Borgmann's helpful interpretation of Merton, I want to give some thought to Borgmann's division of labor between the philosopher and the prophet.

*From Prophecy to Philosophy, Passion to Systematic Analysis,  
Pioneer to Settler*<sup>20</sup>

The work of the prophet, according to Borgmann, is passionate and topical. Where does the passion come from? As stated above, in the

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case of Merton we might find a pastoral sense of the way in which the premises of modernity endanger human flourishing. The irony of that danger is that it comes through values such as disburdenment, which, as Borgmann shows throughout his work, is a staple of the cultural pattern. Borgmann cites Merton who cites the tractor. The tractor disburdens the farmer, but places that person in a different and detached realm, and separated from the immediacy and concreteness of contemplative engagements with the soil, the beast of burden and quiet. Merton's passion is a result of a sense of loss and the new conditions that fragment our experience so that our openness to the divine ground is clogged. Borgmann has spent decades understanding the clog, such a task necessarily involves a dispassionate look and a diagnostic reason. The prophet must speak as the clog is happening to warn abruptly.

By calling the prophet a pioneer, Borgmann is making a claim about the intellectual edges of culture. The pioneer is unafraid, radically exploratory, and their curiosity has no bounds, as Merton's writings well attest. The pioneer goes in our stead, for the rest of us who are more careful and conventional. But the settler is also courageous, and has made a decision to survey the lay of the land, to live within the orbit of a particular place, face its daily tasks, and turn over its ground relentlessly in order to understand comprehensively the real shape of the settlement. The philosopher, as settler, understands more and more deeply the familiar and obvious so that he or she can become ever more transparent, even seen anew.

Merton understood technology to be a distraction; Borgmann sees it as a ubiquitous, concealed pattern he calls "the device paradigm" through which distraction is all in all. If for Merton the culture of technology presented us with periodic rains of distraction, for Borgmann that precipitation is more like a constant fog.<sup>21</sup> And if, for Merton, the simplicity of contemplative life is to celebrate the call of the unbidden, the surprises of light stumbled upon in the consistent practices of the responsible and religious life, Borgmann situates contemplation in the focal practices like the family dinner where

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conversation and contemplation can be practiced in order to derive enduring human values. These diachronic considerations not only bring together the late twentieth and the early twenty-first century, they also bring together the prophet and philosopher and the unique ways these personalities express their vital work for the world, about which they care so deeply.

### *Borgmann on Merton*

As philosophy is wont to do, Borgmann takes a comprehensive look at Merton's sense of technology and points out the possibility that as technological culture grew stronger, Merton's understanding of contemplation broadened in part because the dangers in technological use became more pronounced. He provides evidence from *The Seven Story Mountain* that Merton was raised with an acute awareness of the superficiality of consumerist and technological developments. Borgmann suggests that this budding sense in the future contemplative resulted in Merton's "pivotal contrast between technology and contemplation, seen as malaise and salvation."<sup>22</sup> He then follows this contrast through Merton's later reflections, showing that there is a marked recession of the possibility of contemplation that concerns Merton as he reflects on his experience, an experience of technology in the monastery. Borgmann clarifies this sense by citing Merton's writing about the use of the tractor in the monastic economy. Borgmann warns that we cannot construe Merton as anti-technology. The tractor helps the monastic economy but Merton is simply more and more aware of the system that creates louder, bigger, and more efficient equipment for the Trappists' work of farming. But ultimately, Borgmann interprets Merton's concern with technology as one that is driven by the sense that the technological culture seriously compromises and mitigates the human capacity to perceive God. Citing a passage from *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, we learn from Merton that technology can have the following effects on human consciousness:

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1. a deadening of spirit and sensibility,
2. a blunting of perception,
3. a loss of awareness,
4. a lowering of tone,
5. a general fatigue and lassitude, and
6. a proneness to unrest and guilt.<sup>23</sup>

What Merton saw, according to Borgmann, is not only the effects of technology on human consciousness, but also an emerging pattern of technological culture. Borgmann expands Merton's commentary by providing the two cultural side effects of the technological patterns, commodification and mechanization.

- Commodification is the detachment of things and practices from their traditional contexts, and the conversion of things and practices into freely available commodities.
- Mechanization is the replacement of traditions, contexts, and competencies by increasingly powerful and concealed machineries.<sup>24</sup>

In Merton's pastoral and prophetic speech in the six effects noted above, the descriptions are wrought in the context of a Monk concerned with our capacity to relate to the divine Source. There is a feeling of loss, a pastoral concern with the loss of human potential and flourishing. We see in the two bullet points from Borgmann conclusions drawn from systematic study and an analysis of cultural processes. The philosopher, Borgmann, is challenged by the prophet to understand and then define particular processes endemic, and often hidden within the American way of life. But we note that Borgmann describes Merton's warnings about technology with an eye toward this historical context, not Merton's. What this means is that Merton's lament that technology blunts our perception of God has given way to what Borgmann considers a more pervasive "mindlessness, either the sullen mindlessness of unloved work and pointless consumption or the hyperactive mindlessness of frenetic work and conspicuous consumption."<sup>25</sup> This is not a comment offered from the

privileged seat of a philosophic specialty.<sup>26</sup> It is offered, it seems, from a real prophetic or even pastoral concern that echoes Merton's judgment that human flourishing evokes a certain mindfulness, or contemplative bent.

I share such a concern and think Borgmann's description an accurate portrayal of our day and time. Consider the patterns that determine our sense of what is of value, what we think ought to be desired, what constitutes success, and so forth, the philosopher Borgmann is inviting us to become more mindful within these patterns. A key learning Borgmann takes from Merton is a mindful stand taken within the ubiquitous patterns of technology. Borgmann interprets Merton's sense of contemplation moving from a stand of resistance and austerity toward a stand of simple receptivity, from a "strenuous clinging to an idea of sanctity" to the "celebration of resurrection and creation."<sup>27</sup> Borgmann appreciates this state of contemplative experience because, I believe, he sees that technological patterns are so pervasive that austere resistance and refusal only cramps the spirit. A piety that resists and holds the technological patterns in contempt is a piety that is consistently defeated. Merton's love of the world would not allow him to withdraw from the technologically patterned existence that he critiqued. Borgmann derives some gratification, it seems, from Merton's affirmations of contemplative moments as, first, "grounded in the immediacy and concreteness of life; and second, they include responsibility for the human community."<sup>28</sup>

This lesson from Merton gives Borgmann's notion of focal practices a contemplative thrust at a time when technology is more than a distraction, it is a constant fog. But Borgmann also gives us a cognitive map of the culture of technology, the fog, as he says. If we can see the patterns of the fog—the human desire for comfort connecting to the sense and relief of disburdenment, the separation of machinery from commodity, the way commodities keep us from more social engagements, the pattern's unquestionable ubiquity and logic—we can begin to make our way through the fog to a focal practice. Why don't we—in our sphere of influence—develop events and practices that

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have things, rather than devices, at their center? Can we not raise the question, with Merton, about why the tractor has to become bigger, louder? Why is Amazon's plan to develop delivery drones even worthy of our reflection? Do we have a say about what kinds of objects are going to be flying into our communities, our yards?

### *Areas for Further Consideration*

At the end of his article on Merton, written for the *Merton Annual* and then published also in a journal of faith and science, Borgmann writes with passion. His rhetorical tone is prophetic not philosophic.

As members of the technological society, we have systematically uprooted the relations that once had grounded our lives in a certain community, a definite place, and an overarching time. The machineries that now support us fail to engage us, and the commodities that are supposed to please us have turned out to be joyless. Misery has become a low-grade headache, and glory has been transmuted into a fugitive pleasure. We have become insensitive to the good news.<sup>29</sup>

That particular statement has weight because it is made by someone like Borgmann. Someone who has done the hard work of analyzing computational structures, uncovered the philosophic bases of modernity's ideological suppositions that ground technology, and provided realistic ethical proposals through which human culture might responsibly preserve a possibility of contemplation. We trust Borgmann's words above and sense their veracity because we know he knows of that which he speaks. Why do we trust a prophet? Why does Merton resonate with us? It is because he was an advanced practitioner of difficult spiritual work, the work of conversion. And the fruit of conversion is authenticity and clarity of vision; the proper use of our gifts and the integrity of our words and actions. Merton resonates today for many reasons, but his words speak beyond themselves to his own struggles through which he derived authentic-

ity—we trust him because he is a pioneer, a pioneer of the Spirit, drawing life from the ecclesial narrative (and Narrator) both he and Borgmann share. In the case of Borgmann and Merton, the philosopher and prophet exemplify a deep concern for the state of human capacities. The philosopher wants persons to know the truth of their context; the prophet wants people to know the truth about their collective and individual selves and the God the prophet speaks for. But the prophet and philosopher also share what Borgmann said of Merton: they share an intrepid openness. The work of the prophet and philosopher are similar in this sense of intrepid openness to truth. And, as I have already suggested, their tasks are not always distinguishable, the prophet out-reasons the philosophic temper of his age, and the philosopher feels a natural pull to speak thunderously from the edges of society on the true and the good.

*The Metaphors of Emptiness and Openness  
in Faith and Reason*

I began this article with the compound word, contemplation, exploring its roots, giving us a sense that it is an embodiment of human experience through which we become *open* to ultimate things. Openness has metaphorical resonances in discussions of ethics, mysticism, and fundamentally, in learning. The metaphor works for a couple of reasons, but one of the reasons is that we are dealing with metaphysical activities—the operations of the human mind. The images of open and closed are inappropriate with reference to the mind, yet it is the very inappropriateness that evokes insight into human thought processes. Technology *contains* thought; it closes off alternatives.<sup>30</sup> Other objects that draw our attention evoke other patterns of thought when we pursue them. A flower can be dissected, observed, or beheld. We derive different knowledge depending upon the way of our perception. So “open” minded and “close” minded allow us to explore the kinship between spatial capaciousness and the mind’s capacity to make room for possibilities. “Openness” is perhaps overwrought today. We

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tell students to be open; we are attracted to people who seem open to us. But it is also a fruitful metaphor, especially when we consider Borgsmann's adjective placed before it, "intrepid." Merton, as prophets must be, seems fearless in his openness to whatever is human. To this adjective we must add the contextual element: when openness is most necessary, in terms of our moral interactions—for example, listening and speaking. That context we can call *encounter*, for it is not merely human interaction that can be described as encounter.

*From Emptiness to Openness: The Ways of Faith and Reason*

The philosopher and prophet share an intrepid openness in their sphere of encounter. And they both experience a kind of emptiness that precedes these encounters. The prophet is burdened by the tasks that he alone discerns, which she alone must embrace. Then, when the truth is offered, there is no reward, much more likely there is scorn and derision. Emptiness, for the prophet, is born of weakness. Human frailty bears witness to the fact that there is a truth larger than any culture, any political arrangement, any meaningful sentimentality that will dissipate in the face of ultimate truth. Societies have their gods and prophets dismantle them with speech. The prophet cannot help speaking, out of his own weakness, the truth God has given to him. Here is Jeremiah: "I say to myself I will not mention him, I will speak in his name no more. But then it becomes like a fire burning in my heart" (Jer 20:7-9). The prophet's weakness is not only that he or she recedes from the challenges of speaking, but does not know exactly the course of speech that would be most effective; here is Merton: "The great question then is how do we communicate with the modern world? If in fact communication has been reduced to pseudo-communication, to the celebration of pseudo-events and the irate clashing of incompatible myth-systems, how are we to avoid falling into this predicament?"<sup>31</sup>

There is a void here, a marked inability, a confession of defeat, an emptiness. He goes on to suggest that human encounter is the

answer, that the love between citizens brings a new beginning; an alternative to the problem. Openness is the other side, if you will, of emptiness. In the prophet the emptiness is born of weakness and a dire frustration that no one hears. In Merton's case, human encounter is the "answer." Openness to the other is the other side of emptiness of spirit.

The emptiness of the philosopher is a mind void of ideology, of intellectual agenda. The philosopher, ideally, has no premises that would bespeak ideological leanings. The philosopher's emptiness precedes exploration. It is out of intellectual emptiness that the philosopher must climb, lifted by the rungs of his own reason—the philosopher climbs into his own capacity to think. Every idea, every possible line of reasoning is a door, many doors are closed on inspection, but many remain opened to explore again. The philosopher's emptiness leads to the careful articulation of many ideas so that what is most ordinary becomes illuminated by the depths of reason. A television becomes a device, a device becomes an object of disburdenment, some disburdenment is good, yet the pattern of disburdenment fragments. The moral complex of our culture of technology is picked apart, analyzed, critiqued—we are open to the good technology can bring, we are openly aware of the problems it manifests. The emptiness of faith affirms the truth of God. The emptiness of reason pursues truth in the concrete—in the ethos of our time. In the case of Merton and Borgmann we see a mutual cross-fertilization of faith and reason across history and through the genuine tasks the disciplines of prophecy and philosophy undertake.

### Notes

1. See Annette Holba, *Philosophical Leisure: Recuperative Praxis for Human Communication* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2007); Josef Pieper, *Leisure the Basis of Culture* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009).
2. Albert Borgmann, *The Philosophy of Language: Historical Foundations and Contemporary Issues* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1974).
3. For an overview of contemporary philosophy of technology see Val Dusek, *Philosophy*

- of Technology: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006); the interpretation of Borgsmann as idealist is from Dusek, I have chosen to add "personalist," 127-28.
4. Albert Borgsmann, *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life: A Philosophical Inquiry*, 1984; 5th printing 1997; *Crossing the Postmodern Divide*, 1992, *Holding onto Reality: The Nature of Information at the Turn of the Millennium*, 1999. (all published Chicago: University of Chicago Press).
  5. Borgsmann, *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life*, 41-42.
  6. Albert Borgsmann, "Reflections and Reviews: The Moral Complexion of Consumption," *Journal of Consumer Research* 26 (2000): 418-422, 420.
  7. Borgsmann, *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life*, 39.
  8. The article by Albert Borgsmann, "Contemplation in a Technological Era: Learning from Thomas Merton," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 64 (2012): 3-10, is the catalyst for this essay. Also published in *Merton Annual* 24 (2011): 54-66.
  9. In addition to my own reading of Merton I have relied on two interpreters, Robert Inchausti, ed. *Echoing Silence: Thomas Merton on the Vocation of Writing* (Boston: New Seeds, 2007), vii-x, and *Subversive Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2005), 94-100, and *Thomas Merton: Selected Essays*, ed. Patrick F. O'Connell (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2013).
  10. Inchausti, ed., *Echoing Silence*, x.
  11. In his introduction to the essay, O'Connell suggests that it is one of Merton's most explicit on the question of Western technological modes and the possibility of contemplation, *Merton: Selected Essays*, 225. Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1968), 223.
  12. Christopher Framuk, "Apocalypticism in a Catholic Key: Lessons from Thomas Merton," *Horizons* 36, no. 2 (2009): 235-64, 248.
  13. *Faith and Violence*, 163.
  14. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961), 6, 1.
  15. The second chapter in *New Seeds of Contemplation* is entitled *What Contemplation is Not*. Note that Merton employs a philosophical method ancient and medieval called the *via negativa*: coming to define something by delineating what a thing is not. The assumption is that certain things can never be known in their essence, for example, God. This philosophical method was never acceptable to certain forms of logical positivism (modernity) and the verification principle or confirmation principle that demands that for statements to make any sense they have to be empirically verified. We employ the *via negativa* all the time, if I were to tell my five year old son what shark tastes like, I might begin by saying, "well it does not taste like barbequed ribs." Our point is that Merton thought philosophically all the time by virtue of his understanding of the Catholic philosophical tradition and the Latin that it employed.
  16. Borgsmann, "Contemplation in a Technological Era," 4.
  17. Merton, *Faith and Violence*, 151.
  18. Borgsmann, "Contemplation in a Technological Era," 5-6.
  19. *Ibid.*, 3.

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20. Ibid. Borgmann calls the prophet passionate and a pioneer; he calls the philosopher dispassionate, systematic, and a settler.
21. Ibid., 6.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid., 4.
24. Ibid., 5.
25. Ibid., 7.
26. In Borgmann's book of collected essays he writes: "It is a simple fact that philosophy as a professional discipline commands neither assent nor attention. When Anglo-American philosophers contemplate the state of their art, they readily concede the lack of consensus within their profession and the indifference of the culture at large to the profession itself. At the same time there is no denying the extreme rigor and precision of contemporary philosophical work, which gives the impression that all the finely wrought philosophical pieces are destined eventually to fit together into a compelling, imposing, and intricate structure. But one will search in vain for the emerging outlines of such an edifice." See, *Power Failure: Christianity in the Culture of Technology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2003), 12.
27. Borgmann, "Contemplation in a Technological Era," 7.
28. Ibid., 8.
29. Ibid., 9.
30. It is true that the word "contains" has a sort of pronounced duplicity. Contains means holds back, cuts off, but it also means holds, or has; I mean it in the former sense. See the work of Paul Ricoeur I have consulted, "The Metaphorical Process," in *Exploring the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. David Steward (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1988), 235-48.
31. Merton, *Faith and Violence*, 163.

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