Contents

1

The Foundation of the False Self

I

The terms "true self" and "false self" are not the creations of Merton, in the sense in which the term "unconscious" is the creation of Freud or the phrase "cogito ergo sum" is unique to Descartes. Merton's spirituality is firmly grounded in Christian revelation and tradition. His genius lies not in founding a new spirituality, nor in coining his own unique concepts, but in drawing forth unrecognized and unappreciated, yet vitally important, elements from various traditions. He brings these elements together in new configurations more meaningful to contemporary man.

We will begin this chapter by indicating briefly the scriptural and sacramental basis for what Merton terms the false self.

In Genesis we see that the foundation of our life and identity resides in our unique, life-giving relationship with God. Likewise, in Genesis we see that the archetypal disobedience of Adam and Eve has caused our spiritual death by damaging our relationship with God.

From very early in Israel's history there is planted in her heart a seed of hope for deliverance from this self-inflicted bondage to death. Israel yearns for a Messiah. She cries out to God for deliverance and her cry is answered in the person of Jesus.

"In the beginning," the opening line of the Gospel of John, clearly echoes the opening line of Genesis. New Testament texts make clear that, in Jesus, our origins begin anew. By Jesus' acceptance of the Father's will he has restored our relationship with God. Jesus, the New Adam, gives birth to the New Man by giving

to mankind the Spirit in whom Jesus is one with the Father. Jesus takes the effects of Adam's disobedience upon himself and in his death "death dies." Jesus, in resurrected glory, appears before us as the firstfruits of a new humankind whose life is once again grounded in God, in whom there is no death.

Christian life is clearly presented in the New Testament to be primarily a participation in the life of Christ. We are called "to die with him" by "dying to sin" so that we might "rise with him." Life in Christ does not then begin at biological death, but rather begins now in a death to self, in a conversion, a *metanoia*, in which we "put on the mind of Christ" and live a life through Christ in the Spirit. Thus Paul says that "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old order has passed away; now all is new!" (2 Cor 5:17).

This reality is made sacramentally present within the believing community by the initiation rite of Baptism. The early Christian practice of adult baptism by immersion gave graphic symbolic expression to this sharing in the death and resurrection of Christ. The writings of the Fathers speak of the waters of Baptism as both a womb and a tomb. The one being baptized goes down into the water as Christ went down into the earth in death. The coming up out of the water is Christ rising in glory, victorious over death. In Baptism the Spirit, given entrance through faith, incorporates the Christian into Christ's life. Christ's life becomes our own so that we can say with Paul, "for me to live is Christ."

But our daily life and our prayer quickly reveal to us that our life in Christ is a life in becoming. Christ is the door that leads to life, but we ourselves must walk through that door by sharing in his death in order to share in his life. This calls for a daily and sometimes arduous struggle, a daily carrying of our cross which is, above all, our own deeply seated rebellion against God and our resulting tendency toward death. This tendency to sin and death is itself a mystery. It is the darkness that has been redeemed by Christ but which we must constantly and with effort bring to his healing gaze. It is sin. It is what Merton calls the false self.

II

We pursue the spiritual life as children of Adam struggling to give birth to the new and original self given to us by God and restored to us by Christ. We struggle as though in labor. From the rich soil of our hopes there spring forth only thorns. The tiniest flower demands our sweat before it appears through the rocky ground. We spend our nights in weeping and our days in toil. We strive to grow beyond ourselves, to give birth to Christ's life within us.

We are like the hideous man Merton presents to us in *The Way of Chuang Tzu*:

> When a hideous man becomes a father
> And a son is born to him
> In the middle of the night
> He trembles and lights a lamp
> And runs to look in anguish
> On that child's face
> To see whom he resembles.[1]

Each day we rise from prayer and rush to the mirror of self-awareness in the hope of discovering that our efforts have given birth to the image of someone who does not bear the mark of our disfigurement. Each day we hope to discover the face of a child born anew. But left to our own devices we discover only the old man of misguided self-seeking. Adam lives within us. In his disobedience unto death we behold ourselves. Our daily actions, our blindness in prayer, reveal to us that the wound dealt upon the human heart still pulses and festers within us.

The core of our being is drawn like a stone to the quiet depths of each moment where God waits for us with eternal longing. But to those depths the false self will not let us travel. Like stones skipped across the surface of the water we are kept skimming along the peripheral, one-dimensional fringes of life. To sink is to

vanish. To sink into the unknown depths of God's call to union with himself is to lose all that the false self knows and cherishes.

Thus, the false self does not face or even acknowledge the darkness within. On the contrary, the darkness is proclaimed to be the brightest of lights. The false self, like a ruling despot, demands unquestioning obedience. Everything must be kept moving in an endless cult of domination and exploitation.

But, while turning from the ways of the false self to the path of interior prayer, we find ourselves on the horns of a dilemma which is finally resolved only in a childlike abandonment to God's mercy. On the one hand there is the great truth that from the first moment of my existence the deepest dimension of my life is that I am made by God for union with himself. The deepest dimension of my identity as a human person is that I share in God's own life both now and in eternity in a relationship of untold intimacy.

On the other hand, my own daily experience impresses upon me the painful truth that my heart has listened to the serpent instead of to God. There is something in me that puts on fig leaves of concealment, kills my brother, builds towers of confusion, and brings cosmic chaos upon the earth. There is something in me that loves darkness rather than light, that rejects God and thereby rejects my own deepest reality as a human person made in the image and likeness of God.

Sin is the word we most often use to refer to this latter aspect of human experience in which we find ourselves negating our own intrinsic relationship to God. Sin taken in this sense does not, of course, refer simply to the isolated actions which we call sinful. Rather, such actions are seen as symptoms or manifestations of sin taken as the state or condition of alienation in which we find ourselves. As Paul expresses it in Romans, ". . . I am weak flesh sold unto slavery of sin. I cannot understand my own actions. I do not do what I want to do but what I hate. . . . What happens is that I do, not the good I will to do, but the evil I do not intend. But

if I do what is against my will, it is not I who do it, but sin which dwells in me" (Rom 7:14–20).

Of sin considered in this way, Merton writes:

> To say I was born in sin is to say I came into the world with a false self. I was born in a mask. I came into existence under a sign of contradiction, being someone that I was never intended to be and therefore a denial of what I am supposed to be. And thus I came into existence and nonexistence at the same time because from the very start I was something that I was not.[2]

Here Merton equates sin with the identity-giving structures of the false self. This in itself is significant. The focus of sin is shifted from the realm of morality to that of ontology. For Merton, the matter of *who* we are always precedes what we do. Thus, sin is not essentially an action but rather an identity. Sin is a fundamental stance of wanting to be what we are not. Sin is thus an orientation to falsity, a basic lie concerning our own deepest reality. Likewise, inversely, to turn away from sin is, above all, to turn away from a tragic case of mistaken identity concerning our own selves.

This then is the false self. It is a tragic self, in that it ends up with less than nothing in trying to gain more than the everything which God freely bestows upon his children. The false self is a whole syndrome of lies and illusions that spring from a radical rejection of God in whom alone we find our own truth and ultimate identity.

With this background in mind we can now reflect upon Merton's insights into Adam as the paradigm of the false self. We will more readily be able to understand what is meant by the term the "true self" if we can put our finger on precisely what is false in the false self. But, before proceeding with these and later reflections on Adam in Merton's writings, we would do well to keep in mind that Merton approaches Adam not as a biblical scholar but rather as a spokesman of the Christian contemplative traditions.

The Genesis text itself tells us that we are sharers in divine life as God's creatures, that we were created to find our fulfillment in our faithful response to God.

The biblical meaning of this text is left intact yet developed by the reflections of later Christian writers of the various patristic, monastic and contemplative traditions. In the light of Christ (the New Adam) and from within the context of contemplative experience (in the Spirit) the Adam and Eve narrative provides a rich source of symbols revealing to us our call from God in creation to become perfectly like him through Christ in the Spirit. It is in continuity with these Christian traditions that Merton turns to Adam in his reflections on the true self in God.

III

Prayer, understood as the distilled awareness of our entire life before God, is a journey forward, a response to a call from the Father to become perfectly like his Son through the power of the Holy Spirit. But this journey forward can also be seen as a kind of journey backward, in which we seek to gain access to the relationship Adam had with God.

In prayer we journey forward to our origin. We close our eyes in prayer and open them in the pristine moment of creation. We open our eyes to find God, his hands still smeared with clay, hovering over us, breathing into us his own divine life, smiling to see in us a reflection of himself. We go to our place of prayer confident that in prayer we transcend both place and time.

In prayer, distinctions like outside and inside, past and future, no longer apply. In prayer, we sit before the gates of Eden and the self the Father created us to be appears, freed from layer upon layer of falsity and distortion in which we had become entangled and lost. In prayer, we experience this going back to our origins as a going into the center of our self, where God holds both our origin and our end in one eternal moment.

Our journey back is thus not a chronological one, going back as a psychiatrist might take his patient to a past event that caused some particular disorientation at the psychological level. It is worth noting, however, that our psychological wholeness is in no way removed from our growth in prayer. The true self is the whole self. A life of prayer involves an integrated wholeness of our entire life before God. We must learn to discover the wounded father and mother living within. We must learn to heal them and at the same time "hate them" by drawing our life and identity not from them, but rather from the Father who ever draws us forward into a land "we know not," yet a land which is our only true home.

Adam is not seen as some historical figure who committed a particular act that brought about a kind of ontological birth defect that is handed down from child to child. Rather, Adam is now. Adam is ourselves in disobedience to God. The garden of Eden prior to the fall is just as much in the future as it is in the past. As we said, the depths of the heart know no time. Both heaven and hell live not only beyond us but also within us, and it is through the door of ourselves that we enter into both.

Considering Adam as an archetypal mirror of ourselves, we see God calling us out of nothingness, drawing us forth from the chaos to give us a relationship of likeness to himself. He breathes into us his own divine life and makes it our own. But God does not sweep over us like a tidal wave. Rather, with power and yet with a divine meekness, he invites us to respond to his call by giving ourselves to him with that same abandonment with which he gives himself to us. It is our love for God that makes us most like God. He asks for our love, our self-donation, in the intimate life-giving encounter with himself that will later be more definitively expressed in terms of *faith* and *covenant*.

Genesis also tells of a serpent who lies about a promise of divinity to God's children. The serpent's promise is a venom that flows into the vibrant, delicate faith bond between ourselves and God. The serpent, midwife of the false self, injects its poisonous

promises into Adam's desire to be like God. This fact alone reveals something of the paradox and mystery of evil, for the serpent's lie is a dark and twisted echo of God's creative act in which he made us sharers of his own divine life. Indeed, for us to want to be like God is simply for us to want to be who God created us to be in his own image and likeness. In short, Adam's desire to be like God springs from the very core of his God-given, God-created identity.

The crux of the matter is, however, that *we cannot be like God without God*. We cannot be like God by usurping God's transcendent sovereignty in a spiritual *coup* that violates God's will. We cannot take our deepest self, which is a gift from God, and wrench it from God's hands to claim it as a coveted possession.

Any expression of self-proclaimed likeness to God is forbidden us, not because it breaks some law arbitrarily decreed by God, but because such an action is tantamount to a fundamental, death-dealing, ontological lie. We are not God. We are not our own origin, nor are we our own ultimate fulfillment. To claim to be so is a suicidal act that wounds our faith relationship with the living God and replaces it with a futile faith in a self that can never exist.

And yet it is this suicidal act that the brazen liar invites Adam to commit—and Adam accepts the offer! In doing so, Adam, in effect, decapitates himself. He tears out his own heart. He gives birth to that sinister child of darkness and death that we are here referring to as the false self, the identity that Merton describes as "someone that I was never intended to be and therefore a denial of what I am supposed to be."

The spiritual life for Merton moves within the context of an identity given to us by God, distorted and hidden by sin and returned to us by Christ. The spiritual life for Merton is a journey in which we discover ourselves in discovering God, and discover God in discovering our true self hidden in God. Merton repeatedly reminds us that we must discover for ourselves what the fallen Adam within us can never see, namely, that

> the secret of my identity is hidden in the love and mercy of God.
>
> But whatever is in God is really identical with Him, for his infinite simplicity admits no division and no distinction. Therefore, I cannot hope to find myself anywhere except in Him.
>
> Ultimately the only way that I can be myself is to become identified with Him in whom is hidden the reason and fulfillment of my existence.
>
> Therefore, there is only one problem on which all my existence, my peace and my happiness depend: to discover myself in discovering God. If I find Him I will find myself and if I find my true self I will find Him.[3]

Our one problem resides in our turning, like Adam, away from the relationship established in the total self-donation of faith. We choose freely to reject God's way of becoming who God calls us to become, and in this rejection we lose our way. We lose both God and ourselves. We choose a life outside God's love and thus choose death. We choose a freedom outside God's will and thus lose all freedom in the narrow confines of a self that can never exist. So it is that the spiritual life centers around the one problem of an identity found in faith. Our true self is a self in communion. It is a self that subsists in God's eternal love. Likewise, the false self is the self that stands outside this created subsisting communion with God that forms our very identity. As Merton puts it,

> When we seem to possess and use our being and natural faculties in a completely autonomous manner, as if our individual ego were the pure source and end of our own acts, then we are in illusion and our acts, however spontaneous they may seem to be, lack spiritual meaning and authenticity.[4]

In our zeal to become the landlords of our own being, we cling to each achievement as a kind of verification of our self-proclaimed

reality. We become the center and God somehow recedes to an invisible fringe. Others become real to the extent they become significant others to the designs of our own ego. And in this process the ALL of God dies in us and the sterile nothingness of our desires becomes our God.

In the following text Merton makes clear that the self-proclaimed autonomy of the false self is but an illusion. He also identifies this illusion with sin and with the blindness of the world understood in Christian terms as the place that was unable to recognize Christ. This illusion, this shadow, this sin, this world, Merton states to be within us all.

> Every one of us is shadowed by an illusory person: a false self.
>
> This is the man I want myself to be but who cannot exist, because God does not know anything about him. And to be unknown of God is altogether too much privacy.
>
> My false and private self is the one who wants to exist outside the reach of God's will and God's love—outside of reality and outside of life. And such a self cannot help but be an illusion.
>
> We are not very good at recognizing illusions, least of all the ones we cherish about ourselves—the ones we are born with and which feed the roots of sin. For most people in the world, there is no greater subjective reality than this false self of theirs, which cannot exist. A life devoted to the cult of this shadow is what is called a life of sin.[5]

The primordial event of Adam's fall continues to live in every act we make in service of the false self. In contrast to this, the spiritual life of the Christian is a life in Christ, through whom we are enabled to remove the shackles of sin and the mask of illusion. In Christ we find the hope of a face-to-face relationship with God, in