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FAITH AND REASON IN THOMAS MERTON: THE "UNIFIED HEART" – A MONK'S SOLUTION?

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RIASSUNTO: ***Fede e ragione in Thomas Merton: il "cuore unificato" – la soluzione di un monaco?*** L'articolo prende l'avvio da uno scambio di lettere tra il monaco americano Thomas Merton ed il filosofo francese Jacques Maritain sul rapporto fede-ragione. Dopo aver considerato l'approccio mertoniano, avvicinandolo ad una posizione simile riscontrata in un carteggio anteriore tra Jacques Maritain ed il Beato Vladimir Ghika (un altro corrispondente affiattato del filosofo francese), l'articolo prosegue suggerendo che per Merton il problema non consistette tanto nel conciliare i dati della scienza con i dogmi della fede, quanto nel raggiungere quell'"unificazione del cuore" auspicata dal filosofo Martin Buber come il vero *cammino dell'uomo*.

Parole-chiave: fede e ragione, Thomas Merton, Vladimir Ghika, Jacques Maritain, Martin Buber, hasidismo, neotomismo, monachesimo, intelligenza, intuizione

REZUMAT: ***Credință și rațiune la Thomas Merton: «unificarea inimii» – soluția unui monah?*** După ce analizează poziția lui Thomas Merton cu privire la raportul dintre credință și rațiune, pornind de la o corespondență a călugărului american cu filosoful francez Jaques Maritain, articolul „Credință și rațiune la Thomas Merton: «unificarea inimii» – soluția unui monah?" arată că pentru Merton, ca și pentru Fericitul Vladimir Ghika (un alt corespondent apropiat al lui Maritain), problema a fost nu atât una de conciliere între datele științei și dogmele credinței, cât mai degrabă una de „unificare a inimii", în sensul atribuit conceptului de către filosoful Martin Buber.

Cuvinte-cheie: rațiune și credință, Thomas Merton, Vladimir Ghika, Jacques Maritain, Martin Buber, hasidism, neotomism, monahism, inteligență, intuiție

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1. A false problem?

A certain segment of the modern thought has accustomed us to view the relationship between faith and reason as an irreconcilable opposition. Yet, it may surprise the contemporary scholar to find out that prominent 20th century thinkers such as Thomas Merton[2] or Blessed Vladimir Ghika[3] were rather unconcerned

[2] Thomas Merton (Prades, France 1915 – Bangkok, Thailand 1968) was an American monk, social activist and writer who converted to Catholicism in 1938. In 1941 he entered the Trappist monastery of Our Lady of Gethsemane. His autobiographical novel *The Seven Storey Mountain*, published in 1948, brought him international acclaim. At the same time, the book sparked a wave of conversions to Catholicism and a steady influx of aspirants to the religious life. Due to his enormous work, his commitment to peace, his intellectual and spiritual exchanges with prominent international personalities, Merton's ideas continue to hold considerable influence to this day (*cf.* Jim Forest, *Living with Wisdom*, Maryknoll NY 1991). His legacy is carried on by the Thomas Merton Center in Louisville, Kentucky (see http://merton.org) and by a great number of independent scholars and research centers. Of his many books, so far Romanian translations have been produced for *New Seeds of Contemplation* (*Noi semințe ale contemplării,* Târgu Lăpuș 2009, translated by Ioana Tătaru); *Mystics and Zen Masters* (*Mistici creștini și maeștri Zen*, vol. I: Bucharest, 2003, translated by Maria-Alina Manolescu, Irina Marin, Petruța-Oana Năiduț; vol. II: Bucharest 2004, translated by Sorana Corneanu, Irina Marin *et al.*). Also, *The Seven Storey Mountain* was translated as *Muntele cu șapte trepte* by Francisca Băltăceanu and Monica Broșteanu (Bucharest 2015), while *The Sign of Jonas* was translated by the author of this article as *Semnul lui Iona*, Bucharest 2016. For an updated list of titles by Thomas Merton, see Paul M. Pearson, Ph.D. (edit.), Thomas Merton: Bibliography*, http://www.merton.org/Research/Resources/Checklist-Bibliography-2017.pdf*. For a comprehensive list of works on Thomas Merton, see Bibliographic Resources, *http://www.merton.org/Research/bibresources.aspx*.

[3] Vladimir Ghika (Constantinople, 1973 – Bucharest 1954) descended from an old noble family which, historically, gave the Romanian countries nine rulers. Raised in the finest Greek-Orthodox tradition, he converted to Catholicism in 1902. After an intense apostolate as a layman, in 1923 he became a priest of the Archdiocese of Paris, where he continued and developed his many religious, charitable and diplomatic commitments. He travelled extensively worldwide, organizing Eucharistic congresses, establishing monasteries and hospitals, promoting charitable or religious projects. After 1939, his apostolic activities would keep him in his country of origin, Romania, where in 1952 he would be arrested by the newly installed communist regime. He died in 1954 in the Jilava Prison. Pope Francis beatified him in 2013. Ghika has been the topic of several biographies, among which: Francisca Băltăceanu *et al.*, *Vladimir Ghika, professeur d'espérance*, Paris 2013; Horia Cosmovici, *Monseniorul: amintiri din viața de apostolat*, Bucharest 1996; Jean Daujat, *L'apôtre du XX^e siècle, Vladimir Ghika*, Paris 1956. Vladimir Ghika's legacy is continued, among others, by the Vladimir Ghika Institute of the Roman-Catholic Archbishopric of Bucharest, Romania (see www.vladimirghika.ro).

with what many of us may tend to consider a "classical problem". Merton's powerful, all-encompassing conversion experience is a good illustration for a different outlook.

After his spiritual awakening, faith in the existence of God ceased *per se* to pose as a question to Merton's reason. The former agnostic simply *knew* that God existed: he had met Him; God was always present to him. Appling an Augustinian expression to this American monk, one may say that God was more intimate to Merton than Merton's own being[4]. Such awareness of God's presence resided in Merton, even during times of darkness or anger, or, conversely, of relaxation and partying with friends: his diaries, his rich correspondence, as well as the testimonies of those who met him in person all testify to that "indwelling presence" of God[5].

As he points out in his autobiography[6], Merton had been drawn to Catholicism by the writings of two neo-Thomistic philosophers: Étienne Gilson's *L'esprit de la philosophie médiévale*, and Jacques Maritain's *Art et scolastique*. After entering the monastery, Merton continued to train in the best tradition of Christian philosophy. Along the Thomistic line of thought, he was convinced that any rational man in full possession of his faculties can and will naturally come to know God. It is interesting, in this sense, to find a similarity of thinking between the opinions expressed by Merton in his correspondence with Jacques Maritain[7],

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[4] *Cf.* Augustine, *Confessiones* 3, 6, 11.

[5] Thomas Merton*, A Life in Letters*, edited by William H. Shannon and Christine M. Bocher, New York 2008, 386.

[6] *Cf.* Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, New York 1949, 171, 203-204.

[7] Jacques Maritain (Paris, 1882 – Toulouse, 1973) was a French philosopher, pedagogue and writer, a prominent figure of neo-Thomism in the 20th century. Converted to Catholicism in 1906, he exerted a major influence on political and philosophical thought, his contribution being decisive, for example, in drafting the Universal Declaration of the Human Rights, adopted in 1948 at the UN. Maritain's correspondence with Merton started in 1939; the two stayed in touch for almost three decades, until Merton's death in 1968. Ghika and Maritain, on the other hand, had met in the Parisian intellectual milieus some time around 1920. Together, they would develop a rich apostolate until 1939, when war separated them definitively (being married to a Jew, Maritain had to seek refuge in the US; Ghika, on the other hand, was surprised by the outbreak of the war in his homeland, Romania; he decided to stay put, and after the war he renewed his decision, choosing to remain behind the Iron Curtain. Ghika was eventually arrested and killed by the newly installed pro-Soviet totalitarian regime). Similarly to Ghika and Merton, Maritain has left an enormous legacy which continues to draw worldwide research. For more information, see, for example, the guidelines of *Le Fonds Maritain*, Bibliothèque nationale et universitaire de Strasbourg, at

and the ideas exchanged earlier, in their own letters, by Jacques Maritain and the Romanian prince Vladimir Ghika.

Both epistolaries include remarks which attest to this likeness of views regarding the relationship between faith and reason. In a letter of 1921 that did not reach us, Maritain forwards Ghika a request to review a recently published book of paleontology[8]. Ghika agrees in principle to do the article, but he points out that the topic is delicate. Not that the book would be a potential challenge to his religious beliefs – on the contrary, he seems not to consider the subject a priority. Also, Ghika's fine intellectual sense tells him that the scientific and the theological discourses do not belong to the same level: there is more to apologetics than a mere criticism of some evolutionist theories. Thus, in a postcard of October 3, 1921, Ghika writes to his friend: "I thought [...] the potential review on Boule to be a project for much later, or even a questionable one. So I haven't resumed work on it since I left Paris..."[9]. And, in a letter of November 24, he continues: "I'm very much behind with Boule and Freud. Regarding Boule, I have jotted down some acceptable notes on several pieces of paper – and the article could appear soon (but it is dangerous, given the delicate topics he keeps touching)..."[10].

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https://www.bnu.fr/fr/services/nos-collections/le-fonds-maritain. The information in this article is based mainly on the works of Jean-Luc Barré, *Jacques et Raïssa Maritain, Les Mendiants du ciel*, Paris 1996, and Luc Verly (editor), Correspondance Vladimir Ghika – Jacques Maritain (extraits), in *Pro Memoria* no. 15-16/2016-2017, Bucharest 2018 (online French version: *https://issuu.com/postulatorvladimirghika/docs/pro-memoria-franceza-nr.-15-16-2016*).

[8] The book Maritain referred to was *Les Hommes fossiles : éléments de paléontologie humaine* (Paris 1921), by Marcellin Boule (1861-1942), a French paleontologist – *cf.* Verly, Correspondance, *Pro Memoria*, 74, footnote to letter of November 24, 1921.

[9] „Je [...] croyais l'éventuelle chronique sur Boule de réalisation éloignée sinon problématique. Ce qui fait que je n'avais rien remis sur le chantier depuis mon départ de Paris..." (*apud* Luc Verly, *Correspondance Vladimir Ghika – Jacques Maritain*, unpublished, postcard of October 3, 1921). Unfortunately Ghika's paper, if it was ever written, did not reach us.

[10] For the reader's delight, I quote the whole paragraph: „... je suis resté très en arrière avec Boule et Freud. Pour Boule j'ai pas mal de notes tracées au vol sur des bouts de papier – et l'article pourrait en sortir sous peu (il est d'ailleurs périlleux, vu les sujets délicats qu'il frôle sans cesse) ; pour Freud le magasin est surtout dans ma tête, et vu mon état actuel, si cela ne presse pas trop, je préférerais en causer avec vous en vous rapportant les « matières premières » (*Revue de Genève*) plutôt que de me mettre à mon bureau pour rédiger le tout. Pour ledit Freud, plus je l'envisage sous toutes ses faces, plus je suis stupéfait de la pauvreté de ses idées et du caractère primaire de ses déductions ou conclusions ; faut-il qu'il y ait un tarissement des sèves intellectuelles de par le monde pour qu'on fasse un sort à d'aussi faibles (et

Unlike his philosopher friend Maritain, Ghika seems less involved in battling those thinkers who seek to oppose faith by scientific reasonings. In this field, Ghika's attitude is governed rather by prudence than by a desire to be right. Implicitly, though, Ghika continues in the line of the powerful minds of the Catholic Church, from Albert the Great to Thomas Aquinas to Robert Bellarmine:[11] new scientific discoveries are not a real challenge to the faith, even when they seem to contradict it. Experimental data reflect transient stages of knowledge, likely to be overcome by subsequent discoveries; and if there seems to be a contradiction between a passage of the Scripture, and science – as Thomas Aquinas points out –, it means that either the biblical passage is misinterpreted, or the scientific theory needs to be revised[12].

In one of his letters to Jacques Maritain, written more than forty-one years later, in November 1967, Thomas Merton conveys a similar stand. Answering a question previously asked by Maritain, Merton confesses that the problem of evolutionism (an epitome for "modern science" and all that it stands for) had never really concerned him. Although – he says –, he is aware that at some point he should look into this matter, too...[13]

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malsaines) productions de sous-vétérinaires." ("... I'm very much behind with Boule and Freud. Regarding Boule, I have jotted down some acceptable notes on several pieces of paper – and the article could appear soon (but it is dangerous, given the delicate topics he keeps touching); for Freud the bulk [of the ideas] is mostly in my head, and given my current state, if things are not urgent, I would prefer to discuss directly with you when bringing you the 'raw materials' (*Revue de Genève*), rather than going to my desk to write it all down. For the said Freud, the more I look at him under all aspects, the more I am amazed at the poverty of his ideas and the primitive character of his deductions or conclusions; mankind's intellectual sap must be really drying up all over the world if such a weak (and unhealthy) production of an under-veterinarian is possible" (*Pro Memoria* 74).

[11] *Cf.* Thomas E. Woods, Jr., *How the Catholic Church Built Western Civilization*, Washington 2005, 72-73. In Chapter Five, "The Church and Science", Woods underlines the fact that, throughout the ages, Catholic theologians have displayed consistent openness towards new scientific discoveries. Such a long-established attitude – Woods points out – can only be the fruit of these thinkers' confidence in the capability of human reason.

[12] Woods, *How the Catholic Church* 72.

[13] In is interesting to note that, unlike his friends Ghika and Merton, Maritain maintained throughout his life a constant interest in the relationship between faith and science. A "frontier philosopher," as his biographer Jean-Luc Barré described him, Maritain made it his mission to reconcile modern thought – be it political, aesthetic or scientific – to superior metaphysical truths.

> "Thanks for your notes on Evolution from a Thomistic viewpoint – Merton writes to his friend Maritain. I will read them carefully when I get a chance. It is a subject that I have hitherto left on the shelf because I am hardly able to keep up with material in my own field. But one must reach a judgment on this also"[14].

At the time he writes these lines, Thomas Merton is almost 53 years old (and he has only one more year left to live, but he doesn't know it at this point). Merton is a scholar who has written and studied extensively, he is a researcher, an independent thinker and a downright rebellious spokesman on "politically correct" subjects, when he feels things are moving away from the path of truth[15]. And yet, quite significantly, he has not felt the need to ask himself the "big questions" a rationalist would ask. For him, religion is as rational as it can be, and scientific theories – constantly being revised – cannot ultimately pose a challenge to Revelation. Moreover, as a member of a monastic order that stood at the foundation of Europe, Merton is all too well aware of the massive intellectual and civil havoc produced in the aftermath of the Enlightenment by the French Revolution"[16], or, later on, by the "atheist-scientific materialism" of the Bolshevik Revolution.

In his book *The Sign of Jonas*[17] (a journal of his years of monastic formation: 1946 to 1952), Merton makes multiple references to the darkness of a certain kind of "rationalism". At the time, Merton is also working on a history of the Trappist Order, which would be published as a book: *The Waters of Siloe*[18]. At this point in his journal, as he conducts his research, Merton mentions an impressive number of Benedictine monasteries spread throughout Europe. Faithful repositories of Ancient and Medieval

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[14] *Cf.* Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth. Letters to Writers*, edited by Christine M. Bochen, New York 1993, 53.

[15] He was, above all, a sincere man, on whom the "excess" of honesty had repeatedly attracted the censorship of his own writings by his Cistercian Superiors, as well as the constant reproaches of those all too eager to conform to the political correctness of the time. Merton opposed the use of the atomic bomb and nuclear experiments, the Vietnam War, racial discrimination and the isolation of socialist states behind the Iron Curtain. For his stand on these issues, see also, Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, New York 1965.

[16] To give just one example, taking university education as an indicator, Thomas Woods points out that ten years after the French Revolution, the number of students in France had dropped from 50,000 to 12,000 – a net decrease of more that 400% (Woods, *How the Catholic Church* 186).

[17] Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*, New York 1956.

[18] Thomas Merton*, The Waters of Siloe,* Garden City 1951.

culture, some of these monasteries had functioned uninterruptedly for over a millennium (will any of our modern institutions still be around one thousand years from now? ...). Under the charge of idleness and obscurantism, the French Revolution chose to dismantle those former hubs of civilization and scientific innovation. At the beginning of the 20th century, Communist governments the world over would do the same. Half a century later, in a letter to Maritain, Merton also senses, and describes in harsh terms, yet another devastation of religious life, that which would be wrought by contemporary consumerism:

> "We are so foolish and we think this earth is our home (well, it will be that after the resurrection), but there is now all the incredible nonsense that is being preached and said about a religionless religion, about total commitment to the modern secular world, etc. etc., it would make you sick if you saw it. One would think there had never been a Calvary, an Auschwitz, a Dachau... These poor idiots have simply determined that it is now time to be very optimistic, and the gamble succeeded, everybody likes it (Christians, I mean)"[19].

2. Unification of the heart

Returning the main idea of this article, so far I have shown that – in his correspondence with Maritain at least – Merton was rather uninterested in the so-called opposition between faith and reason. Contemporary secularism, on the other hand, seems to have accustomed us to take this opposition for certain.

On the contrary, Merton's thought rose on both wings: on faith and reason together – to quote a well-known expression of St. John Paul II[20]. Our American writer was a monk nurtured in the school of Medieval philosophy: so, naturally, doctrines of faith and rational knowledge both led him to the intimacy with the Triune God. But even Merton, in spite of his powerful conversion experience, and in spite of his sound spiritual formation, was pulled down by something.

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[19] Letter to Jacques Maritain, October 6, 1965, in: Merton, *The Courage* 47.

[20] *Cf.* John Paul II, *Fides et ratio* (1988), opening paragraph: "Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth; and God has placed in the human heart a desire to know the truth – in a word, to know himself – so that, by knowing and loving God, men and women may also come to the fullness of truth about themselves" (*http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091998_fides-et-ratio.html,* accessed May 21, 2020).

And quite considerably. One of his editors once remarked that it is very difficult to be a monk when you are an artist. Born to a father who was a painter, and to a mother who had come to Paris to study *les beaux-arts*, Merton had inherited his artistic nature from both parents. He was like a taut harp string, vibrating with every touch. He could not remain indifferent, and that drove him crazy, because he really wanted one thing only: to be with his God, in peace. Here is how he put it on April 3, 1947 (Holy Thursday):

> "I am thinking especially of Holy Communion. Today is a good day to think about it[21]. Everything I came here to find seems to me to be concentrated in the twenty or thirty minutes of silent and happy absorption that follow Communion when I get a chance to make a thanksgiving that seems to me to be a thanksgiving. I like to remain alone and quiet after Mass. Then my mind is relaxed and my imagination is quiet and my will drowns in an attraction that is beyond understanding, beyond definite ideas".

And after he was ordained a priest, he wrote:

> "The Mass is the most wonderful thing that has ever entered my life. When I am at the altar I feel that I am at last the person that God has truly intended me to be. About the lucidity and peace of this prefect sacrifice I have nothing coherent to say. But I am very aware of the most special atmosphere of grace in which the priest moves and breathes at that moment – and all the day afterwards!"[22]

These being Merton's inner dispositions after his conversion (and things never changed with him in this regard), it is understandable that for him the faith-reason relationship was not a problematic one. The problem, rather, was his need for inner unity, his desire to give his whole being as a single offering of adoration and intercession. This was what had brought him to the monastery, and the struggle to reach this goal remained a leading motivation throughout his adult life. Now, this ability to serve God with an undivided *heart*, which Merton deeply yearned for, may not appear to be directly linked to the philosophical *faith or reason* controversy. Yet, some material

[21] Journal entry quoted from Merton, *The Sign* 44. In the Catholic Church, the Liturgy of this day is centered on the Last Supper during which Jesus Christ instituted the Eucharist.

[22] Merton, *The Sign* 193; journal entry of June 4, 1949, Vigil of Pentecost.

I encountered just as I was preparing this article seemed to suggest otherwise: in fact, the relationship between faith and reason carries much more weight than we would think on the ideal of a "unified heart" – and *differently* than we would think.

The reading material I came across consisted of two books, small in size, but rich in significance: one was called *Drumul omului*, by Martin Buber[23], the other was *Noul Romantism negru* (*The New Black Romanticism*)[24], a collection of studies on an exhibition organized by the Romanian National Art Museum and Künsterhaus Bethanien in Berlin.

The first book, Buber's *Way of Man*, spoke of the Hasidic ideal[25] of the inner, unified man. According to Buber, by coming back to his God-given self, man becomes able to regain the original harmony between soul and body, mind and heart, to the point of becoming all "heart."[26] Man's goal in undertaking this unifying process is to turn himself into an offering fully given to God, but for the benefit of the entire mankind. Buber is convinced that through a return to one's own being [*i.e.* to the "heart"], man can find a path to God and, therefore, to the fulfillment of that particular plan for which God has especially destined him. This is the way of man to the only real happiness.

Noul Romantism negru, on the other hand, purposely brought back into question the rationalism of the Enlightenment, as well as various contemporary rationalisms.

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[23] Martin Buber, *Drumul omului după învățătura hasidică*, Iași 2017 (original title: *Der Weg des Menschen nach der chassidischen Lehre*, based on a conference held in 1947. English version: Martin Buber, *The Way of Man: According to Hasidic Teaching*, Nashville, TN 2012). Merton was familiar with the writings of the „Jewish mystic" (he first mentions hearing of him in a journal entry of October 31, 1949 – *cf.* Merton, *The Sign* 133).

[24] Christoph Tannert (coord.), *Noul romantism negru*, Bucharest 2017.

[25] Hasidism: a movement of spiritual revival initiated in the 18th century in Medjibij (a city in Ukraine) by Israel ben Eliezer (circa 1690-1760), a rabbi born probably in Moldavia, south of the river Prut. The movement, which spread mainly to the United States, Britain, and Israel, took its name from the Hebrew word *hasid*, "godly," which in turn was derived from *chesed*, "God-and-people-loving goodness." The meaning of the term summarizes the philosophy of this orthodox movement developed within the Mosaic cult (*cf.* Daniel Coit Gilman *et al.,* Chasidim, *https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_New_International_Encyclop%C3%A6dia/Chasidim*, accessed May 21, 2020).

[26] According to Jewish mentality, the heart represents the whole human being, interiorly unified. Buber's stand is an obvious reference to Deuteronomy 6,4, *Shema Yisrael*: "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is one Lord, and thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might" (NIV).

According to the authors of this collective work, a prominent side effect induced by rationalism on art – in Romanticism and neo-Romanticism alike – can be traced in the artists' (and art consumers') tendency to oppose to mundane rationality, the "irrationality" of creative intuition[27].

How can these ideas contribute to exploring Merton's implicit approach to the faith-reason relationship? First of all, as I will show later, Buber's discourse, centered on the concept of "heart," is closely connected to the idea of *faith*. Second, the book on Romanticism (a cultural trend that also gives great significance to the *heart* motif) plays on the opposition between rationality and intuition. Let me observe that this suggested opposition (not at all a new concept in the history of ideas) is for art, what the opposition of reason to faith represents in a certain perception of religion.

3. On the kinship of faith and reason

At this point, a few remarks on the symbolism carried by the etymology of the Latin terms[28] *fides et ratio* may provide further insight. This is especially true if we take into account not just the two nouns that form the famous binomial, but also the related verbs: *credo, credere* ("believe"), and *reor, reri* ("think," "reckon")[29].

Remotely, the term "reason" comes, through the Old French *raison*, from *ratus*[30] – the past participle of the Latin verb *reri.* Most etymologists attribute the origin of *reri* to a Proto-Indo-European etymon, **re-* . This ancient root is connected to the ideas of "reasoning" and "counting," as well as to such actions as "considering, confirming or

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[27] *Cf.* Tannert, *Noul romantism* 4.

[28] In discussing the following etymologies, I rely mainly on data gathered from: Michel Bréal – Anatole Bailly, *Dictionnaire étymologique latin*, Paris 1898; William Morris (editor), *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, Boston, 1981; Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, *Deutsche Wörterbuch*, online extended version by Trier University, *http://woerterbuchnetz.de*.

[29] I will not discuss here the etymology of the English word "faith," except to point out that it is related to the Latin *fides*, which means "trust, faith, confidence."

[30] REASON (n.) c. 1200, "intellectual faculty that adopts actions to ends," also "statement in an argument, statement of explanation or justification," from Anglo-French *resoun*, Old French*raison* "course; matter; subject; language, speech; thought, opinion," from Latin *rationem* (nominative *ratio*) "reckoning, understanding, motive, cause," from *ratus*, past participle of *reri* "to reckon, think," from PIE root **re-* "to reason, count" – Douglas Harper, Reason, *www.etymonline.com/search?q=reason*, accessed May 9, 2020.

ratifying"[31]. As one of the many off-springs of **re- / reri*, *ratus* subsequently produced the Latin noun *ratio*, which means "reason," precisely, but also "calculation," and – possibly an earlier meaning – "portion, part". This last meaning signifies "that which is due to an individual"; ratio is what results after a division has been performed in view of further distribution; hence modern English words like "rate, ration, rationalize" etc. Other meanings of *ratio* in Latin include "reckoning, numbering, calculation," as well as "business affair, procedure," which brings us to the term "ratify", mentioned earlier.

Trying to read the ancestral wisdom encoded in *ratio*'s metaphor, one may describe reason as the process of understanding by *dividing* the observable reality into distinct elements (see Latin *rationes*, "portions"), or simply by *counting* and collecting those elements. Division and selection are necessary processes allowing the intellect[32] to analyze and assign otherwise random information to cognitive categories. Reasoning in this way is what helps the individual to make sense of the world around him, and to take hold of it (the old principle *divide et impera* could be read here as "research and comprehend"). Being a procedure that requires clarity and an ability to balance and discern multiple factors, reason has been associated habitually with such physical phenomena as light, brightness, and a lucid and unobstructed view. At the same time, given their connaturalness to mathematical precision and calculations, in the more creative milieus *reason*, and its corollary *rationality* happen to be seen as somewhat mechanical, merely materialistic and even mercantile operations, opposed to the higher intuitive or transcending *inspiration*.

Credo[33] – "faith"[34], on the other hand, comes from the Latin verb *credere*,

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[31] In its variant *ar(e)*-, "to fit together," linguists tend to assign the same root to a variety of modern words such as: "rate," "arithmetic," and also "order," "rite," "adorn" etc.

[32] Another metaphor-rooted word, coming from the Latin verb *intelligo*, composed of *inter*-, "between," and *lego, legere*, "to choose; to pick out, to read."

[33] CREDO (n.) early 13c., "the Creed in the Church service," from Latin *credo* "I believe," the first word of the Apostles' and Nicene creeds, first person singular present indicative of *credere* "to believe," from PIE compound **kerd-dhe*- "to believe," literally "to put one's heart" (source also of Old Irish *cretim*, Irish *creidim*, Welsh *credu* "I believe," Sanskrit *śrad-dhā*- "faith, confidence, devotion"), from PIE root *kerd- "heart." The nativized form is creed. General sense of "formula or statement of belief" is from 1580s – Douglas Harper, Credo, *www.etymonline.com/search?q=credo*, accessed May 9, 2020.

[34] Interestingly, unlike most modern Indo-European languages, instead of the Latin word *fìdes* the Romanian language has kept the root of *credo* for the term designating the notion of faith. Other Romance languages display similarly derived words, like the Italian *credenza – croyance* in French, *crença*

originally a composite word made of the Proto-Indo-European *kerd-* "heart" (but also "mind," "intelligence"!)[35] and **dha*, "to place." *Credere*, "to believe," means to place one's *heart* on somebody or something! Here, the ancient metaphor is even more transparent than in the etymology of the word "reason." According to this "figure of thought," *credere* is that process, or rather attitude, which consists in "placing, or giving your heart" totally and confidently to a certain reality. But, of course, such a desire for total devotion cannot occur without a good reason (excuse the involuntary pun). Philosophically, to believe means to adhere to a high value, so high that it has impressed itself on the mind as being true to the core, conquering the very heart of a person. Such value can only be an ontological one, something on which the very life of the person, the essence of one's existence, depends. *In absoluto, credere* means adhering to the ontological Truth that one has discovered – in a person, in an idea or in a state of things: "I believe in God, I believe in the Bible, I believe in the resurrection of the dead etc."

Informed by the symbolic knowledge encrypted in these ancestral meanings, we may sum up by saying that reason (*ratio)* is a function of the intellect, while faith *(credo)* is a function of the will. Reason is a faculty of the human mind, a mental process evidenced by the capacity for dissociation and analysis. On the other hand, faith, which at first we might have tended to associate with affectivity rather than with the intellect, actually turns out to encompass both. Faith (as metaphorically described by the etymology of the word *credere*) is an attitude, a choice. It develops through a process of intuition, comprehension and synthesis, and it results in one's *voluntary adherence* to what is known or discovered to be true. Faith, therefore, not only does not oppose reason, but it includes it, being a much more complex dimension than reason itself. Faith is an act of the will – a will informed by the intellect and

in Portuguese, *creencia* in Spanish –, but in all these languages the respective terms developed a "weak" sense of the Latin verb, indicating a mere *belief*, an *opinion* relative to a certain group or cultural context, whereas the Romanian word *credință* continues the "strong", religious meaning. The Romanian words *credință* and *a crede* primarily designate the act of placing your faith in the Absolute, as described by the theological virtue of Faith, or by Abraham's faith, for example (a secondary meaning referring to "common belief" is also present, similarly to the other Romance languages).

[35] *Cf.* Breal-Bailly, *Dictionnaire étymologique* 56.

sustained by affectivity[36]. Finally, the essence of this act is total adhesion to an ontological value perceived as *the* Truth.

All these aspects are touched implicitly in the two abovementioned books. The etymology of *credere* clearly supports Buber's discourse on the "undivided, unified heart" (*The Way of Man*). In its approach to creativity, the second book, *Noul Romantism*, draws a fine line by opposing artistic intuition to rationality. The relationship suggests an indirect analogy with the philosophical opposition between faith and reason. This "lay" reading may lead one to think that intuition is faith's specific prerogative, whereas analysis is the prerogative of reason. Yet, some scholars see things differently (and the etymological data we have just presented seem to confirm their stand). Thus, already in *La Pensée et le mouvant* (1934)[37], Bergson affirmed that *intuition* occurs as a result of quantitative *analytical* accumulations (generally, information that is received and analyzed unconsciously). On the other hand, according to the same philosopher, the analytical processes implied in reasoning are not entirely foreign to one or more primary intuitions which trigger and may further support analytical thought (reason). In significant continuity with the Bergsonian interpretation, one of the studies included in *Noul Romantism negru* mentions the fact that 21st century researchers have begun to see intuition as a superior form of intelligence[38]. The story we read between the lines of this study is similar to the one described by the metaphors encrypted in the etymologies of *ratio* and *credo*: it is a story about a reason that divides (in order to infer and master the information from the world around), and about an integrative intuition which totally embraces the truth it has encountered – albeit in a highly synthetic, and sometimes indistinct, manner.

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One tentative conclusion of this long excursus is that faith and reason are two approaches not alien to each other. Their common denominator could be found in the all-encompassing concept of "heart" – as defined by Buber in *The Way of Man*. Traditionally, the heart is both "mind" and "love"; it is the seat of the will, and also the

[36] Significantly, and wisely, the English language has a word, *sense,* that designates at the same time both reason and feeling!

[37] *Apud https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henri_Bergson*, accessed on January 5, 2017.

[38] Călin Stegerean, in Tannert, *Noul romantism* 2.

inner forum that ultimately confirms the ontological validity of the elements submitted by reason. The heart is the essence of man, and that which keeps him going. Therefore, the real conflict does not reside in the so-called antagonism between the dogmas of faith and the findings of reason (which is, after all, a superficial opposition). Rather, the conflict resides much deeper, in the diverging allegiances inhabiting the heart of a man who, divided inwardly, can no longer find himself. The overriding question, "Adam, where are you?" (Genesis 3,9) is – as Buber says – just a simple attempt to awaken man to reality, a reminder of his inner unity which he lost by separating himself from the Truth. God's first question, addressed to man in Paradise, is also an urgent call to all humanity, an invitation to regain possession of the faculties of body and soul together, in a fully unified "heart-person".

The call still stands. In a religious sense – as we have already seen –, this call for inner unity/unification aims at leading one to share, undivided, in the existence of God who is the source of all existence. Thomas Merton sought and desired such a unified heart throughout his life. This was the reason for which he entered the monastery in the first place, and the reason for which he remained there even as numerous calls from within and without attempted to drag him in different directions.

Indeed, it was said of Merton that he had planned to leave the religious state. Not true. He did want to leave Gethsemane, right at the beginning of his novitiate, but only in order to transfer to a monastery with a more contemplative lifestyle; he even wrote to the Pope in this regard, but, not receiving permission, he obeyed and… stayed.

There was also much talk about Merton's relationship, when he was already 50 years old, with a young woman half his age. Otherwise a sincere love story, fresh and surprising like an unexpected spring, this relationship was out of place, and Merton knew it. It all happened in the wave of post Vatican II enthusiasm, when a lot of monks and priests were leaving the religious life and were getting married. Yet, when confronted with the irregularity of his situation, Merton chose to give up the relationship and remain in the monastery.

Merton was also said to have been drawn to the idea of a syncretism with Eastern religions. Again, not true. On the contrary, according to the direct testimonies of the Dalai Lama and other Tibetan masters, whom Merton met during his Asian journey, it was precisely because of this American monk that Christianity was better understood in the Oriental religious milieus[39]. Chatral Sangye Rimpoche (1913-2015), for example,

[39] *Cf.* Forest, *Living with Wisdom* 206.

was amazed to be able to communicate so easily with a Christian; in fact, he confessed to Merton that for the first time in his life he had understood what Christianity was all about. As for Merton himself, during his journey through the Far East, shortly before his sudden death, he had noted:

> "Thinking about my own life and future, it is still a very open question. I am beginning to appreciate the hermitage at Gethsemane more than I did last summer when things seemed so noisy and crowded. [...] There is no problem of my wanting simply to leave Gethsemane. It is my monastery and being away helped me to see it in perspective and to love it more"[40].

And just a few days before he died, in a circular letter he wrote to those at home:

> "I wish you all peace and joy in the Lord and an increase in faith: for in my contacts with these new friends I also feel consolation in my own faith in Jesus Christ and His indwelling presence. I hope and believe He may be present in the hearts of us all"[41].

I have mentioned here just a few salient details; an in-depth study of Merton's biography will only add to the list, as a standing proof to his relentless quest for inner unity. If we were to choose one feature that most defines Merton's personality, it could very well be this irrepressible, existential need to be "truthful to the Truth" – the need to give his heart to the God of love, whom he had encountered.

4. Conclusion

Merton's autobiographical literature, his diaries and letters, as well as his writings on spirituality seem to testify to a non-conflicting relationship between faith and reason. The course of his life took Merton from his native village in Southern France to a childhood spent between Long Island (New York), Bermuda and France, then to studies at Cambridge, in England, and at Columbia University, back again in New York. Finally, at the age of 27 he entered a Trappist monastery in Kentucky. With the exception of some short trips and his great "Asian journey," Merton spent the next twenty seven years (that is, the whole second half of his life) within the walls of the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemane. Still, he found his death

[40] Merton, *The Asian Journal*, *apud* Forest, *Living with Wisdom* 202 and 204.

[41] Merton, *A Life in Letters* 386.

unexpectedly on the other side of the world, in Bangkok, just as he was ready to embark on a new adventure: understanding the contemplative dimension of the great Eastern religions.

Clearly, with such a diversity of exposures, his life could not be alien to all sorts of oscillations and queries; yet, in spite of all the questions that marked Merton's experiences, the monk who became a writer never doubted the existence of God. He did not falter in his faith when he was questioning his initial vocational choice (after entering the Trappists, he would have liked to join a "more austere" order – the Carthusians). He did not falter when overnight celebrity propelled him into the social arena, exposing him all the challenges of the mid 20th century – and there were many! He did not falter when, now a hermit, the need for affection drove him into a relationship that would have meant giving up his calling. In the end, he did not falter in his faith – as some people think – even when, after having insisted a lot with his superiors, he received permission to take his "Asian tour," meeting with the Dalai Lama and with prominent Zen and Sufi masters.

Otherwise an extremely sensitive artist, Merton showed – in terms of the relationship between faith and reason – a balance that his monastic brothers from the Middle Ages would have called "supernatural." In his work on the history of his Order, *The Waters of Siloe*, Merton had described the essence of monasticism as follows:

> "It is by the activity of our mind and will that we know and love: it is in the cloister that the monk finds his sunlight and companionship and books. But above activity, in the dark church of the *memoria* where there is no explicit thought, and where acts of the will are mute as in the depths of their ultimate causes, the soul meets God in the ineffable darkness of an immediate contact that transcends every activity, every intuition, every flame of virtue or love. [...] It is in the inner sanctuary of the spirit that the monk achieves the supreme purpose of his whole life and really fulfills his vocation – by union with God in perfectly pure and disinterested love that seeks no reward, because God Himself is its reward"[42].

After finding his God, Merton thought of nothing more than to be a priest and a monk. The word "monk" comes from the Greek μόνος, where it means "alone," "solitary," but also "one," "undivided." This was Merton's implicit solution to the "faith or reason" issue. In a broader sense – which means attaining an unified heart – it can be our solution, too.

[42] Merton, *The Waters of Siloe* 279.