REFORM WITHOUT REVOLUTION: DISCRETIO AS THE LEGACY OF THE CARThUSIANS

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In this paper I wish to suggest that the much touted and, recently, much more decried slogan, Carthusia nuncquam reformata quia nuncquam deformata is not a form of triumphalism or naive idolization of the Carthusians and hence need not be "muddling through," via discretio at properly discerned moments, rather than one's strengths and weaknesses, is one important aspect of discretio, as I have set forth not so much arguing that discretio is unique to the Carthusians, which would be absurd, but that the Carthusians held on to it when the culture in general abandoned it and who live a nineteenth-century way of life in the computer age. Both are commonly represented as utterly changing. Both remain hidden (and thus fascinating) to outsiders, which means that their processes for evaluating innovations also remain largely hidden. When confronted with an innovation the Amish elders retreat behind closed doors, consulting each other informally or in infrequent but crucial formal council meetings, paralleling the Carthusian general chapter, differentiorium, and election system. The results are communicated in-house only, not broadcast to the outside world. A potential innovation (tractors, automobiles, rubber tires on tractors, organized missionary or caritative work, Sunday schools) is shrewdly analyzed for its probable impact on the community's distant-yet-not-utterly-removed relation with the outside world and a decision reached for the entire community, which has agreed in advance to accept the decision. In practice this has led to the Amish rejecting electricity and telephones wired into their homes but accepting the use of public pay telephones and employing gasoline-powered generators to run farm machinery; rejecting the ownership of automobiles but hiring "English" neighbors to drive them to town or half-way across the country; seeing themselves as burdened under the gaze of gawking tourists come to observe their "quaint" way of life yet earning a living by selling handmade furniture, quilts, and other crafts to them. To outsiders this looks like a hypocritical (note the kingship--dia-krasis, discretio) compromise with the outside world from which they claim to wish to be separated. It is actually a shrewd negotiating of a discernible mediam path. And this discernment is the key to their ability to maintain today a way of life remarkably consistent with their original way of life. 1

But what do I mean by discretio in the Carthusian tradition? I have in mind acute empirical observation and analysis of the problem at hand (clinical psychological-sociological), then proper discernment of moments, rather than attempts to apply dynamic equivalence or naive idolization of the Carthusians and hence need not be "muddling through," via discretio at properly discerned moments, rather than one's strengths and weaknesses, is one important aspect of discretio, as I have set forth not so much arguing that discretio is unique to the Carthusians, which would be absurd, but that the Carthusians held on to it when the culture in general abandoned it and who live a nineteenth-century way of life in the computer age. Both are commonly represented as utterly changing. Both remain hidden (and thus fascinating) to outsiders, which means that their processes for evaluating innovations also remain largely hidden. When confronted with an innovation the Amish elders retreat behind closed doors, consulting each other informally or in infrequent but crucial formal council meetings, paralleling the Carthusian general chapter, differentiorium, and election system. The results are communicated in-house only, not broadcast to the outside world. A potential innovation (tractors, automobiles, rubber tires on tractors, organized missionary or caritative work, Sunday schools) is shrewdly analyzed for its probable impact on the community's distant-yet-not-utterly-removed relation with the outside world and a decision reached for the entire community, which has agreed in advance to accept the decision. In practice this has led to the Amish rejecting electricity and telephones wired into their homes but accepting the use of public pay telephones and employing gasoline-powered generators to run farm machinery; rejecting the ownership of automobiles but hiring "English" neighbors to drive them to town or half-way across the country; seeing themselves as burdened under the gaze of gawking tourists come to observe their "quaint" way of life yet earning a living by selling handmade furniture, quilts, and other crafts to them. To outsiders this looks like a hypocritical (note the kingship--dia-krasis, discretio) compromise with the outside world from which they claim to wish to be separated. It is actually a shrewd negotiating of a discernible mediam path. And this discernment is the key to their ability to maintain today a way of life remarkably consistent with their original way of life. 1

1. Compare the Carthusian ordinationes, created as a record of General Chapter meetings but disseminated only for use within the houses of the Order, with the minutes of the Amish minutes council meetings of the middle nineteenth century studied by Paton Yoder in Tradition and Transition.

2. Amish do lose many members unwilling to abide by such decisions, but such hemorrhaging of membership is not nearly so excessive as to threaten to bleed them to death. Contrary to repeated dire predictions that they would disappear, they have grown and thrived in numbers over the last century, since they became clearly distinct from the mainstream Mennonites. Those who leave usually join their Mennonite cousins of one sort or another, though a range of groups between Mennonites and Amish has also emerged: e.g. the Beachy Amish, "New Amish" Amish Brotherhood, King Amish, Fellowship Amish, Conservative Amish Mennonite etc. See The Mennonite Encyclopedia, vol. 5, ed. Cornelius J. Dyck and Dennis D. Martin (Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1990), p. 200, 20-22.


4. For instance, selling crafts to tourists permits them at least partially to turn an odious development into something serving their needs, since they can produce the items at home on a small scale, employing family members, rather than going to work in factories. Since World War II, the shift to huge agribusinesses dominating the farming economy in the United States, combined with suburban sprawl has driven land prices beyond the reach of many Amish families seeking to establish their children on farmland. Some alternative way of earning a living was essential; the tourist-craft trade suits them admirably. See Krabill, Riddle.

5. They have thus discovered a true dynamic equivalence approach, which allows for interesting comparison with International Commission on English in the Liturgy's (representing modern professional liturgists) inept employing of "dynamic equivalence" principles of translation to transform the Catholic liturgy into vernacular banality (see note 62 below). The Carthusian liqueur may represent a similar shrewd negotiation of the path from medieval general pharmacology and extensive agriculture carried on by surfclays (flying brothers, tenants, employees) to a modern commercial venture that could be carried on in much the same arms-length way yet bring a satisfactory return.

spiritual observation in the case of the original masters of discretio, the Desert Fathers) combined with a divine gift. It represents the collective wisdom of the community and the tradition applied to individuals representing individual cases. It is an art, not merely a science: a skill learned by long practice, an ability to do something well, rather than mere knowledge of something, though it requires and yields knowledge. It is fundamentally aesthetic. As with all sapiential skills, it is learned by patterning experience, from the outside in, through an external cultivation and training that is nonetheless built on careful rational-intellectual analysis. As practiced by the earliest monks, it was an expression of the "movements of the heart" and of the strategies and memories of the Devil stimulated within it, an exegesis of the alphabet of the heart, to quote Peter Brown.  


20. See, for instance, Abadarr Macnayre's discussion of ancient Greek virtues in After Virtue, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, 1981, 1984), 149-55: The virtues are those qualities that enable an individual to achieve eudaimonia; the lack of which will frustrate movement toward that telos; the immediate outcome of the exercise of a virtue is a choice that issues in right action (149) and to act virtuously is to act from inclination formed by the cultivation of the virtues (149). Yet virtuous acting is not merely being well-trained, since a well-trained soldier may do what courage would demand in a particular setting, but not because he is courageous, rather because he is well-trained or afraid of punishment. Choices thus require judgment, above all phronesis, an intellectual virtue. But the application of phronesis can involve what to Christians would constitute sin: Odysseus as grandson of Hermes (son of Autochtho), is the quintessential liar, yet he does so with equanimity and equilibrio, he has enough discernment of this sort to carry it all off. In other words, the Greek hero is one who employed skilled cunning leading to success. One might also compare Cicero, De Officiis, Bk l, translated as On Duties, ed. M. T. Griffin and E. M. Atkins, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge U. Press, 1991) with Ambrose's, De officiis ministrorum (PL 25, 1945), a precis of Gregory the Great's classic Pastoral Rule. This classical, pagan approach to practical wisdom resurfaces in the Renaissance. See Susan Snyder, "The Left Hand of God: Despair in Medieval and Renaissance Tradition," Studies in the Renaissance, 12 (1965), 18-59, 34-44.
For, precisely because the Devil "cannot draw them into open evil, he instead tempts and attacks them all the more forcefully, astutely, and cunningly under the guise of virtues, they lack all the more the virtue of discretion."21

Now, discretion is certainly not central for Carthusians alone. As we have already seen, it was central to the Desert tradition, as transmitted to the West via John Cassian,22 but also through the Latin translations of John Climacus and the collections of the Sayings of the Desert Fathers. From these sources it figures prominently in the Benedictine leadership. Discretion figures prominently in both monastic23 and secular24 priests throughout the Middle Ages.

Indeed, far from being limited to the Carthusians, according to Arno Borst, "Ausgleich and "measuredness" were also key elements in the mentality of the medieval lower nobility (from whose ranks many patrons of the early Carthusians came), only to disappear as the later medieval nobility developed a more erudite and highly articulated way of training their sons and as a fanaticism of power replaced the spiritual discipline that once kept alive the knightly ideal of measuredness.25


23 Whereas Benedict's rule uses discretion three times and discernere five times, the Rule of the Master uses discernere only twice and discretion not at all, yet the latter work is three times longer. Yet the Regula Benedicti is a cluster of terms: considerare, cogitare, providere, temperare, mensurare facere, and considerare nine times, and the Master uses the term only once and the verb nineteen times considerare. For Benedict, however, consideratio and Dekkers, "Discretio" chez saint Benoît et saint Grégoire, "Discretio in the Sinne der Regel Benedictis und ihrer Tradition," Erbe und Auftrag, 52 (1976), 362-73.


25 E.g., Robert Holcot, on the fal discretionis in his Super libros sapientiae (Hagenau, 1494, reprinted Frankfurt a. M.: Minerva, 1974), capitulum IV, lectio XLVI.

Yet, as important as discretio was to all segments of medieval society, I believe it was particularly crucial for Carthusians, and, as it has ceased to be a central skill in the modern world, constitutes a Carthusian legacy to us all. Why do I make this claim?

(1) Discretio is the key to the departure from Reims by Bruno, who was, according to the earliest Carthusian chronicle, "a most saintly man, and gifted with twin sciences, namely outstanding in divine eloquence as much as in ciceronian human eloquence; shining with discretion, devotion, and excellence of character of life." The spiritual gift of discretio also figured in his and his companions' reception by Hugh of Grenoble who, aided by a vision, perceived 'them to have been called by God and led by the Spirit of God to Hugh, and led to the place already pointed out by the angels, he had no doubt that the words of God in the Gospel applied to them: 'Their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father' [Mt 18:10].

(2) Moreover, if, as Bruno Rieder has argued, Guigo I's Meditationes are his musings on the challenges presented by the prior's office,26 then discretion offers the key to this fascinating work—but under the label utilitas rather than discretio. Rieder has shown that, for Guigo, utilitas is the key to understanding mediation, avoiding false polarizations, and achieving a proper application of general rules.27 Discovering the utilitas of anything is necessarily relational, since something will always only be useful for someone because it requires belief in a cosmic order to make sense:28 created in the image of God, our ultimate utilitas is worship and service of God. Discretio is the means to discover this, above all to discover this in ways that might at first seem counterintuitive, e.g., sitting patiently in one's cell.29

For Nicholas Kempf, discretio is the key to all action, for it not only distinguishes true from false virtues but distinguishes spirit, soul, and marrow (Heb 4:12), where the marrow refers to the principal intention, or the affectio out of which the intent proceeds, a principal intent that is more intimate to the person than his own mind knows the way that God penetrates everything He has made.30 For Kempf, mystical union simply proceeds out of the clarifying of this intention.

(3) Discretio proves to be central in the life of contemplation. Referring to the second stage of divinely infused contemplation, Guigo de Ponte notes how hidden intuition helps discern between the human and the divine, between pure, full light and total darkness.31 In each of the twelve steps of the contemplative life one...
must “discern through spiritual experience what one reads.” The analogical leap itself is dependent on having gained discretion:

“She is now able to turn easily from one manner [of ascent] to the other [i.e., one is analogical, by renunciation; the other by affirmation, speculative]. Even though, as it seems, intellectual rapture cannot occur without affective rapture, nor affective rapture without an element of intellectual rapture, when she ascends in the aforementioned manner, the godly spirit has learned to discern between the two and to exercise and maintain each according to its characteristics. To be affected toward God is the same as to enjoy God in his presence.”

Discretio is a combination of knowledge and skill, of knowledge and practice. Thus, in the mystical ascent, for Hugh of Balma as well as Nicholas Kempf, the mystical ascent begins in purgation, moves through knowledge and surges up into the famous totally affective analogical ascent; yet yields a higher knowledge—what Kempf calls the scientia sanctarum. Bruno Rieder has illustrated well how Guigo I moves from discerning utilitas to contemplation: because the utilitas is closely bound up with the rectum et bonum and because God is the supreme instance of the utilitas principle, that is, God is the one who wants nothing other than the salvation, well-being, Heil of others, for God, no conflict can exist between self-interest and the common good. One ought not say that a utilitas exists for God, rather, that God is the highest utilitas. Hence, utilitas really means the true love and worship of God. It comes by grace, not by one’s own effort. For Guigo mysticism is not some rarified deification or bright vision but rather it is to be what God intended one to be, namely, to love, to enter into the perichoresis of the inner life of the Trinitarian relations. Contemplation is simply to abide in love, in the words of John’s Gospel.4

Discretio is the key for Carthusians when deciding whether to become active in the world or not. I have dealt with this at length in my book on Nicholas Kempf.5 Here I may simply note that Sigrid Haude, in an article in the Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte, would not have needed to be surprised at the shift from “contemplative silence” to activist reform on the part of the Cologne Carthusians had she been more familiar with the Carthusian understanding of discretio.5

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4 Discretio is the key to the Carthusian process of reform over many centuries, a process of deliberate reform rather than revolution. Where other religious orders found themselves making sharp shifts constitutionally (e.g., the formation of congregations by the once autonomous Benedictines, beginning with the late medieval Bursfeld or Santa Justina reforms and leading to the modern Benedictine congregation system) or, at least, with a distinct lack of discretio (e.g., the reform of La Trappe among the Cistercians), with whose founder, Jean de Rancé, the Carthusian Prior General, Innocent Le Masson, tangled over the nature of good monastic observance6), the Carthusian approach, like that of the Amish, was to move slowly and cautiously, changing as little as possible, despite outside pressure. Certainly significant change and evolution took place during the first two centuries of Carthusian life, part of the normal growing process of a new order. But after the Statuta Antiqua absorbed and replaced the Consuetudines Guingon in the middle of the thirteenth century as the definitive legislation (1259-1271), changes were relatively limited in scope. The Statuta Nova (1368) were essentially appendices to the thirteenth-century legislation at the appropriate places. The sixteenth-century Terzo Compilatio made such minimal changes as to permit them to be clustered into thirteen short chapters. When the universal church entered into a period of consolidation and reform in the mid-sixteenth century the Carthusians, obedient to the decisions of the Council of Trent, undertook another reconfiguration of the order’s legislation. The first part of the Statutes was printed separately as an Ordinarium containing liturgical legislation for daily office (Breviary, 1587, 1643, 1879?), with a separate regula (1562, 1603, 1679, 1713?), while the second and third parts

5 Louis Lekai underscores the lack of discretion on the part of Augustin de Lestrange (1754-1827). At Valsainte: his regulations... were beyond normal human endurance and incompatible with genuine Cistercian traditions,” leading to a schism between those who returned to the observance of Abbot Rancé and a distinction between the “New Reform” and the “Old Reform.” Perhaps the roots of the immoderation of the post-Vatican II Trappist reform lie in lack of discretio during the nineteenth-century reform,7 indeed, to the “innovations” and immoderation even of the emerging “Strict Observance” of the seventeenth century, which, rather than reifying the “common observance,” had resulted in schism, including even factionalism within the Strict Observance during the seventeenth. In fairness, however, one must admit that anyone less full of zeal than de Lestrange would never have survived the rigors of the years spent dodging Napoleon across all of Europe as far and even across the Atlantic. One suspects that Lekai, writing in the immediate aftermath of the Second Vatican Council in which the past was frequently portrayed as narrow and excessively ascetic and penitential, might have unwittingly exaggerated the failings of his Trappist cousins in the area of discretion. See Louis J. Lekai, The Cistercians: Ideals and Reality (Kent, Ohio: Kent State U. press, 1977), pp. 138-152, 181-186.

6 On Le Masson, see the discussion of his Disciplina, below.

7 The Statuta Jancelini (1222) and the De reformatione of Prior Bernard (1248) deal entirely with hoc changes growing out of several generations of praxis. See James Hogg, The Statuta Jancelini (1222) and the De Reformatione of Prior Bernard (1248), Analecta Catusiana, 65 (Salzburg, 1978). Hogg refers to “essential changes” (“wesentliche Abänderungen” under Priors Jancelin and Bernard (1222, 1224): three days of fasting on bread and water per week reduced to one day, monks no longer prepared their food for themselves in their cells. See “Kartäuser,” in Theologie in Deutschland, vol. 17 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1988), pp. 666-673, at 668.

became the "Statutes," the Nova Collectio Statutarum (1582, 1681, 1688) (with papal approval, 1736, 1879). Here we have a real reconfiguring and reintegrating of all the previous legislation, but still largely limited to its form rather than its contents. The contents remained in essential continuity with the past; such changes as were required by the Council of Trent were minimal and unnecessary changes were avoided. That is the epitome of discretion. The seventeenth century merely witnessed the reprinting, with minor emendations, of this late sixteenth-century legislation. Dom Innocent Le Masson's late seventeenth-century synopsis of what had remained the same and what had changed and his consideration of the specific characteristics that enabled the Carthusians to preserve their original observance with which he concluded his study. Here we can merely summarize his conclusions briefly: genuine rather than feigned cantus in the tenacious adherence to the form of life laid down in

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The text of the Carthusian Missal has not been included in the documents series of The Evolution of the Carthusian Statutes from the Consuetudines Cuigonis to the Terra Compilatio, but Dom Emmanuel Cluzet's detailed study of the origins of the Carthusian Missal in relation to those of the Cluniacs, Cistercians, the canons of Saint-Ruf, and the dioceses surrounding the Grande Chartreuse Cartusian, Analecta Cartusiana, 99, 26-31 (Salzburg, 1994). Notable are Dom Cluzet's comments at the end of his first volume, asking if it would not be appropriate for a Carthusian aggiornamento ("qui caeterum ille in prima Chartuense period, with moments of "qui" were there or there? where additional authority.

The Nova Collectio was first published under Bernard II Carasse (prior to the Grande Chartreuse, 1566-1586), revised with slight revisions 1681 under Dom Innocent Masson, with some corrections the order's legislation, see his introduction to The Evolution of the Carthusian Statutes from the Consuetudines Cuigonis to the Terra Compilatio, Documents, vol. 5: Nova Collectio Staturorum, pp. 1-200, based on the unpublished researches of Irénée Jaricot, "Essai sur l'Histoire de nos Statutes," Air de l'histoire des origines du missel Chartuense (Salzburg, 1993). AC 99.5-6 contains the later 1681 edition of the had been expunged. The latter 1681 edition is the one that was reprinted in 1736 and 1879.

The examples are those pointed out by James Hogg in his introduction to AC 99.8, pp. vi-vii. The Evolution of the Carthusian Statutes from the Consuetudines Cuigonis to the Terra Compilatio, Documents, vol. 1: Nova Collectio Staturorum, pp. vi-vii. See also Hubert Elie, Les Editions des Statute of Nova Collectio, rather than the 1681 edition, from which Dom Le Masson's unauthorized additions were expunged. The latter 1681 edition is the one that was reprinted in 1736 and 1879. The examples are those pointed out by James Hogg in his introduction to AC 99.8, pp. vi-vii.

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restructured under new clusters of topics and the lay brethren are now more completely integrated within the structure of the collection, but the actual content of the legislation remains in remarkable continuity with the ancient statutes."

In this light, a careful comparison of the process undertaken by the Trappists after Vatican II, the reform commission charged with revising the Roman liturgy, and the Carthusian reforms would make a good Doktorarbeit.

Of course, to analyze fully the post-Vatican II Carthusian reform vis-à-vis the Trappists, one would need to study the particulars of life in Carthusian houses, not just the formal documents. This is difficult if not impossible to do, compared to studying the once-cloistered Trappists, whose "Centering Prayer" and publishing apostolates are readily accessible. But even this situation underscores my point: the Carthusians have maintained tight claustration, rightly making it difficult, though not impossible, even for those enamored of them, to know just how much has changed in the wake of the application of the revised statutes. The fact that the Trappists make it so easy to find out what they are doing places Carthusian discretion in high relief.

That the present prior of the Grande Chartreuse has recently undertaken to ask the houses of the order to aid the planned new history of the Carthusian Order indicates a definite development, but that such histories of the order have been planned on several occasions over the past few centuries and that even the plans are structured in such a way as to keep the order at a carefully chosen arms-length distance from the project while still encouraging the order to proceed along the lines of the sort of discretion that I have in mind. This is exactly what Guigo I was doing when he inserted an explanation, based on "sober discretion, for why the Chartreuse could not provide for the horses of guests: no, we will not completely rule out receiving guests, but we cannot make it easy for them to come." As Le Masson pointed out, "carefully chosen and delimited interaction with outsiders, including even the most favorably disposed academics, has always been an important factor in maintaining the original Carthusian propositum.

As we now survey the ruins of the liturgy created by dynamic equivalency "translations" and the considerable loss of Catholic identity in most Western European and North American parishes, which in North America at least, are in many aspects virtually indistinguishable from Methodist or Presbyterian congregations, the wisdom of Carthusian soberness stands out.

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18. Inspired by the popularity of the life and writings of Thomas Merton and the monastic revival in Trappist houses that resulted from his autobiography, a number of Trappists, perhaps most notably Basil Pennington, were influential, working with lay scholars, in establishing the highly successful Cistercian Fathers and Cistercian Studies series, making the writings of the Cistercians available in English. The publishing work is carried on by the Cistercian Institute, an academic institute at Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, Michigan, though Cistercians of the Strict Observance and Common Observance have participated in significant numbers in sessions organized by the Cistercian Institute at the annual medieval studies congresses. Trappists regularly participate in a variety of other academic and churchly venues, requiring a level of travel outside the monastery that would be unthinkable for Carthusians (and would have been unthinkable to Trappists in the mid-1950s).

20. Pennington's early historical studies of Cistercian history and spirituality were largely conventional; his later work, e.g., Thomas Merton, Brother Monks: The Quest for True Freedom (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987) reflects his order's much more active role in the world. One might profitably contrast Merton's journal of his early years at Cethamess Abbey, The Song of Jonas (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1953), with his mid-1960s writings and with works about him by Pennington and others to gain a sense of the degree of change in four decades.


41. Disciplina, 557, 575-583.

42. It must be emphasized that the disaster in English-speaking areas results primarily from the adaptations permitted by national episcopal conferences, not from the Latin Novus Ordo itself. The conferences permitted additional alternative prayers, leading to a variety in liturgical practice that rivals that of Presbyterians and Methodists and that discards entirely the long history of "centering prayer" see Christopher Noble, "Christian Contemplation and Centering Prayer," Hymnology and Pastoral Review, 94.6 (March 1994), 24-32, 45-46.
But, my listeners are undoubtedly asking, what you mean by discrėtio is little more than a common-sense approach to change and continuity. That I even have to emphasize the centrality of discrėtio is a testimony to how characteristic revolutionary change has been for the Modern Project. I have written about the difference between reform and revolution at length elsewhere. Here I can only outline some major elements.

If John Cassian and Gregory the Great understood discrėtio as an art rather than science, then the shift from a grammar-, literary-, person-based scholarship to an exaggeratedly logic-based scholarship, a shift that only fully takes place in the fourteenth century, is significant. The parallel development in political institutions comes only in the modern era, when, completely disenchanted by abuses of power by absolutist kings, the bearers of the bourgeois revolutions abandoned faith in personal rule in order to create written constitutions. In between lies the Protestant Reformation which, similarly disillusioned by abuses of power on the part of bishops, popes, and abbots, abandoned a living, organic, personal-yet-ecclesial government for a government of the Church scriptūra sola. Both written constitutions and sacred Scripture, of course, require interpretation. This need has, in the twentieth century, brought back oligarchic personal rule in the western so-called democracies. For instance, court decisions rather than legislation passed by elected assemblies now drive social and political change in North Atlantic "democracies." Similarly, the Protestant reformers, disenchanted with personal government by bishops, handed over responsibility for interpreting Scripture to scholarly experts in Greek and Hebrew, effectively, to university professors of theology. When the universities secularized during the so-called "Enlightenment," Scripture study was reduced essentially to modern, i.e., historicist, method. At the other end of the spectrum, a highly idiosyncratic and personal anti-intellectual interpretation of Scripture dominated the Evangelical Protestants who arose in response to the secularization of university theology. This, in turn, has led to a plethora of splintered denominations and sects. In short, giving up on an ecclesiastical oligarchy or idiosyncratic and non-ecclesial personal government by theological illiterate laymen (and, increasingly, an oligarchy of theologically illiterate laywomen).

We can see a fundamental mistrust, indeed rejection, of the principle of personal discretion in Martin Luther, who sees the very principle of discretion as leading to abuse. Referring to advice to his friend Augustinians at Erlft about his spiritual Anfechtungen, Luther said:

"Ahi! (they say) what are you worrying about? It isn't necessary; you have only to be humble and patient. Do you think that God requires such strict conduct from you? He knows all your imaginings and he is good. One groan will please him. Do you think that nobody can be saved unless he behaves so strictly? Where would all the others be, then, in whom you see no such vileness? Perish the thought that they should all be lost! It really is necessary to observe 'discretion,' etc. And so gradually the unhappy soul forgets the fear of the Lord, and that the kingdom of heaven suffers violence."

The move from reform as seeking to distinguish abuse from proper use toward blanket condemnations of existing structures may be seen at every turn in the transitional century of the modern era, the sixteenth. In place of the classic Catholic understanding of sin as effacing but not destroying the image of God and free choice in man, both Calvin and Luther, in somewhat different ways, assert a complete destruction of free will, the destruction of the image of God in man, "total depravity" of human nature, and a deterministic view of predestination.

In contrast, the Carthusian Georg Carpentarius exemplified Carthusian discretion even in his reaction to Luther: he greeted Luther's appearance on the public stage initially with joy, and he continued to recognize much that was good in Luther's writings, but he could not approve of Luther's extension and development of his teaching in opposition to the recognized leadership of the church. In December 1522 Adam Petri printed Luther's New Testament translation and gave the Basel Carthusians several copies. They set one aside for the lay brothers. Written on its first page is a comment by Carpentarius to the effect that the translation undoubtedly contains much of Luther's teaching, but little of it is offensive (ärgelich), moreover, each person must read these things with discretion and not build upon anything other than what the common Christians and holy fathers had already accepted. After Petri and Carpentarius, the Carthusians were copies of Luther's commentary on Galatians, the very work in which Luther expressed his exasperation with the theological misunderstandings of the monastic discretion. Carpentarius wrote: "At the time [this was written] Luther had not been condemned, but was condemned about two years later, after he had persisted in his vehemence (protervitas) in writings that contained both good and bad. And thus he deserved to be condemned equally with the others. Thus this..."
commentary is read with judgment [i.e., with discretion, with critical evaluation] or even is neglected."

When Carpentin reported in his chronicle on the fact that the authorities in Zurich had had all their church plate melted down with the proceeds designated for the town poor," he commented that "the intent, it would seem on its face is not to be disapproved of, but it remains to be seen what effects will come of it. ... I cannot make any judgment on these things; if they have done good, it will become apparent. They will have to stand or fall before their own lord."

A full exploration of these matters exceeds the confines of the present paper. However, one can suggest that abandoning discretion, above all abandoning the principle that abusus non tollit usum, lies at the heart of all these developments. Properly angry at ecclesiastical or political abuses, instead of seeking to reform existing institutions, the Carthusians avoided, even when much of the rest of the Catholic Church in Western Europe and North America abandoned, in the name of a putative "Spirit" of Vatican II and without attention to the letter of Vatican II, the principle and practice of discretion.

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1. Der Spielfilm «Breken Silence» - ein Mythos für das ausgehende 20. Jh.?

Vermutlich haben einige von Ihnen den Film «Breken Silence» im Kino selber gesehen. 1996 war dieser Spielfilm mit einem Kartäusermönch als merkwürdig unzeitgemässer Hauptfigur bei der Filmkritik und auf Filmfestivals, aber auch in den Kinos erstaunlich erfolgreich. Es wurde eine Art Kultfilm.1 Was steckt hinter diesem Erfolg? - mal abgesehen davon, dass der Film gut gemacht ist, Spannung und Unterhaltung bietet, und schauspielerisch hervorragend besetzt ist?


Der Film erzählt also den Mythos eines aus der »Welt« völlig ausgegrenzten Bereiches, erzählt damit im ursprünglichen Sinn von einem heiligen Ort, von einem noch nicht profanierten Paradies. Sie erinnern sich vielleicht auch noch an den einst erfolgreichen Buchtitel «Das weiße Paradies» über das Leben der Kartäuser in La Valsainte.2 Und dieser Eindruck des Überzeitlichen und Überörtlichen - was ja wesentlich zu einem Mythos gehört - wird im Film noch betont durch die Spiegelung in der fernöstlichen Szenerie (Indien und Indonesien), durch die der Kartäusermönch gefunden wird.

Moderne Mythen werden nicht mehr am Herdfeuer, sondern in Filmen erzählt.3 Dabei ist mir durchaus klar, dass der klassisch religionswissenschaftliche Begriff des Mythos auf diese modernen Mythen nicht tel quel übertragbar ist. Gleichwohl lassen sich...