

Desiring God implicitly: ‘worldly union desires’ and openness to God

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Abstract: ‘Interested non-belief’ in God is now a common attitude, and one religious outlook such non-believers should take seriously is the Christian contemplative tradition. Drawing on C. S. Lewis, I identify the familiar phenomenon of ‘worldly union desire’: elicited by worldly things, and aimed at union with some beauty or goodness therein. I examine specifically Thomas Merton’s contemplative outlook, arguing that by his lights worldly union desires manifest a desire for God and aid spiritual openness. Merton’s picture extends any purely secular value in worldly union desire-experiences, giving union with God – and the spirituality aimed at this goal – a deep existential appeal for non-believers.

Non-believing openness and religious desire

Charles Taylor, in *A Secular Age*, notes that in the West today, belief in God is ‘one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace’ (Taylor (2007), 3). Here I’ll primarily address this mindset. If one sees a deep importance in searching for God, can one cultivate religious openness without belief?¹ That is, if one cannot believe that God is real, can one nonetheless cultivate openness to the inestimable benefits that would be available if God *were* real – cultivate an attitude that would conduce to one’s eventually being able to receive and live out those benefits? Framing this question as I do in terms of theistic belief, I’ll use Christianity as a case study.² I’ll argue that a particular Christian conception of the spiritual life should be taken seriously within the secular mindset Taylor describes. I’ll do this by showing how such a life can include activity that doesn’t explicitly reference theism, and that is therefore eminently available to non-believers as a way of cultivating openness to the goal of the spiritual life thus conceived. This activity is centred on a kind of *desire*: I’ll suggest that some non-religious desires can stand in fruitful relation to the desire for God, on the

Christian account I examine. These non-religious desires can help in reaching the satisfaction of the desire for God that, on this Christian picture, constitutes our final happiness.

Desire for God: setting a standard

To start with, we'll need some understanding of what I call 'rightly ordered' desire concerning God: of the sort of desire it's in God's nature to satisfy. A helpful resource here is, I submit, the Christian *contemplative* tradition, since it says things especially relevant for our purposes about both desire for God and other desires. Given this tradition's breadth, I'll focus on one writer: Thomas Merton. Merton is clear and recent: though he stands in a long tradition,³ his culture and language are familiar enough to make understanding him relatively straightforward. Moreover, his voice is distinctive and personal, vividly emerging from a real human life.

In Merton's emphasis on passing in silent prayer beyond idolatrous preconceptions of God,⁴ there's a standard for rightly ordered desire: lacking any self-regard, and fully satisfied in loving union with God. Call this a 'union desire' concerning God. I won't attempt a detailed characterization of union. The main thought here is that a rightly ordered desire concerning God would be satisfied in a knowledge and love so intimate that one would no longer see one's identity as different from God's nature.⁵

With this notion of rightly ordered desire, let's home in on the issue motivating my argument: namely, the spiritual value of desires *not* centred on God. Merton urges us at one point to '[keep] our soul . . . empty of desires for all . . . things that please . . . our nature, no matter how . . . sublime' (Merton (1999), 153). However, we might be reluctant to take such a negative spiritual assessment of worldly desires as our general view. Alvin Plantinga, for instance, writes of 'passionate desire[s] to be united with the object of desire', such as sexual longing or the yearning elicited by great beauty. He suggests that these are *signs, foreshadowings*, and *types* of longing for God – *manifestations* of the desire for union.⁶ Call these *worldly union desires*. In the following sections I'll consider desire along several philosophical and theological dimensions. I'll argue that by the lights of Merton's contemplative spirituality, taken more widely than the comment on desire quoted a moment ago, worldly union desires stand in a fruitful relation to a union desire concerning God, and are thus nourishing for the spiritual life.

Desire: philosophical and theological considerations

Philosophical

In what follows, I borrow a crucial notion from Talbot Brewer: *dialectical desire*. This is 'self-augmenting attraction to [things] represented . . . [as] intrinsically good'. It draws one into 'dialectical activity', 'whose value cannot be grasped . . .

[perfectly] from the outset, but must be progressively clarified via engagement in the activity'. As one's knowledge of the desire's object is clarified, so is the desire itself. Examples of dialectical activity include 'initiat[ing] an intimate love relationship . . . or deepen[ing] our appreciation of an unfamiliar genre of music'.⁷

On this characterization, union desire concerning God is dialectical.⁸ If God is real (which I assume for argument's sake, to give 'interested non-believers' something to which they can cultivate openness), then one's knowledge of God will start off incomplete, and be deepened through practices that give expression to one's desire. As one's knowledge deepens, the desire will too, taking in progressively more of who God is.⁹

With this in mind I'll introduce the relation that, I submit, can hold between worldly union desires and a union desire concerning God: namely, one desire's being a *manifestation and form* of another. My desire to write this article is a manifestation and form of my desire to contribute to the philosophy of religion. My desire to sing in a choir is a manifestation and form of my desire to engage with sacred music. Now all these desires are for states of affairs. However, plausibly some desires are irreducible to desires for states of affairs.¹⁰ The simplest way of distinguishing between these two kinds of desire is as follows. A desire of the first kind takes as its object a state of affairs to be brought about; it's 'a call to world-making'. A desire of the second kind, in Brewer's words, takes as its object something 'already wholly present if not wholly appreciated . . . The attraction is not itself a call to world-making, but rather a magnetic attraction to [something] already there to be vividly appreciated.'¹¹ As an example of the second kind, *interpersonal* desire can remain even after any given desire for a state of affairs is satisfied; hence, the desire for the person cannot be identical with any desire for a state of affairs.¹² The lack of total satisfaction of the non-state-of-affairs desire can draw us further into a relationship in which a loved one is increasingly revealed to us. As Brewer has put it, '[t]o love another is to be drawn to another by a generous straining to bring into focus the goodness, hence desirability, of an as yet obscure object of desire' (Brewer (2006), 280). Similar things are true of our appreciating music, art, or poetry. And, importantly, such non-state-of-affairs desires can stand in the manifestation/form relation. For instance, a non-state-of-affairs desire for another person can take the form of and be manifested in an attraction to, and thus a non-state-of-affairs desire for, something the person enjoys. If I love someone and believe she enjoys Herbert's poetry, then I may well be attracted to Herbert's poetry because I see reading it as a way of deepening my knowledge of my beloved.

From the above examples, I suggest the following condition:

MANIFESTATION/FORM

Desire *a* is a manifestation and form of desire *b*

if and only if

the desirer has *a* because she takes attaining (or partly attaining) *a*'s object to be a way of attaining (or partly attaining) *b*'s object.

b takes a specific form dictated by the circumstances, finding manifestation in *a*. Thus *a*'s deepest significance for the desirer derives from *b*. It's important to note that the relation can hold even if the desirer is unaware of underlying *b*, and so hasn't conceptualized *b* or its object in any way. For instance, I might have an unacknowledged desire for a sense of belonging, and desire to sing in a choir because I unconsciously associate it with belonging. Again, these seem to be desires for states of affairs; but it also looks as though the manifestation/form relation can hold between *non-state-of-affairs* desires, even if the desirer is unaware of the underlying desire. For instance, I might have an unacknowledged desire for a particular person, and, holding a non-occurrent belief that she enjoys Herbert's poetry, I may be attracted to it because I see reading it as a way of becoming better acquainted with the person I desire – even though I haven't admitted this to myself. But regardless of whether we consider plausible an interpersonal case such as this, the primary question for our purposes is whether an underlying, non-state-of-affairs desire for *God* can find manifestation and form in another non-state-of-affairs-desire, even if the desirer is unaware of her underlying desire for God. And I shall argue later that, by the lights of Merton's contemplative spirituality, this is indeed possible.

Additionally, between desires in a manifestation/form relation, another relation can hold:

APPROPRIATENESS

Desire *a* is appropriate relative to desire *b*
if and only if

attaining (or partly attaining) *a*'s object really is a way of attaining (or partly attaining) *b*'s object.

Clearly APPROPRIATENESS is conceptually distinct from MANIFESTATION/FORM: in the abstract, we can make sense of the idea that someone takes (partly) attaining *a*'s object to be a way of (partly) attaining *b*'s object, without thinking she is *correct* in doing so. To return to the earlier example, perhaps singing in this particular choir is not in fact a way of attaining a sense of belonging, even though I take it to be. However, we'll see a little later that when we apply the two relations theologically, they are not separable in practice: a worldly union desire's appropriateness is part of what makes it a manifestation and form of a union desire for God.

Theological

For Merton, recall, rightly ordered desire concerning God lacks any self-regard; moreover, it's ultimately a desire for *God*, rather than a state-of-affairs desire for union:

[I]f we consider . . . mystical union . . . as something that perfects [us] and gives us the highest possible happiness . . . it is possible to desire it [selfishly] . . . The essence of [mystical] union is a pure and selfless love that empties the soul of all pride . . . so that nothing may be left of it but

the pure capacity for [God] . . . To desire *God* is the most fundamental of . . . human desires . . . the . . . root of . . . our quest for happiness. (Merton (1999), 125, my emphasis)¹³

However, such desire is fully satisfied in loving union with God – our most complete fulfilment:

Contemplation, by which we know and love God as he is in himself . . . is the fulfilment of deep capacities . . . that God has willed should never be fulfilled in any other way . . . [W]here contemplation becomes what it is really meant to be, it is . . . God . . . identifying a created life with his own Life so that there is nothing left of any significance but God living in God. (*ibid.*, 150, 184)

We don't automatically have a pure union desire for God: if we consciously desire him at all, we inevitably domesticate him into how we'd like him to be, or grasp at him possessively.¹⁴ Still, everyone has some union desire for God, however unacknowledged. After describing the 'ecstasy of pure love' that is union with God, Merton declares: 'this is what all hearts pray for when they cry: "Thy will be done"' (*ibid.*, 186–187).¹⁵

Philosophical applied to theological

Union desires elicited by things other than God, which I've called worldly union desires, are readily recognizable. We've encountered Plantinga's 'passionate desire[s] to be united with the object of desire'. C. S. Lewis also vividly describes this kind of experience, calling it 'Sweet Desire' (Lewis (1986a), Preface) or 'Joy' (Lewis (1986b), *passim*). It's an intense longing, a painful delight,¹⁶ whose object and stimulus are distinct. The object is

that unnameable something, desire for which pierces us like a rapier at the smell of a bonfire, the sound of wild ducks flying overhead, the title of *The Well at the World's End*, the opening lines of *Kubla Khan*, the morning cobwebs in late summer, or the noise of falling waves . . . (Lewis (1986a), 15)¹⁷

In general, stimuli might include art, music, poetry, nature, or other people. But object and stimulus, though distinct, are related. We're awakened to the possibility of a beauty and goodness glimpsed in the stimulus, with which we long to be united: in Joy's 'visitations', says Lewis, 'we became aware of our fragmentary . . . nature and ached for that impossible reunion which would annihilate us' (Lewis (1986b), 177).¹⁸ The longing, then, need not be explicitly for God.

I've claimed that worldly union desires can help in reaching the satisfaction of the desire for God that, on Merton's picture, constitutes our final happiness. That is, worldly union desires can help in eventually attaining union with God, if such union is possible. Specifically, I claim the following:

CENTRAL CLAIM

By the lights of Merton's spirituality, worldly union desires are *appropriate manifestations and forms* of a union desire for God.

Let's now apply our earlier philosophical considerations to union desire for God:

THEOLOGICAL MANIFESTATION/FORM

Desire *a* is a manifestation and form of a union desire for God

if and only if

the desirer has *a* because she takes attaining (or partly attaining) *a*'s object to be a way of attaining (or partly attaining) God in loving union.

Do worldly union desires satisfy this condition, by Merton's lights? I submit that they do, given some features of Merton's spirituality and some general features of desire. Suppose you have a union desire for God – which, Merton maintains, you do, however unconsciously. If, as Merton claims, the desire's satisfaction in union with God would constitute your deepest fulfilment, then you'd recognize that satisfaction by the deep fulfilment that it would afford – by the fact that the desire would be at rest. Thus, plausibly, you'd recognize *glimpses* of the desire's satisfaction by the glimpses of deep fulfilment that they'd afford. By Merton's lights, as I'll argue shortly, the beauty and goodness in worldly union desire elicitors offer glimpses of satisfaction of the union desire for God. Therefore, assuming you're receptive enough, in encountering such beauty or goodness you'll *recognize* a glimpse of satisfaction of your union desire for God. Moreover, it seems entirely plausible that this can happen even if you're unaware of that desire. If you have an underlying desire for something that is glimpsed in other things, then those other things will be lit up in your experience with special salience and significance. But there is no reason to think that this alone would necessarily render the underlying desire transparent to you, without further reflection and self-examination. You recognize, then, a glimpse of satisfaction of your union desire for God. You'll therefore sense, however inchoately and inarticulately, that partly 'attaining' the beauty or goodness in which you glimpse that satisfaction – feeling partly united with it – would be a way of partly attaining the object of your union desire for God. If you're unaware of your underlying desire for God then such a sense will be below the level of conscious awareness; but once again, this notion poses no real problems to our understanding. Assuming the idea of an unconscious desire makes sense (and it certainly did for Merton), it's entirely natural to think of such a desire as guiding someone to pursue things that seem to promise satisfaction. If the desirer is unaware of the underlying desire, then 'seeming to promise satisfaction' would take the form of being lit up with the salience and significance described earlier.

Because the beauty and goodness you encounter in some aspect of the world seem to promise satisfaction of your underlying desire for God, you'll come to desire that beauty and goodness: you'll form a worldly union desire. Nonetheless the whole process may be unconscious, experienced simply as the worldly union desire. Your worldly union desire will thus satisfy the condition for being a manifestation and form of a union desire for God. Assuming,

then, that this account is accurate, we get part of my central claim: by Merton's lights, worldly union desires are manifestations and forms of a union desire for God.

Let's now look at the other part of my central claim, which was included in the foregoing argument as an assumption: worldly union desires are by Merton's lights *appropriate* relative to a union desire for God. Again, applying our earlier philosophical considerations, we get the following:

THEOLOGICAL APPROPRIATENESS

Desire *a* is appropriate relative to a union desire for God

if and only if

attaining (or partly attaining) *a*'s object really is a way of attaining (or partly attaining) God in loving union.

I claimed, recall, that by Merton's lights, the beauty and goodness in worldly union desire elicitors offer glimpses of God in loving union. 'The only true joy on earth', he writes, is to 'enter by love into union with the life who dwells and sings within the essence of every creature and in the core of our own souls' (Merton (1999), 27). However, this requires a certain kind of engagement with creatures. First, it must be other-centred, our attention directed away from ourselves.¹⁹ Second, we must recognize that creatures won't fully satisfy us. 'The fulfilment we find in creatures belongs to . . . a reality that . . . reflects God. The anguish we find in them belongs to the disorder of our desire, which looks for . . . a greater fulfilment than any created thing [can give]' (*ibid.*, 28).²⁰

Can our engagement with worldly union desire elicitors fulfil these conditions? Clearly the desires Plantinga and Lewis describe are other-centred: their elicitors draw us out of ourselves and hint at something profoundly significant. What's more, a worldly union desire looks beyond its stimulus to an intangible object seemingly glimpsed there: we don't expect full satisfaction from the stimulus, or creature. So, by Merton's lights, any fleeting satisfaction of a worldly union desire is a partial experience of God in loving union: worldly union desires are appropriate relative to a union desire for God.

Recall that, assuming God is real, union desire for God is dialectical: as one's knowledge of God deepens through practice, the desire will deepen too. Given what I've said, knowledge-deepening 'practice' here can include worldly union desire-centred activity: attending closely to nature, cultivating a love of art, music, or poetry, or un-self-centred engagement with other people. This means that any fleeting moments of worldly union desire satisfaction will help shape the desirer for deeper love and knowledge of God. These moments deepen and nuance one's knowledge of God (for instance, seeing his beauty as having precisely *this* quality). One's underlying – and perhaps unacknowledged – union desire for God is thereby deepened and nuanced: one now has a greater sense of what God is like, and a correspondingly developed attraction to him. And this increases

one's capacity for loving union with God: the more our desire for someone incorporates who they are, the more we can receive of them.

Conclusions

I've argued that, by Merton's lights, worldly union desires are appropriate manifestations and forms of a union desire for God – whether or not the worldly union desire possessor is aware of her underlying desire for God. Given Merton's contemplative account of the spiritual life, fleeting satisfactions of worldly union desires deepen one's capacity for union with God. The contemplative account thus extends and enriches the value that non-believers can find in worldly union desire-experiences. The account also gives loving union with God – together with the way of life aimed at this goal – an appeal that non-believers might appreciate. Moreover, by including worldly union desire-centred activity, the contemplative life incorporates a way of cultivating openness to God that is eminently available to non-believers. I suggest, therefore, that this conception of the spiritual life should be taken seriously by a non-believer for whom belief in God is a live option.²¹

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Notes

1. Thus I have in mind those for whom theism is a 'live hypothesis' in William James's sense, 'appeal[ing] as a real possibility', making an 'electric connection with [one's] nature', and 'scintillat[ing] with . . . credibility' (James (1897), 2).
2. All I say here presupposes Taylor's characterization of theism at the most general level. On his view, theistic commitment is to recognize a transcendent reality beyond the natural world, whence life at its

fullest seems to come as a gift. The best kind of life is defined by living in light of a good that is independent of human flourishing, namely, loving and worshipping God – even though such a life necessarily conduces to human flourishing. See Taylor (2007), 4–20.

3. See the Author's Note in Merton (1999), where he refers to some of his main influences, including the Rule of St Benedict, St Bernard of Clairvaux, and St John of the Cross.
4. See for instance *ibid.*, 94.
5. Bernard McGinn offers a rough distinction between two models of union in the Christian tradition: the 'erotic' model, in which there is spiritual union in a bond of love that nonetheless preserves the ontological creator-creature distinction; and the 'indistinction' model, in which the human becomes absolutely one with God. Whilst this distinction is useful for giving some sense of the tradition's main emphases, McGinn notes that 'there was a considerable variety of ways of conceiving these modes of union, and many mystics used language and images expressing both forms'. See McGinn (2012), 200–210 (the quotation is from 204). In Merton's writing we find both models: for erotic union, see for instance Merton (1999), 108, 111; for the union of indistinction, see *ibid.*, 184, 186–187.
6. Plantinga (2000), ch. 9, sec. IV, esp. 311–318. Plantinga's best shot at characterizing this relation between worldly desires for union and the desire for God is to say that 'where b is a type of a . . . a will be of great value in some respect; b will resemble a in that respect, though b will be of less value than a' (*ibid.*, 322–323). However, he seems mainly to have in mind the relation between human eros and *divine love*, rather than the relation between human eros for worldly things and for God.
7. See Brewer (2009), 39, 45, 55, 58.
8. See *ibid.*, 56–61 for a discussion of dialectical desire for God as found in several Christian sources, including Gregory of Nyssa, Aquinas, and Walter Hilton.
9. If God has no reality independently of those who seek him, then one can only have *apparent* knowledge of God. If one's knowledge of God is merely apparent, then one's understanding of the term 'God' can still evolve, even if there is no God of whom to deepen one's knowledge; and in this case one's desire for God may still correspondingly evolve.
10. For an example of the opposite view, see Sumner (1996), 124.
11. I base this distinction between state-of-affairs and non-state-of-affairs desires partly on Brewer (2006), 275, 279 (the quotation is taken from both pages).
12. Brewer gives as an example Dorothy's love for her beloved: 'Being with him, dwelling on his words, and touching and kissing him might all figure as propitious conditions for the intensification of her desire for him rather than as satisfactions of that desire' (*ibid.*, 264).
13. There are other passages that seem to suggest that rightly ordered desire is for mystical union with God, rather than for God himself: see Merton (1999), 125, 186. However, the desire for mystical union is necessarily directed at a state of affairs involving the desirer; therefore, in order to avoid being a selfish desire, it must be born of love for God. In other words, a loving desire for God must be the fundamental desire if one's desires concerning God are to be rightly ordered. The same view can be found in Aquinas, whom Merton echoes in the above-quoted passage. Influenced by Aristotle, Aquinas distinguishes between *God* as the end for which humans exist, and *knowing and loving God* as the attainment or enjoyment of that end. Knowing and loving God is a fact about the human; however, the object of the human will is God himself. Thus, our happiness does *not* consist in reaching the summit of human nature. Rather, we '[reac]h out to the universal fount itself of good, which is the common object of happiness of all the blessed'. We attain total happiness in the fulfilment of the desire for *God*, not in the fulfilment of the desire for a state of affairs that concerns *us*. See Aquinas (1941), I-II, Q1, A8; Q2, AA7–8; Q3, A1 (the quotation is from Q2, A8).
14. Merton (1999), 126, 158–159.
15. Again, we can turn to Aquinas for some clarification on unacknowledged desire for God. Everyone, Aquinas claims, desires happiness in general – desires that his will be satisfied. Since God is the object of the human will, it follows that everyone desires God. However, not everyone desires the state of affairs in which complete happiness must reside, since not everyone knows what it is: namely, union with God, the object of happiness and last end of humankind. One can desire God without knowing it, and thus without desiring any state of affairs whose articulation refers explicitly to God. See Aquinas (1941), I-II, Q2, A8; Q3, A8; Q5, A8.
16. Lewis (1986a), 12.
17. Plantinga also captures the object-stimulus distinction in worldly union desires: 'When confronted with beauty, it is never enough; we are never really satisfied; there is more beyond, a more that we yearn for,

but can only dimly conceive' (Plantinga (2000), 318). The psychotherapist Irvin Yalom is another author who describes worldly union desires, finding them to be a universal feature of human experience: 'The lonely *I* ecstatically dissolving into the *we*. How often I've heard that! It's the common denominator of every form of bliss – romantic, sexual, political, religious, mystical. Everyone wants and welcomes this blissful merger' (Yalom (1991), 39).

18. Lewis also describes this sort of desire elsewhere: 'We do not want merely to *see* beauty, though, God knows, even that is bounty enough. We want something else which can hardly be put into words – to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it' (Lewis (1980), 126, quoted in Plantinga (2000), 318, n. 39).
19. Merton (1999), 25.
20. This echoes Augustine's distinction between use and enjoyment: 'to enjoy a thing is to rest with satisfaction in it for its own sake. To use, on the other hand, is to employ whatever means are at one's disposal to obtain what one desires.' God is the true object of enjoyment – the only object of enjoyment that can make us truly happy; and, in order to enjoy God, we must use this world (including other humans) rather than enjoying it. We can use the world to come to enjoy God because God can be understood to some extent through the world. See St Augustine (1979), bk I (the quotation is from ch. 4).
21. My thanks go to those who commented on earlier drafts of this article: two anonymous referees, and audiences at the 12th Conference of the British Society for the Philosophy of Religion (Oriental College, University of Oxford), the Symposium of the Religious Experience and Desire project (Heythrop College, University of London), and the Noesis Lent seminar 2017 (Faculty of Divinity, University of Cambridge) – and especially John Bugbee at the latter, who prepared a response.