

Beyond Political Illusion: The Role of the Individual in Troubled Times

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FOR THOMAS MERTON, 'the world' was not some static, scholastic concept but an ever-changing, mutating, living reality, alive in his bloodstream. And when he described it, particularly in his poetry and later essays, it was always as a co-participant, struggling to understand himself in and through the particulars of existence. In *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* he wrote:

We are living in the greatest revolution in history—a huge spontaneous upheaval of the entire human race: not the revolution planned and carried out by any particular party, race, or nation, but a deep elemental boiling over of all the inner contradictions that have ever been in man, a revelation of the chaotic forces inside everybody. This is not something we have chosen, nor is it something we are free to avoid.

This revolution is a profound spiritual crisis of the whole world, manifested largely in desperation, cynicism, violence, conflict, self-contradiction, ambivalence, fear and hope, doubt and belief, creation and destructiveness, progress and regression, obsessive attachments to images, idols, slogans, programs that only dull the general anguish for a moment until it bursts out everywhere in a still more acute and terrifying form. We do not know if we are building a fabulously wonderful world or destroying all that we have ever had, all that we have achieved!

All the inner force of man is boiling and bursting out, the good together with the evil, the good poisoned by evil and fighting it, the evil pretending to be good and revealing itself in the most dreadful crimes, justified and rationalized by the purest and most innocent intentions.¹

So how does one find one's bearings amid such tumult and confusion? What is the place of the individual in troubled times?

I hope to make clear Merton's radically original answer to these questions by comparing his contemplative vision to two very different interpretations of contemporary ethics. Firstly, the Neo-Machiavellianism represented by Robert Kaplan, whose book *Warrior Politics: Why Leadership Demands a Pagan Ethos* became very popular in the United States shortly after the events of 9/11. And secondly, the Christian-Realism of Reinhold Niebuhr, whose ideas provided the ethical underpinning to both American Cold War Policy and Martin Luther King's Birmingham Campaign.

I'll begin with Kaplan because, although he represents the absolute antithesis to Merton's prophetic Christianity, there are some very interesting parallels. For one thing, Kaplan argues that our world is not 'modern' or 'postmodern,' but ancient, 'a world that, despite its technologies, the best Chinese, Greek, and Roman philosophers would have understood, and known how to navigate.'² Works such as Sun Tzu's *Art of War*, Augustine's *City of God*, and Hobbes' *Leviathan* have acquired odd new relevance – as have all our classics – as prescient anticipations, albeit unconsciously and in pre-modern terms, of the movement toward a global civilization as it struggles through uneven economic developments and the clash of civilizations.

Kaplan's central thesis, however, is better illustrated by the following quote:

a policy is defined not by its excellence but by its outcome: if it isn't effective, it can't be virtuous... Machiavelli believes in pagan virtue—ruthless and pragmatic but not amoral. 'All armed prophets succeed,' he writes, 'whereas unarmed ones fail.'³

I can think of no more succinct summation of the values of our modern politicized world than this little paragraph. No wonder Kaplan's book was praised by former secretary of state Henry Kissinger, former secretary of defense William Cohen, Newt Gingrich, and the CEO of Lockheed Martin! And yet every prophetic religious figure – from Samuel to Thomas Merton – has been struggling against just such sentiments.

What is at stake here is not exactly whether the ends justify the means, but more whether we can ever really know the ends we should seek. Machiavelli, Kissinger, and Kaplan say that we can, and so they advocate a pagan leadership ethos that is both pitiless and calculating; whereas Merton, like the prophets before him, argues for a more existential vision. Since we can't know what the good truly is, we must

temper our ambitions with moral caution and a sense of historical irony.

For Merton, causality in human affairs is largely an illusion; the future can't be understood through the categories of the present, and human calculations of self-interest are simply not objective enough given the unseen hand of providence operating behind the scenes. The pagan virtues of Pilate are short-sighted and inaccurate; however clever they might have seemed to tacticians and men of the hour.

But let us not miss Kaplan's point: by bringing the realities of coercion and violence into our discussion of social policy, he makes it clear that *authentic ethical achievements can't be merely an extension of our idealism*. If we are serious about furthering the good, the true, and the beautiful, we must factor in those forces working against them. That is to say, acquiring an ethical vision of life cannot be divorced from exercising our civic responsibilities, and to that we need to add understanding of what is really going on in the world around us. Public service, in this sense, may be the very means through which a more accurate understanding of the world is acquired.

What strikes a Merton reader most about Kaplan's argument is how surprisingly bookish he is in his acceptance of the price *others must pay* so that we might forge a political consensus. His focus upon so-called 'realities' belies a very truncated view of both real historical possibilities and actual human suffering. What is needed if we want to really grasp the current state of the world is a repudiation of our prerogative 'to be safe' and a turn to the ascetic heroism of the selfless statesman, the struggling artist, the altruistic soldier, the dedicated philosopher, noble scientist, and servant saint; perhaps, a marriage of working class endurance with aristocratic *noblesse oblige*: the stoic courage of the New York firefighter coupled with the intellectual reach of a Franklin Delano Roosevelt and wit of Mark Twain.

What Kaplan fails to realize in his call for a pagan leadership ethos is that Orthodoxy has already been there and back. Traditional Christian theology is largely what is left of Classical Thought after history has been seen through as a power play. It doesn't try to redeem our times, improve them, redirect, or even change them; it just describes reality, and by so doing liberates us from the tyranny of pagan philosophers and petty tyrants so that we can experience real hope. Hope not that the world is getting better or that our dreams will come true – it's not, and they won't – but hope that life itself is a great

good and that love and courage matter. Indeed, love, courage, fortitude, and the struggle for justice are not tools for progress at all, but ends in themselves—who we are.

Perhaps the post-war theologian who offered the most sophisticated take on the role religion plays in contemporary power politics was Reinhold Niebuhr. Like Merton, he began his academic career as a Marxist, but World War II made it clear to him that 'moral' individuals could inhabit 'immoral' societies, and that the clash between a private ethics and the public good required serious theological reflection.

Politics could not give us all that we seek, but there was no way to know what we could seek without confronting intractable political realities and actual human limitations. Christian realists were needed to temper the utopian excesses of both Left and Right wing political extremes without giving up on the possibility of progress or succumbing to cynicism, acquiescence, or despair. The West may not have all the solutions to every problem, but if it was honest enough to admit that no easy solutions existed, then this tragic awareness offered more hope for slow, sustained progress than the easy, revolutionary 'proposals' offered by the ideologues of the Soviet Bloc.

For Niebuhr, the Biblical ideal of the Kingdom of God stood in radical judgment not only of current social reality but also to every conceivable alternative to it. Cultural and social achievements, however impressive, could provide no final good. History was driven by an insatiable human desire for more. We are best able to direct our energies toward reform only when we understand what is really going on, and in most cases what is going on is not merely a clash of competing ideals but also a clash of competing interests.

A 'realistic' Christian ethic has to take into account all the factors in a situation, especially those born of unconscious self-seeking and entrenched privilege. Any perspective that ignores these forces may allow its advocates to feel good about their selfless idealism but at the expense of true and effective moral action. These are Hegel's 'beautiful souls' who opt out of history for the moral comfort of an illusory absolute, as opposed to engaged Christian realists who own up to their limitations as flawed human beings who nevertheless must act in a morally compromised world.

Given Niebuhr's perspective, the fanaticism of Pontius Pilate is the fanaticism of all good men, who do not know that they are not as good as they esteem themselves. Pilate represents the moral mediocrity of

all political leaders who simply cannot distinguish between a criminal and the Saviour because they judge everything by the same reductive laws of minimal order.⁴ Or as John Millbank has so eloquently put it,

In Pilate, precisely, we see what human rule and reason is: the slaying through indifference and impatience of the God-man or the human future.⁵

As a result, all political decisions tend to devolve into questions of the lesser of two evils which inevitably devolves further into concessions to expediency. Prophetic leadership can challenge this narrowing of possibilities, but it is seldom if ever successful. The best one can hope, Niebuhr argues, is for a hovering irony that keeps the powerful perpetually self-effacing and subject to criticism.

But, educating the American public into the paradoxes and ironies of history was a risky thing given the assault upon ethical thinking that had already taken place due to the propaganda barrages of World War II. 'Christian realism' pitched to this frightened and cynical post-war population could only serve to heighten Cold War paranoia and justify a tendency to shoot first and ask questions later—a point of view summarized in that chilling slogan that emerged from the Vietnam war: 'Kill them all, and let God sort them out.'

This is why Thomas Merton's *The Seven Storey Mountain* (1948) resonated powerfully with those looking for a non-materialistic, alternative to the ideologies of the new super states. To meet the dangerous new power alignments of the post-war world, a new America had emerged: corporate, consolidated, internationally connected, and militarily ready, run by professional managers, social scientists, and experts. The most pressing question of the era was not how the country's unique democratic character was going to be preserved, that was already gone, but rather whose interests this new class of technocrats were going to serve.

Merton offered a refreshingly frank answer to this question. The new class would serve exactly the same worldly interests as the old ones: progress, money, power, and development. The Allies' victory may have saved the world from entering into a new dark age, but if they failed to recognize the empty cultural forms that had preceded it and that threatened to follow in its wake, there was a very real danger that their victory could become hollow.

The Seven Storey Mountain, by examining the place of mysticism in the life of the mind, or rather by examining its 'absence,' raised the troubling question of the role of individual conscience in the new technological society. Merton, more or less, agreed with Mahatma Gandhi, that history was 'the record of every interruption of the even working of the force of love'—everything that stood between the individual and God. It was an account – and this was confirmed by the GIs now returning home from the war – of the accumulated sins of the fathers visited upon the sons, shadows playing upon the inside of a cave; a nightmare from which all of us were trying to awake.

Yet for Merton human experiences – existential reality, events – were no mere fictions. If life's time-bound particulars sometimes obscured their transcendental source, and if the chronicles of human strife often hid the mystery of existence behind a veil of self-justifications, that did not mean that Reality itself could not be known. Only that it was usually misnamed. And it was in this process of mis-naming that the significance of experience itself got fatally distorted, causing individuals to oscillate between personal preoccupation with their own subjective experiences and a pseudoscientific materialism posited as a presupposition for conventional sanity.

As the allusion to Dante in the title implies, *The Seven Storey Mountain* represented the modern world as a purgatory—a spiritual Diaspora where the most profound human values and experiences were rapidly being exiled, left for dead, or buried at sea. The Allies, in an instinctual rejoinder to the militarism of the totalitarian states, had themselves embraced the values of production, might, and control, and, in the process had lost track of their single greatest moral strength: the ascetic ideal. If Western civilization was going to survive, Merton suggested, it would have to go inward to get back in touch with its own spiritual core:

The way to find the real world is not merely to measure and observe what is outside us, but to discover our own inner ground. For that is where the world is, first of all: in my deepest self. This "ground," this "world" where I am mysteriously present at once to my own self and to the freedoms of all other men, is not a visible, objective and determined structure with fixed laws and demands. It is a living and self-creating mystery of which I am myself a part, to which I am myself my own unique door.⁶

Protestant America in its conversation with Enlightenment skepticism had accepted the epistemological preoccupations of the new sciences

as central, and so became concerned with evidences for the faith, but never came to grips with the wisdom tradition still lurking within the medieval imagination. This rootless, invented, American Protestant self longed for a spiritual home, but given its preoccupation with Cartesian certainties had no means for arriving there. The Catholic contemplative tradition, however, updated by a healthy dose of theistic existentialism, could bring the Western religious imagination back in touch with its experience and go beyond William James' focus on the philosophical reasonableness and moral helpfulness of faith, to what Kierkegaard called 'the absolutely, paradoxically, teleological placed' radicalism of the apostle.

Seen in the light of Merton's contemplative spirituality, Christianity takes on new meaning as a mediating position between classical metaphysics and contemporary theory. It supplies a post-mythological perspective that leads to a view of human development as a movement away from mimetic desire⁷ to a universal, transcendent ethic of solidarity with the outcast, the alienated, the excluded, and the poor.

Thomas Merton described this as a movement away from the values of the *false self*, that part of us created by culture and identified with success, achievement, and others' good opinions, to the values of the *real self*, that part of us known only to God which is glimpsed by us from time to time in moments of prayer, service, and contemplation. This self is revealed when we experience personal loss or some form of psychological disintegration that reconstitutes our identity within some more inclusive comprehension of life.

This distinction between the social self and the mystical self holds far reaching political implications: shifting the entire focus of culture criticism away from sociological categories to existential analysis, recollection, and the revelations of prayer. Merton remarks:

One of the most widespread errors of our time is a superficial "personalism" which identifies the "person" with the external self, the empirical ego, and devotes itself solemnly to the cultivation of this ego. But this is the cult of a pure illusion, the illusion of what is popularly imagined to be "personality" or worse still "dynamic" and "successful" personality. When this error is taken over into religion it leads to the worst kind of nonsense—a cult of psychologism and self-expression which vitiates our whole cultural and spiritual self. Our reality, our true self, is hidden in what appears to us to be nothingness and void. What we are not seems to be real, what we are seems to be unreal. We can rise above this

unreality, and recover our hidden identity. And that is why the way to reality is the way of humility which brings us to reject the illusory self and accept the “empty” self that is “nothing” in our own eyes and in the eyes of men, but is our true reality in the eyes of God: for this reality is “in God” and “with Him” and belongs entirely to Him.⁸

Many secular scholars have a difficult time accepting this distinction, and so as a result the Christian tradition they study – much like the Islamic World they imagine – is either static, lethal or dead. So they administer inoculations against its supposed poisons or conduct autopsies, never suspecting that the body of thought they are working on is not only still alive but highly conscious. Merton, by accepting the spiritual premises inherent to Christian spirituality, allows us to rethink our relationship to the secular categories dominating contemporary thought, giving us distance from them, and liberating us from their ethical blindness.

The events of 9/11 confronted Americans with a problem not faced since the last war: what do we do with an implacable, relentless, and suicidal enemy sworn to our destruction? The pacifist approach would have us make this enemy into our friend through dialogue, self-sacrifice, and negotiation. Air-drop supplies into Afghanistan rather than bombs, and use this opportunity to reflect upon our own sins and excess as well as theirs. The militant would simply eliminate our enemies wholesale by killing them. This approach – equally unrealistic – has at least the bureaucratic advantage of advancing a measurable goal!

Niebuhr realism, however, offers another approach: we must simply own up to the fact that life itself is a tragic affair, that there will always be those who oppose our interests and plans, even those who will our destruction. We cannot make them our friends whatever we do because we cannot in good conscience change ourselves to reflect their values, nor can we physically eliminate them from the face of the earth, and so we must temper our ambitions both in peace and in war with a longer view of things that recognizes both our moral and our practical limitations as human beings.

George W. Bush’s mixed strategy of sending both bombs and humanitarian supplies to Afghanistan doesn’t qualify as Niebuhrian irony, however, because Bush never owned up to the contradictory nature of his policies. For him, the bread and the bombs were simply

two sides of the same coin, the carrot and the stick of ‘infinite justice.’ Niebuhr, however, would caution against such a naive view. Bombs don’t just eliminate enemies, they also create them, and humanitarian aid doesn’t only generate good will; it also creates resentment and dependencies. Political dialogue must be preceded by real cultural and theological exchanges if peace is ever to be achieved, but these are seldom to be found either among today’s Machiavellian policy makers or those enforcing their tough-minded policies on the front lines.

Jean Baudrillard described the American war in Afghanistan as ‘the continuation of non-politics by other means,’ and his point is well taken.⁹ If no conversation was taking place between the West and the Islamic countries before the war began, the war itself certainly won’t cure that; it will simply continue the *silence* more vociferously. The terrorist attacks didn’t clarify the ambiguities of our relationship to the Islamic World any more than they obscured them. We are exactly where we were before 9/11: in the middle of an economic transition to globalization without any real vision why we are doing it or what kind of ancient animosities we are setting off in the process.

Christian realists accept this state of affairs as the tragic context within which all of us must work out our shared human destiny—accepting our moral culpability, our partial virtue, and our limited vision as givens, tempering our confidence in ourselves and in our nation through our faith in a universal God greater than both. But Christian contemplatives like Merton, suspect that even this measured, reasonable approach might be a misreading of our true situation, and that only through recollection and prayer can our illusions be lessened and the windows of perception cleansed.

Here is where Thomas Merton comes in as a key twentieth century social thinker. Tempted by Marxism in his youth, he ultimately chose to carry ‘the ignorant perfection of ordinary people’ to its logical conclusion by turning away from the false values of modernity to a deep reflection upon the sources of his own dignity, joy, and desire for human justice in the religious traditions of the West.

His witness, of course, was largely misunderstood within the bifurcated, politicized social contexts of Cold War America and the protests of the sixties. Appropriated first by the Catholic sectarians and then later by the counter-culture, his true significance as a post-liberal critic of secular optimism and the ‘perfect crime’ of simulated modern

existence went largely unnoticed.¹⁰ And yet as time goes by, his insights, his refusals, his troubled relationship to both the church and to his times, become more and more telling as a prophetic commentary on contemporary existence.

Merton was more than a diagnostician; he was a soldier of the spirit; like Gandhi, he conducted 'experiments in truth.' They were interior experiments, and so his 'discoveries' were not as easily transferable to the political environment as say the deft political discernments of Niebuhr or the radical certainties of the Berrigans. And yet in the long run, Merton's tragic, religious plebeian view that history is not the primary theatre of the self-making but that conscience is, may be in fact the more important and telling observation.

Elie Wiesel tells a parable that eloquently describes the current state of spiritual affairs: Man once prayed to God to let him be God for a few moments so that he might know what it was like. God refused saying that if he changed places with Man, Man might not change back. But Man promised he would, so God allowed the switch. But once he became God, Man refused to switch back. We live in a world in which Man has become God, and God has become man, and only just recently have both parties begun to feel uncomfortable with the arrangement.

Merton's return to the sources of Western asceticism in the contemplative traditions of Benedict and Cassian was not a switch back to pre-modern Orthodoxy but to a right relation with God that transformed all our current knowledge in the light of as yet unknown categories of spiritual understanding—not in a retro-embrace of paganism, nor a modern pragmatism that evades the possibility of radical change.

Niebuhr was the single most influential religious intellectual in post-war America because he embraced the paradoxes of modern Christianity as powerfully as Merton, insisting that there could be no salvation in human history and yet no grace apart from it. But ultimately the kind of activist public intellectual he became was the very antithesis of Merton's monastic 'marginal man.'

Merton spent over a third of his day in prayer and silence, while Niebuhr attended conferences, met with public officials, published rejoinders to public policy statements, and generally made himself a force in the corridors of power. He spent forty weekends a year traveling

around the country giving sermons and making sure his 'realist' Christian morality entered into the public debates of his day. Merton, on the other hand, retired from the world, lived the life of a peasant, kept close to nature and solitude, eventually even becoming a hermit. He played down the public acclaim and the business of an 'important man' in order to celebrate the duties of a monk—to teach, to serve, to work, to pray, and to stay close to the poor. For Merton, the first duty of the Christian apostle in both good and bad times was to practice what he preached, not to become a spokesman for a 'Christian world view.' Merton understood that creative living was an act of generosity, of giving, or extravagance, and that the message of any work of art, love, or witness is always the same: this will disconnect you from your fused personality.

As a result, Merton's vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience put him in a much more radical relationship to his times than Niebuhr, who may have been a more consistent social theorist but did not live an alternative way of life. And yet Merton, like Niebuhr, understood the dangers of too one-sided a rejection of the world. He too advocated a tragic awareness of man's limitations. He too took the 'long view.' But Merton's public work was more 'private,' if I can put it that way. He addressed specific individuals through personal correspondence and conversation. And he wrote books for ordinary men and women seeking wholeness in a fragmented age. He did not write – as Niebuhr did – 'with one eye firmly fixed on social and political forces.' He wrote directly to other disoriented modern souls, with one ear tuned to the eternal silence.

Merton understood that we cannot perceive a truly inclusive reality until we have discarded the solidity, the boundedness, the unfreedom, the negativity inherited from our cultural and political ethos. The contemplative life allowed him to acknowledge the exquisite co-existence of opposites and inverted dimensions beyond consensus reality, so that he could align himself with raw, creative energy—the Holy Spirit, the Muse, the non-material stuff that is the source, meaning, and value of the material world.

Niebuhr moved beyond tragedy to point out the 'ironies' of American history, whereas Merton threw his life into the mystic, contemplative abyss in order to reveal our hypocrisies and complicities. Merton wasn't as interested in distinguishing between the lesser of two political evils as he was in describing the impact our politicized world was

having upon our ability to attain purity of heart. He described the situation this way:

This is no longer a time of systematic ethical speculation, for such speculation implies time to reason, and the power to bring social and individual action under the concerted control of reasoned principles upon which most men agree.

There is no time to reason out, calmly and objectively, the moral implications of technical developments which are perhaps already superseded by the time one knows enough to reason about them.

Action is not governed by moral reason but by political expediency and the demands of technology—translated into the simple abstract formulas of propaganda. These formulas have nothing to do with reasoned moral action, even though they may appeal to apparent moral values—they simply condition the mass of men to react in a desired way to certain stimuli.

Men do not agree in moral reasoning. They concur in the emotional use of slogans and political formulas. There is no persuasion but that of power, of quantity, of pressure, of fear, of desire. Such is our present condition—and it is critical!¹¹

How do we escape this?

Perhaps, this is the role of the individual in trouble times: to manage his or her own escape. And Merton's suggestions as to how this may be done are very clear: we must refuse to be duped by the claims and desire of our false selves, refuse to insult our own souls by making intellectual and moral compromises with the prevailing half truths, and insist upon the greater reality of our unknowable, transcendent identities whose true existence is known only to God.

We can say 'Yes' to Niebuhrian Christian Realism only to the degree we go beyond politics to embrace the Contemplative Surrealism of Jesus Christ whose resurrection disclosed the hitherto unseen potentialities lurking within the spiritual darkness of our own lost lives.

Notes and References

1. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. Garden City, New York, Doubleday, 1966, pp.54-55. Image edition 1989, pp.66-67
2. Robert Kaplan, *Warrior Politics*. New York, Random House, 2001, p.vii
3. *Ibid.* pp.viii-ix
4. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History*. New York, Scribners, 1962, p.160

5. John Millbank, 'Knowledge: The theological critique of philosophy in Hamann and Jacobi' in *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (ed. John Millbank, Graham Ward and Catherine Pickstock). London, Routledge, 1999, p.30
6. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*. Garden City, New York, Doubleday, 1971, p.234
7. 'Mimetic desire' is a term used by René Girard to describe the plasticity of human longing. We are born with certain survival needs, but we are conditioned into desires by seeing what others want and copying them. What we really want is to appropriate the things others want in order to gain status, prestige, and identity. Contemplation, meditation, and prayer are antidotes to mimetic desire—the hypnotic trance cast upon all of us by culture after the fall.
8. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*. New York, New Directions, 1962, pp.281-282, republished in England as *Seeds of Contemplation*. Wheathampstead, Anthony Clarke Books, 1972, pp.218-219
9. *Harpers Magazine*, February 2002, p.18
10. See Jean Baudrillard's telling analysis of our virtual age, *The Perfect Crime*, translated by Chris Turner. London and New York, Verso, 1996
11. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. Garden City, New York, Doubleday, 1966, pp.53-54. Image edition 1989, pp.65-66