

## Unbinding Prometheus: Thomas Merton and the 'Patient Architecture of Peace'

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May the Spirit of Life that has brought us together make our encounter an epiphany of certainties we could not know in isolation.

Adapted from Thomas Merton's 'Message to poets'<sup>1</sup>

For He is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us. Ephesians 2:14

Let me express my sincerest gratitude to the good organizers of this meeting for their kindness in inviting me to echo Thomas Merton's message for us in times of great turmoil. It is indeed a humbling privilege to share this invitation with Diana Francis and Tina Beattie, whose works I have found so illuminating for the pursuit of peace, as well as to be accompanied by many fine Merton scholars from whom I continue to learn so much. I am also very pleased to be in this wonderful setting, at a time when we can learn many lessons from the Quaker spirituality and witness peace as exemplified by the fruitful encounter and correspondence between Douglas V. Steere and Thomas Merton.<sup>2</sup> On a personal note, my presence here is yet another way of paying a debt of gratitude for a decisive time in my life, more than twenty years ago, when I spent a whole academic year in the town of Walsall working as an Assistant Teacher, which widened my horizons and paved my way to adulthood.

I would like to introduce the topic of my presentation with the words of a famous tragicomic Spanish character, an anti-Promethean figure:

First, my son, you must fear God, because in fearing Him lies wisdom, and if you are wise, you cannot err in anything. Second, you must look at who you are and make an effort to know yourself, which is the most difficult knowledge one can imagine. When you know

yourself, you will not puff yourself up like the frog who wanted to be the equal to the ox ...

Thus begins one of the most famous passages in the novel *Don Quixote*, when the ill-fated knight, who regards himself as God's knight, gives counsel to Sancho, his loyal squire, about to become a governor. And this is his concluding remark:

Consider the culprit who falls under your jurisdiction as a fallen man subject to the conditions of our depraved nature, and to the extent that you can, without doing injury to the opposing party, show him compassion and clemency, because although the attributes of God are equal, in our view mercy is more brilliant and splendid than justice.<sup>3</sup>

Parallels between Cervantes and Shakespeare have been pointed out far beyond the coincidence of the date of their death. If Harold Bloom sees the Spanish novel as a Christian treatise in the guise of a fiction of 'cosmological scope and reverberation,'<sup>4</sup> the French literary critic and theologian Charles Moeller in his book *Greek Wisdom and Christian Paradox*, considers Prospero's epilogue in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* as a threshold leading to the discovery of Christian charity:

My ending is despair unless I be relieved by prayer, which pierces so that it assaults mercy itself, and frees all faults. As you from crimes would pardon'd be, let your indulgence set me free.

And Portia's address (Act IV, Scene I), in *The Merchant of Venice*, clearly bears the mark of the Gospel:

The quality of mercy is not strain'd; it droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath. It is twice blest; it blesseth him that gives and him that takes. 'Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes the throned monarch better than his crown; his sceptre shows the force of temporal power, the attribute to awe and majesty, wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings; but mercy is above this sceptred sway, it is enthroned in the hearts of kings, it is an attribute to God himself; and earthly power doth then show likest God's when mercy seasons justice.<sup>5</sup>

The wise words of Donald Allchin in his presidential address at the 2002 Thomas Merton Society conference are still fresh in my mind and they bear the same urgency as they did then or, sadly, even more. The prayer from the heart and our plea for mercy are needed as perhaps a

way yet to be collectively addressed to orient our action and our passivity, our engagement and our resistance, our ethos and our pathos, while we follow the advice given by Christ to Silouan the Athonite, upon which Merton reflects in his journal entry for 11 September 1960: 'keep your mind in hell and do not despair.'<sup>6</sup>

We do not need to travel very far to get a glimpse, or worse, of a taste of hell. Susan George's short history of neo-liberalism looks like an accurate, if obviously depressing, description of structural evil. Millions of dollars have been spent, she argues, to make it seem 'as if it were the natural and normal condition of humankind.' Her analysis has nothing to do with condemning commerce but rather with rejecting both the claim that the economy should dictate its rules to society (instead of the other way round) and its functioning as a new perverse yet pervasive religion. Neo-liberalism, very much like the vulture in the story of Prometheus, 'may be insatiable but it is not invulnerable.'<sup>7</sup>

Terrible events threaten the fabric of daily existence. Many take the form of an implosive, rather than an explosive form of terrorism, all the more effective because they shape the normal state of things and are not regarded as exceptional, abnormal or insane. Forty years ago, Merton realized that 'perhaps we must say that in a society like ours the worst insanity is to be totally without anxiety, totally 'sane', that is, perfectly 'adjusted.'<sup>8</sup> In the year 1999, the journalist and director of the journal *Le Monde Diplomatique* described the situation of our planet just before the new century in ways that should shake us out of any self-complacency:

The United States has overwhelming supremacy in the five key areas of power: political, economic, technological, cultural and military. In the Middle East it has given the world a ... display of its hegemony bombing Iraq and its people without serious cause [and] ignoring (if not dismissing) international legality embodied in the United Nations. ... But this display of power is deceptive ... [for] the US has 32 million people with a life expectancy of less than 60 years; 40 million without medical cover; 45 million living below the poverty line; and 52 million who cannot read or write. And the European Union, with its euro and all its wealth, has 50 million people living in poverty and 18 million unemployed. ... We now have individuals who are richer than whole countries ... Each of the world's largest companies sells more than any of the 120 poorest countries in the world export ... The people running these companies and the big finance and media groups ... exercise a huge weight on political decision making.<sup>9</sup>

Professor Katarina Tomasevski has documented how education keeps being systematically denied where it is most needed in the world, despite the fact that it is one of the basic universal human rights.<sup>10</sup> She quotes the economist and Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen, who firmly states that having human beings moulded to become fine cogs in the economic machine is neither the final goal of education nor a true human aspiration, for human beings are an end in themselves and not just the means to achieve social progress.<sup>11</sup>

In a similar vein, Arundhati Roy addressed an American audience at The Riverside Church in New York last year. There, she regretted the fact that 'democracy has become Empire's euphemism for neo-liberal capitalism.' She praised the American nation and its people, with such a noble history of resistance, freedom and dignity,<sup>12</sup> even if she hated to disagree with its president, and she stated that the only institution more powerful than the U.S. government is American civil society.<sup>13</sup>

History has recently confirmed this fact in my own country, where Spanish civil society certainly showed strong opposition to the government; this impressive resistance was morally reinforced because demonstrations were peaceful and, therefore, they conveyed a display of genuine 'civil-ization.' In parenthesis, I would like to say that as 'a collateral effect' of a chain of events which started to gain tremendous momentum in Spain last March, a group of lecturers from the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, in the Canary Islands, supported by José Saramago and the ATTAC association,<sup>14</sup> have made the proposal that the 30 million demonstrators against the Iraq war be candidates for this year's Nobel Peace Prize. It may only be a symbolic action but symbols can be extremely meaningful and influential.

Meaningful indeed was also the symbolic act of disarmament performed last summer by three Dominican nuns in their fifties and sixties, when they broke into a missile silo in Colorado and 'using plastic bottles filled with their own blood, they poured six crosses on the concrete lid of the silo,' and awaited in prayer and song the arrival of soldiers and their military arrest. Theirs was a Plowshares prophetic action<sup>15</sup> to denounce the threat posed by the President of the United States in his refusal to rule out the use of nuclear weapons in his war plans. They received 30 to 40 months in prison sentences. To console their supporters one of them said:

I don't fear going to prison. I don't fear loss of freedom to move about.  
I don't even fear death. The fear that fills me is not having lived hard

enough, deep enough and sweet enough with whatever gifts God has given me.<sup>16</sup>

These may also be the kind of signs asked for by Jim Tull, former director of Amos House, a Catholic Worker inspired house of hospitality in Providence. Rather than fostering a kind of sainthood which may reinforce an individualistic worldview and displace collective responsibility, exempting us from the call to relational transformation and, therefore, subtly enabling and supporting the oppressive status quo, he takes the case of Dorothy Day, Peter Maurin and Daniel Berrigan whose peaceful witness and protest were ways of protecting their integrity in a profoundly dysfunctional society as well as of offering constructive alternatives for ordinary people against a culture turned crazy.<sup>17</sup>

If I may count on your indulgence, I will briefly refer to the Spanish 11 March 2004 tragedy if only because it has everything to do with the topic of this conference. I will do it from the perspective of a foreign and sympathetic observer. Mary Jo Leddy chronicled Spain's collective grief in the *National Catholic Reporter* (March 26, 2004). The final story of her sensitive article may perhaps illustrate better than anything else the painful lesson to be learned after the massacre. It reads as follows:

On election day (which took place three days after the bombings) I went to Sunday Mass in a middle class suburb of Palma (de Mallorca). It was the children's mass and the priest entered into dialogue with them. 'Usually we come here to celebrate but today it is more difficult.'

'Because of Madrid,' said one little girl.

'Yes, it was a day of great violence,' the priest commented. 'But there is violence all around us even here.'

The little hands shot up:

'On the TV.'

'In the soccer games.'

'In the school when the big guys beat up the smaller ones.'

'Yes,' said the priest. 'And there is violence in war, there is violence when we take advantage of the poor, and violence when we don't look at someone because he or she has a different skin color.'

He looked at the children carefully: 'Everyday you can help to make peace because everyday you live in a culture of violence.'

The view of Merton's Buddhist friend and contemporary spiritual teacher Thich Nhat Hanh offers both an explanation and a course of action based on contemplation along the same lines:

The violence and hatred we presently face has been created by misunderstanding, injustice, discrimination and despair. We are all co-responsible for the making of violence and despair in the world by our way of living, of consuming and of handling the problems of the world. Understanding why this violence has been created, we will then know what to do in order to decrease the level of violence in ourselves and in the world, to create and foster understanding, reconciliation and forgiveness.<sup>18</sup>

And he adds:

The daily wars that occur within our thoughts and within our families have everything to do with the wars fought between peoples and nations throughout the world.<sup>19</sup>

In the wise words of Diana Francis:

if we resign ourselves to pathological relationships, to the oppression of some human beings by others and to the inevitability of war and destruction, investing culture with the right and the power to control our lives, I believe we degrade ourselves, robbing ourselves of moral choice ...<sup>20</sup>

Quaker writer and educator Parker J. Palmer bluntly addresses the following question: 'Can we educate the soul?' Before attempting an answer, he makes a clarifying comment:

The core human reality that 'heart and soul' language points to has been given many names by diverse traditions. Hasidic Jews call it the spark of the divine in every being. Christians may call it spirit, though some (eg the Quakers) call it identity and integrity. Depth psychologists call it the outcome of individuation. And there are common idioms for it in everyday speech, as when we say of someone we know and care about, 'He just isn't himself these days' or 'She seems to have found herself.' *What* one names this core of the human being is of no real consequence ... because no one can claim to know its true name. But *that* one names it is, I believe, crucial.<sup>21</sup>

Powerless people, he states, have managed to produce deep-reaching social change by:

drawing upon and deploying the only power that cannot be taken from us: the power of the human soul, the human spirit, the human heart.<sup>21</sup>

Tiziano Terzani, a journalist who has been working for the German newspaper *Der Spiegel* and writes frequently for *Il Corriere della Sera*,

after having reported widely on many international conflicts, urges us 'to stop, take a time to reflect and be silent' for, rather than somewhere out there, 'the causes of war are within us. They are to be found in passions such as desire, fear, insecurity, greed, pride and vanity.'<sup>22</sup>

This introduction sets the background of Thomas Merton's reading of the human condition under the metaphorical lens of the myth of Prometheus. Merton had learned about Shakespeare from his mentor Mark Van Doren,<sup>23</sup> who had also written an essay on Cervantes. Merton, we know, was also familiar with the Latin and the Greek language and culture.<sup>24</sup> He felt it a moral obligation to be informed about and conversant with the cultures and peoples of all times and places. And he set himself to pray for, meditate on and make a positive contribution to his world by first reaching it through the filter of words under the Light of the One Living Word.

José Antonio Merino OFM has established a parallel between Don Quixote and St Francis of Assisi whom, being the opposite archetypes of Hesiod's Prometheus, he calls 'two necessary fools.' He suggests that society would fare better if it could become a bit more Quixotic and Christianity might be sanctified if it turned more Franciscan.<sup>25</sup> For he thinks, very much like Raimon Panikkar, that religion may also fall prey to *hubris*, and before even trying to convert anyone it must undergo conversion first. This *conversio*, in the view of Panikkar, should be much more radical than a moral transformation. It has to rid itself of labels, even if they are religious, in order to point to the real depths of the human being.<sup>26</sup>

The world badly needs fools like them or like the old Zen hermit Ryokan. He lived some two hundred years ago in Japan, leading a very simple and austere life and he despised ranks and titles. Once, on his return to his mountain hut, he found that the few things he possessed had been stolen and the house was empty. Then he wrote a short poem: 'The moon can be seen from the window! / The thief could not take it away.'<sup>27</sup>

The more one sees today's world events the more one agrees with Merton's diagnosis of the sickness of our age, namely, our belief in false gods who, 'in order to exist at all, have to dominate (man), feed on him and ruin him.'<sup>28</sup> They are the result of our own projections. Man, like Prometheus, binds himself with iron fetters or golden chains. Despite their inconsistency, their delusory reality rules our lives. This interplay of distorted reflections clouds the bare and innocent perception of



reality. On the other hand, Merton showed a deep trust in the redeeming power of Christ, the Life-giver, Himself a gift far beyond any Promethean agendas of insularity and self-aggrandizement.

Only the 'foolish wisdom' of the Cross can shatter the mirror and mirage of our self-inflicted malady, and free us from the 'prisons we choose to live inside,' to use Doris Lessing's provocative expression.<sup>29</sup> The grammar and the drama of our age seem to be written according to a script of despair leading to increasingly entangled knots of confusion. And yet Merton's message is one of hope in the midst of 'this fatal moment of choice.'<sup>30</sup>

Merton's proposals for a peaceful world have to be situated within a historical context in which the two versions of Prometheus have played a seminal role in the making of our civilization for they represent the primordial human choice. Suffice it to say that in Hesiod's version Prometheus has a homeomorphic parallel in the figure of Cain, whereas Merton likens the Prometheus of Aeschylus to Christ.

I will next select a few sentences from Merton's chapter on 'Promethean Theology' and focus only on the version by Hesiod.<sup>31</sup> 'What did Prometheus do? He stole the fire from the gods, and they punished him for it.' This is, in a nutshell, Hesiod's version of the myth. And what follows is Merton's interpretation of it from the arena of contemplation:

Not knowing that the fire was his for the asking ..., Prometheus felt he had to steal it (p.11). How sad the figure of Prometheus and how sad are his gods: for they had to fear him in order to exist and he had to hate them in order to live ... . Without the living God (without a center) men become little helpless gods, imprisoned within the four walls of their own weakness and fear. They are so conscious of their weakness that they think they have nothing to give to another, and that they can only subsist by snatching from others the little they have, a little love, a little knowledge, a little power (p.12). The great error of Promethean mysticism is that it takes no account of anyone but the Self. For Prometheus, there is no 'other.' His spirit, his strivings, have no relation to any other person. Everything converges upon himself. But the secret of Christian mysticism is that it fulfils the self by selfless love for other persons ... . Salvation belongs to the order of love, of freedom and of giving. It is not ours if it is conquered, only if it is freely received, as it is freely given (p. 21). In whatever form it takes, Promethean spirituality is obsessed with 'mine' and 'thine' – on the distinctions between what is 'mine' and what belongs to God (p. 22). Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world,

came to remove all obstacles to peace between ourselves and other men and God (p. 29). The union of the Christian with God is the exact opposite of a Promethean exploit, because the Christian is not trying to steal something from God that God does not want him to have. On the contrary, he is striving with his whole heart to fulfil the will of God and lay hands upon that which God created him to receive. And what is that? It is nothing else but the participation in the life, and wisdom, and joy and peace of God Himself (p.31).<sup>32</sup>

Merton's (and our own) reading of the myth of Prometheus may be enriched and greatly benefit from Tina Beattie's insight about prominent feminine Promethean counterparts in Christian narrative. In fact, it can also be said that, 'Eve steals the fire of the gods, but Mary bodies God in human form.' In her own formulation, 'in Catholic Christianity, it is in Eve before the fall and in Mary at the annunciation that we encounter the human being as "essentially and radically good".' And, what is more important,

Mary's particular personal vocation is to become the mother of Christ, but she stands as the supreme example of Christian faith ... because she believed and responded with her whole being to God ... . As the person entirely open and obedient to God, she is the human creature perfected and redeemed in the incarnation.<sup>33</sup>

The Promethean action of stealing the fire touches such deep chords that even if the Greek genius is to be credited for its creation, its meaning could not be kept within its grandiose, yet limited boundaries. Literary, visual and musical renderings and recreations of the myth of Prometheus can be found in Italy, England, Spain, France and Germany from before the Middle Ages through to the twentieth century. Boccaccio, Calderón de la Barca, Jonathan Swift, Voltaire, Percy Shelley, Coleridge, Lord Byron, Mary Shelley, Goethe, Bernard Shaw, Unamuno and countless others have revisited this most tragic leitmotif of the human spirit in their poems, plays, essays or novels.<sup>34</sup> What is perhaps most disturbing is the thread which underlies them all, that is, the equation of knowledge to domination, power, oppression, and pride. In Merton's words: 'The untruth of man, from which comes his faithlessness, is basically a matter of arrogance, or of fear ... . Alienation results in arrogance ... . Centered on his own empty and alienated self, man becomes destructive, negative, violent.'<sup>35</sup>

This alienated and alienating way of knowing is intrinsically violent because, in the first place, it takes the others as objects; also, because by

focusing on abstractions, ideals and disembodied essences it neglects real people and the sacredness of mother earth and, in fact, of matter earth; and finally, because by a movement of permanent greed it takes humanity as the object of progress to the extent that it deems it legitimate to sacrifice individuals or entire populations in the name of its ideals instead of taking progress as the object of humanity, creating in this way a terrible confusion of means and ends.

There is, in short, a crucial difference between knowing as possessing, having, or conquering, and knowing as loving, being and giving; between a rationality which conceptualizes and fixes the known, very much like Prometheus is chained to the mountain rock, and a rationality which conceives and gives birth to thoughts from the womb of love, as incarnate in persons, through an illuminated mind; there is, finally, a world of difference between thinking as craving and thinking as praying and playing in harmony with the cosmos, as Wisdom herself shows us.

To give substance to these intuitions in conversation with Merton and the issue of peace of heart and peace on earth, I would like to briefly comment on an important statement by Merton in his 1962 essay on peace as a religious responsibility. There, Merton affirms: 'We have to look at the problem of nuclear war from the viewpoint of humanity and of God made man, from the viewpoint of the Mystical Body of Christ, and not merely from the viewpoint of abstract formulas.' I believe many of us may accept this important statement unflinchingly. Even so, when Merton suggests that we adopt the viewpoint of 'humanity of God made man' it may also make a great difference to nuance it by adding 'through woman.' We may see it in a clearer light when we continue reading Merton's prognosis: 'Here above all we need a reasoning that is informed with compassion and takes some account of flesh and blood, not a legalistic juggling with principles and precedents.'<sup>36</sup> However, we are more and more aware that so far much reasoning, including metaphorical thinking and artistic expression, has been an expression of power, separation and domination. Historical records show that until now this has been above all a masculine prerogative. Let me offer a couple of examples from East and West.

In the first place, I would like to illustrate one of the manifold circular arguments which jointly downgrade women and nature through a poem by the seventeenth century English poet John Donne, who may easily be associated with Merton due to the oft quoted lines: 'No man

is an island entire of himself', which inspired the title of one of his most famous books. In his well known 'Elegie XIX: To his Mistris Going to Bed,' Donne 'makes the colonization of the woman's body explicit':

Licence, my roving hands, and let them goe  
Behind, before, above, between, below.  
Oh my America, my new found lande,  
My kingdome, safeliest when with one man man'd,  
My myne of precious stones, my Empiree,  
How blest am I in this discovering thee,  
To enter in these bonds is to be free,  
Then where my hand is set my seal shall be.

Bill Phillips, from the University of Barcelona, offers a very telling critical comment:

The English had been colonising North America from the sixteenth century, and Newfoundland was formally taken into the possession of England in 1583, which, if it is true that the poem was written toward the end of the sixteenth century, may be why Donne refers so precisely to this colony in particular. The right to explore and exploit colonies was granted to trading companies by the Crown in the form of a 'system of licences,' which gave the holder a monopoly over such possessions. The request that the lover's *roving hands* be licenced in the poem is a reference to this practice, as well as a further confirmation of this mistris's status as colonised land. The man ... is not just a lover ... . He is king, and she is *kingdome* over which he has a monopoly ... . The purpose of the colonies is also made quite clear: they are to be exploited, as the looting of New World mineral wealth by the Spanish Empire in this period demonstrates. The *mistris* then, is his *myne of precious stones*, and when this image is applied to the woman's body, with its implication of sexual exploitation, or even violation, the disturbing and misogynistic menace of Donne's conceit is revealed.<sup>37</sup>

The second illustration comes from the now classic work by Buddhist scholar and Vajrayana follower Rita M. Gross. In her feminist history, analysis and reconstruction of Buddhism, she claims: 'there is no reason ... to cling to traditional ways of doing things ... . If it is in accord with the *dharma* that patriarchal institutions and practices give way to egalitarian ones, then 2,500 years of Buddhist patriarchy have no countervailing merit.'<sup>38</sup> As an aside, she sensibly offers the following suggestion: 'Surely men too will develop into gentle and mature human

beings more readily in a non-sexist and non-patriarchal environment.<sup>39</sup> She readily admits that much of her inspiration comes from a fruitful dialogue with Christian women and from their prophetic voice.

Clearly, if Prometheus in us humans is to be unbound, we cannot afford to ignore these problematic issues about the ways of perceiving the self and others, for they bear enormous consequences in the world of action.

In tracing back the tumult of his own times, now extended and magnified, Merton's deepest conviction was succinctly expressed as follows:

Our problem is a moral and spiritual problem. It is a problem of enormous and frightful complexity. We have no alternative but to face it, in all its ramifications, and do what we can about it. This is the duty which history itself has imposed on us, which our forefathers, in their mixture of wisdom and folly, have bequeathed to us ... But if we are to face the problem as it is, we must first of all admit its true nature. If it is a *moral* problem, then it implies the appropriate response of reason and freedom. It implies choice, based on knowledge. It implies willingness to study, to reason, to communicate. It implies the capacity to judge. It implies not only that judgment which the individual makes in the secrecy of his conscience, but also political expression and action.<sup>40</sup>

It certainly implies choice, and choice as truly based on knowledge. The question, however, is not just whose knowledge, but also, in close connection with it, which knowledge? If knowledge is based on fear and despair, in other words, if knowledge is Promethean, intrinsically violent, then we are chained, not freed, by knowledge itself. If, on the contrary, knowledge is based on love and compassion, if we really consent to be known, called and encountered defenceless, we will get to know as we are known. Then, and only then, may we see the world as we are seen. Only then, above all, shall we be able to choose as we are chosen.

Stemming from these deep attitudinal changes, as the triggers of right non-violent action, Merton's specific proposals for his own time on earth still make much sense for us today, namely, 'control over the production and stockpiling of weapons,' 'the creation of an international authority with power and sanctions that will be able to control technology,' seriously questioning mass media information as 'sufficient basis for moral judgments for and against war,' a recognition of the

danger of the whole world because of an economy 'of the more developed nations centered on the production of weapons, missiles, and other engines of destruction,' and 'the implications of voting for politicians who promote policies of hate.'

And, particularly Christians, Merton says, must adopt 'fully Christian perspectives' which are 'Catholic,' that is, 'worldwide,' considering 'the needs of mankind and not the temporary expediency and shortsighted policy of a particular nation.' His moral injunction is poignantly valid for us:

The Christian must see that his mission is not to contribute to the blind forces of annihilation which tend to destroy civilization and mankind altogether. He must seek to build rather than to destroy. He must orient his efforts towards world unity and not towards world division ... We have to be convinced that there are certain things already clearly forbidden to all men, such as the use of torture, the killing of hostages ... The destruction of civilized centers by nuclear annihilation bombing is genocide.<sup>41</sup>

This needs to be stressed, for in doing violence to the positive mythical content of 'history' by reducing it to a literal exegesis of the Bible, Christian fundamentalists, incapable of seeing its concrete incarnation in the actual stories of real human beings, have often fallen into the Promethean trap of attributing to themselves the exclusive responsibility of salvation, and of attempting to achieve this in their own blind terms. As Etty Hillesum put it, 'the terrifying thing is that systems grow too big for men and hold them in a satanic grip, the builders no less than the victims of the system.'<sup>42</sup>

When Merton came to propose some 'principles of peace' he realized Christian thinking needed to transform political attitudes by 'overcoming the "split" between the sacred and the profane, the spiritual and the political.'<sup>43</sup>

Together with very harsh criticism, if and where needed, Merton was always ready to offer positive courses of action, in the way of attitudinal changes and specific courses of action along non-violent lines. As a citizen of the USA and as a monk, for instance, Merton addressed his Vietnamese readers in the preface to the Vietnamese edition of *No Man is an Island*. Knowing that it is a deliberate *tour de force*, I would like to ask you to hear 'Iraq,' 'Rwanda,' 'Nigeria' or any of the myriad hot spots in today's world, in place of 'Vietnam'. Please, hear also 'Islam' or 'Hinduism,' or 'Judaism' besides 'Buddhism' in the



following excerpts and see whether their contents apply to our current situation:

When a country has to be rebuilt after war, the passions and energies of war are no longer enough. There must be a new force, the power of love, the power of understanding and human compassion, the strength of selflessness and cooperation, and the creative dynamism of the *will to live and to build, and the will to forgive. The will for reconciliation ...* many of these [Christian] principles run parallel to the ancient teachings of Buddhism. They are in fact in large part universal truths ... . The key ... is that 'No Man is an Island.' A selfish life cannot be fruitful. It cannot be true ... . The conditions of our world are simply an outward expression of our own thoughts and desires. The misfortune of Viet Nam today is that the war there expresses not merely the thoughts and desires of the people of Viet Nam but, unfortunately, the inner confusion of men in other nations in different parts of the earth. The sickness of the entire earth is now erupting in Viet Nam. But perhaps also the sickness of the entire earth may be cured there.

Then, Merton continues expressing the wish that his book may help some in building a world of peace,

But for this to be possible, we must all believe in life and in peace. We must believe in the power of love. We must recognize that our being itself is grounded in love: that is to say that we come into being because we are loved and because we are meant to love others.<sup>44</sup>

At this point, it would be unfair not to pay homage to the Encyclical *Pacem in Terris* by Pope John XXIII, which meant so much to Thomas Merton. If this extraordinary document were better known and followed we would witness tremendous changes in response to 'the longings of all men and women without distinction of faith or conviction.'<sup>45</sup> With admirable balance the edifice of peace is made to rest upon four pillars: truth, justice, charity and freedom.<sup>46</sup>

Professor Edward Said, inspired by 'a hauntingly beautiful passage' by Hugo of St Victor, the twelfth century monk, reached the following conclusion:

No one today is purely *one* thing. Labels like Indian, or woman, or Muslim, or American are not more than starting points, which if followed into actual experience for only a moment are quickly left behind. Imperialism consolidated the mixture of cultures and identities on a global scale. But its worst and most paradoxical gift

was to allow people to believe that they were only, mainly, and exclusively, white, or black, or Western, or Oriental. Yet just as human beings make their own history, they also make their cultures and ethnic identities. No one can deny the persisting continuities of long traditions, sustained habitations, national languages, and cultural geographies, but there seems no reason except fear and prejudice to keep insisting on their separation and distinctiveness, as if that was all human life was about. Survival in fact is about the connections between things; in Eliot's phrase, reality cannot be deprived of the 'other echoes [that] inhabit the garden.' It is more rewarding – and more difficult – to think concretely and sympathetically, contrapuntally, about others than only about 'us.' But this also means not trying to rule others, not trying to classify them or put them in hierarchies, above all, not constantly reiterating how 'our' culture or country is number one (or *not* number one, for that matter).<sup>47</sup>

In these regards, facing structural problems endemic to Promethean policies and acknowledging that we are in debt to those who are brutally indebted to us, whom we systematically exclude, is crucial if we are to build a peaceful world, and to construct common sense, i.e. one which is meaningful for all.

People like H. H. the Dalai Lama, Pope John Paul II, former UNESCO president Federico Mayor Zaragoza<sup>48</sup> and contemplative Thomas Merton, among others, have unanimously advocated for a spiritual revolution to stop warfare in our world. None of them ever regretted the presence of technology but all expressed their desire to make it work for the welfare of the human family. Today's politics and religion need to be enlightened, purged of the 'pathology of power,' put to the service of the whole community of living beings on earth rather than to self-aggrandizement strategies.

We need a joint spiritual and ethical alternative to power politics, a conscious collective effort to ground political action in genuine religious practice, that is, mercy or *charitas*, not *hubris* or pride. In the crystal clear words of *Pacem in Terris*: 'There is nothing human about a society welded together by force' (N.34).

Even if time is pressing, and the urgency may prompt us to act in the prevention of greater evils or to rebel and protest as a reaction to inhuman behaviour,

We still have an obligation to be patient ... . We are formally commanded to love our enemies, and this obligation cannot be met



by a formula of words. . . . Christ Our Lord did not come to bring peace to the world as a kind of spiritual tranquilizer. He brought to His disciples a vocation and a task, to struggle in the world of violence to establish His peace not only in our own hearts but in society itself. This was to be done not by wishing and fair words but by a total interior revolution in which we abandoned the human prudence that is subordinated to the quest for power, and followed the higher wisdom of love and of the Cross.<sup>49</sup>

At this stage, I must confess that I always feel a bit embarrassed to speak as if I were preaching to the converted. I am a teacher trainer and, even if Thomas Merton's message informs my practice, he is not part of the study program. Some of my students have been brought up as Catholics and some are sceptical or they openly reject Catholicism or are indifferent to it or to any other religion. The same may be said of family, friends and colleagues. There is, however, deep respect and mutual and sincere appreciation. After all, we all share the same human concerns. Most agree that we are perhaps in the midst of a collective dark night, even if some may choose other wordings to name the sickness of our age. In his recent essay on the dark night of the soul, psychiatrist Gerald D. May examines the three signs of the dark night, as described by John of the Cross, in the context of social systems. He says that the first two signs, namely, the drying up of gratifications and the powerlessness to do anything about it, together with the lack of deep-down motivation to return to the old ways, can be found to be true of contemporary social situations.

The third, and surest sign, however, appears to be more problematic. He wonders if there is, as Saint John would put it, a deep heartfelt desire to 'remain alone in loving awareness of God ... in interior peace and stillness.' And he confesses that here he stumbles. And yet, he adds:

Surely most social systems do not seem to be seeking a particular deity. But John affirms that the 'loving awareness' does not have to be associated with any specific image of God. Finally, in fact, it cannot be any image at all, for God is *nada*, no-thing. So it is impossible to judge the deeper desires of a system, if indeed they exist, on the basis of religious ideology ... . It is something far deeper and far greater than any identification whatsoever. And it makes me wonder: maybe, when people long for sheer love and bare compassion, when they yearn for simplicity of being and naturalness of peace, when they die inside from the simple desire for liberty and justice, maybe that might become manifest in their relationships, in the groups they form, and

maybe – just maybe – that might be the third and surest sign. There is no way to be certain, but the possibility leaves me with a glimpse of incredible hope in situations that seem the most hopeless ... . Maybe, sometimes, in the midst of things going terribly wrong, something is going just right. But that's the devil of it; there is no way to know for sure. All we can do is hope for the dawn.<sup>50</sup>

According to John, the most real thing for us is our need for God. For Iain Matthew: 'our anxiety is itself language enough: to be with Christ, holding that before him, is communication. It provides its own way of prayer.' And he adds: 'John confidently proposes prayer to us, not as an escape from the darkness that lies beyond our threshold, but as a journey into it. Prayer renames that darkness, not chaos, but the inner cavern, the space within the heart of the risen Christ.'<sup>51</sup>

The human endeavour seems an ever-unfolding story interspersed with songs of innocence and songs of experience, a thread weaving self-fulfilling and unfulfilled prophecies. The New Adam and the New Eve contain the aged wisdom of the earth and the freshness of a new born child, the rare conviviality of pastoral gardens and complex machines, a love for labour and a labour of love, compassionate legacies from North, South, East and West, and insights of intermittent transparency into realms of peace beyond the transient universe within the human soul.

In the middle of a turbulent world, William Johnston sees clear signs of a new humanity, fresh shoots that announce a new springtime of the Spirit.<sup>52</sup> In these times of globalization, Merton's message of hope is that the building of peace, based on inter-confessional dialogue, on looking inward, on contemplation and action, spiritual discernment, and works of compassion, represents a horizon of desire, but also of real possibility, and, above all, a need. And 'Christ the Word cannot bear to see one who loves him suffer, without coming to her aid.'<sup>53</sup> Unlike Prometheus, we only have to give our consent and accept his coming as a gift. This is what Mary did. Christ's death itself was also a final consent and a complete self-giving that cannot be stolen. Defying boundaries and categories, Julian of Norwich was shown that 'our tender Mother Jesus simply leads us into his blessed breast through his open side, and there gives us a glimpse of the Godhead and heavenly joy – the inner certainty of eternal bliss.'<sup>54</sup> This is where the answer of light to Julian's dismay, 'it's all going to be all right; everything is going to be all right,'<sup>55</sup> meets John's darkest hour of the night. This is redeemed

knowledge, suffused with love and unbound. I would like to finish with the prayer of John of the Cross to Christ to whom we may commend, through Merton's intercession, our own brokenness and in whose wound we may find lasting healing, peace and liberation:

You will not take from me, my God, what you once gave me, in your only Son Jesus Christ, in whom you gave me all I desire; so I shall rejoice: you will not delay, if I do not fail to hope... Mine are the heavens, and mine is the earth; mine are the peoples, the just are mine, and mine the sinners; the angels are mine, and the Mother of God, and all things are mine, and God himself is mine and for me, because Christ is mine and all for me.<sup>56</sup>

### Notes and References

- <sup>1</sup> Thomas Merton, 'Message to poets,' *Raids on the Unspeakable*. New York: New Directions, 1966, p.156
- <sup>2</sup> See E. Glenn Hinson, 'Rootedness in Tradition and Global Spirituality,' *The Merton Annual*, Vol. 6 (1993): 6–22 and Thomas Merton and Douglas V. Steere, 'Notes after Visit and Correspondence 1962–1968', *The Merton Annual*, Vol. 6 (1993), pp.23–53
- <sup>3</sup> Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote* (trans Edith Grossman). Harper Collins, 2003, Second part, chapter XLII, pp.730,732
- <sup>4</sup> Harold Bloom, 'Introduction: Don Quixote, Sancho Panza and Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra,' in Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote* (trans Edith Grossman). Harper Collins, 2003, p.xxi
- <sup>5</sup> I have used the 1963 Spanish edition of the book by Charles Moeller, originally published in French as *Sagesse Grecque et Paradoxe Chretien*. Casterman, Tournai, Paris
- <sup>6</sup> A.M. Allchin, 'The Hesychastic Heart of Thomas Merton's Universal Embrace', in Angus Stuart, ed. *The World in my Bloodstream: Thomas Merton's Universal Embrace. Papers from the 2002 Oakham Conference of the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland*. Abergavenny: Three Peaks Press, 2004, pp.18–25
- <sup>7</sup> Susan George, 'A short history of neo-liberalism: twenty years of elite economics and emerging opportunities for structural change,' Conference on Economic sovereignty in a globalising world (Bangkok, 24–26 March 1999). <<http://www.zmag.org/CrisesCurEvts/Globalism/george.htm>>. In her most recent work, *Another world is possible if... (Otro mundo es posible si... Icaria-Intermón, Barcelona 2004)* she states the confusion between the term 'neo-liberal' and 'neo-conservative' with nuanced shades of meaning having to do with emphasis on economy or culture (p.20, Spanish edition)
- <sup>8</sup> Thomas Merton, 'A Devout Meditation in Memory of Adolf Eichmann,' in Thomas Merton, *Passion for Peace. The Social Essays*, William H. Shannon (ed.). New York: Crossroad, 1995, pp.200–201
- <sup>9</sup> Ignacio Ramonet, 'Towards a new century,' *Le Monde Diplomatique*, January 1999 (leader article, electronic edition: <http://MondeDiplo.com>)
- <sup>10</sup> Katarina Tomasevski, *Education Denied*. Zed Books, London and New York

(I have used the Spanish Edition, *El asalto a la educación*. Intermón/Oxfam, Barcelona 2004).

- <sup>11</sup> Amartya Sen, 'Human development and financial conservatism,' *World Development*, Vol. 26, 1998, no 4, p.734.
- <sup>12</sup> As illustrated by Howard Zinn in his book *A People's History of the United States* (<http://thirdworldtraveler.com/Zinn>)
- <sup>13</sup> Arundhati Roy, 'Instant Mix Imperial Democracy (Buy One, Get One Free).' Presented in New York City at The Riverside Church, May 13, 2003. Sponsored by the Center for Economic and Social Rights. (Electronic document. See <[www.cesr.org](http://www.cesr.org)>)
- <sup>14</sup> ATTAC stands for 'Action pour une Taxe Tobin d'Aide aux Citoyens,' after James Tobin († 2002). It started in France in June 1998. See <http://www.attac.org>
- <sup>15</sup> Inspired by Isaiah's announcement: 'They shall beat their swords into ploughshares' (Isaiah 2:4)
- <sup>16</sup> Melissa Jones, 'Nuns sentenced for Plowshares action in Colorado,' *National Catholic Reporter*, August 15, 2003, p.5
- <sup>17</sup> Jim Tull, 'Change in culture is what's needed, as Dorothy Day knew,' *National Catholic Reporter*, February 16, 2001, p.19
- <sup>18</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, 'Cultivating Compassion to Respond to Violence: The Way of Peace.' Circular letter after the 11th September attacks
- <sup>19</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Creating True Peace: Ending Violence in Yourself, Your Family, Your Community, and the World*. Free Press, 2003 (as quoted in Heidi Schlumpf's review, 'Practicing Peace,' *National Catholic Reporter*, September 12, 2003, pp.12–13)
- <sup>20</sup> Diana Francis, *People, Peace and Power. Conflict Transformation in Action* (London-Sterling, Virginia: Pluto Press, 2002) p.82
- <sup>21</sup> Parker J. Palmer, 'Teaching with Heart and Soul: Reflections on Spirituality in Teacher Education,' *Journal of Teacher Education*, Vol. 54, N° 5, November/December 2003, pp.377–378
- <sup>22</sup> Tiziano Terzani, *Cartas contra la Guerra*. RBA Libros-Integral, Barcelona 2002, p.157
- <sup>23</sup> In 1935–36 Merton took a Spanish course in the masterpieces of Spanish Literature and in 1936–37 he took Mark Van Doren's year-long course on Shakespeare and two Spanish courses (Cf. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1984) p.107)
- <sup>24</sup> See Virginia Bear, 'A Woodshed Full of French Angels: Multilingual Merton,' *The Merton Annual*, Vol. 15 (2002), pp.136–154
- <sup>25</sup> José Antonio Merino, *Don Quijote y San Francisco: dos locos necesarios*. PPC, Madrid 2003, p. 123
- <sup>26</sup> Raimon Panikkar, 'El escándalo de las religiones,' in Francesc Torradeflot, ed. *Diálogo entre religiones. Textos fundamentales*. Asociación UNESCO para el diálogo interreligioso-Editorial Trotta, Madrid 2003, pp.173–182. This lecture was delivered in the course of the presentation of the United Religions Initiative in Barcelona (December 1, 2000). See: <[www.uri.org](http://www.uri.org)>
- <sup>27</sup> Zenkei Shibayama, *Las Flores no Hablan*. Eyras, Madrid, 1989, p.137 (I have used the Spanish version of the original book, *A flower does not talk*)
- <sup>28</sup> Thomas Merton, 'Prometheus: A meditation,' *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966) p.86
- <sup>29</sup> Doris Lessing, *Prisons we choose to live inside*. (London Jonathan Cape, 1987)
- <sup>30</sup> Merton's 'Prayer for Peace,' read in the House of Representatives on April

- 12, 1962, the Wednesday in Holy Week
- <sup>31</sup> For further clarification on the two versions as interpreted by Merton, see the excellent entry on Prometheus in William H. Shannon, Christine M. Bochen and Patrick F. O'Connell, *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia*. Maryknoll, New York Orbis Books, 2002, pp.370–371
- <sup>32</sup> Thomas Merton, 'Promethean Theology,' *The New Man*. New York: The Noonday Press, 1990, 12th printing
- <sup>33</sup> Tina Beattie, *God's Mother, Eve's Advocate*. London & New York: Continuum 2002, pp.182–183
- <sup>34</sup> See Gregori Luri Medrano, *Prometeos. Biografías de un mito*. Madrid: Editorial Trotta, 2001
- <sup>35</sup> Thomas Merton, 'The Prison Meditations of Father Delp: Introduction,' in Thomas Merton, *Passion for Peace. The Social Essays*, William H. Shannon (ed.). New York: Crossroad, 1995, p.138
- <sup>36</sup> Thomas Merton, 'Peace: A Religious Responsibility,' in Thomas Merton, *Passion for Peace. The Social Essays*, William H. Shannon (ed.). New York: Crossroad, 1995, p.115
- <sup>37</sup> Bill Phillips, 'The Rape of Mother Earth in Seventeenth Century English Poetry: An ecofeminist interpretation,' *Atlantis* 26, 1 (June 2004): 49–60, pp.50–51
- <sup>38</sup> Rita M. Gross, *Buddhism After Patriarchy: A feminist history, analysis and reconstruction of Buddhism*. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1993, p.121
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* p.114
- <sup>40</sup> Thomas Merton, 'Introduction to Breakthrough to Peace,' in Thomas Merton, *Passion for Peace. The Social Essays*, William H. Shannon (ed.). New York: Crossroad, 1995, p.95
- <sup>41</sup> Thomas Merton, 'Peace: A Religious Responsibility,' in Thomas Merton, *Passion for Peace. The Social Essays*, William H. Shannon (ed.). New York: Crossroad, 1995, pp.113, 122
- <sup>42</sup> Etty Hillesum, *Etty: A Diary 1941–43*. Triad-Grafton, London/ Washington Square Press, New York, 1985, p.190
- <sup>43</sup> Thomas Merton, 'Christianity and Defense in the Nuclear Age,' *On Peace*. London & Oxford: Mowbray, 1984, p.24
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- <sup>45</sup> H. E. Msgr. Celestino Migliore, Intervention to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the Encyclical 'Pacem in Terris,' The Permanent Mission of the Holy See to the United Nations (Thursday, 7 October 2003). <[http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_xxiii/encyclicals/documents/](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_xxiii/encyclicals/documents/)>
- <sup>46</sup> *Pacem in Terris. Encyclical of Pope John XXIII on establishing universal peace in truth, justice, charity and liberty* (April 11, 1963) (N.35)
- <sup>47</sup> Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1994) pp.407–408
- <sup>48</sup> See Fredrik S. Heffermehl, ed., *Construir la paz*. A revised and expanded edition of the volume published by The International Peace Bureau, Icaria-Fundación para una cultura de Paz, Barcelona 2003. See <[www.fund-culturadepaz.org](http://www.fund-culturadepaz.org)> The volume includes contributions by H.H. the Dalai Lama, Kate Dewes, Richard Falk, Jostein Gaarder, Tulle Elster, Mikhail Gorbachev, Sheikh Hasina, Nelson Mandela, Federico Mayor Zaragoza, Howard Zinn, Joanna Macy, Jody Williams and others

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- <sup>51</sup> Iain Matthew, *Impact of God. Soundings from St. John of the Cross*. London, Sydney, Auckland: Hodder & Stoughton, 1995, pp.152–153
- <sup>52</sup> William Johnston, 'Arise, my Love...' *Mysticism for a New Era*. Maryknoll, New York Orbis Books, 2000
- <sup>53</sup> John of the Cross, 2N 19.4. Translation by Iain Matthew from *Obras Completas*. Edited by José Vicente Rodríguez and Federico Ruiz Salvador, fifth edition, EDE, Madrid 1993
- <sup>54</sup> Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, third reprint 1976, Chapter 60, p. 170
- <sup>55</sup> *Ibid.* Chapter 27, p. 104
- <sup>56</sup> John of the Cross, 'Prayer of a soul in love,' *Sayings* 26. Translation by Iain Matthew from *Obras Completas*. Edited by José Vicente Rodríguez and Federico Ruiz Salvador, fifth edition, EDE, Madrid 1993