

A Reflection on *Peace in the Post-Christian Era* by Thomas Merton

Gerard W. Hughes SJ

Thomas Merton wrote this book in 1962, hoping to have it published by Macmillan in the autumn of that year. A few days after completing the work and submitting it to his superiors for censorship, Merton received a letter from the Abbot General of the Cistercians forbidding him to do any further writing on the subject of war and peace! Forty-two years later it has at last been published, a monument to the heroism and prophetic vision of its author, a challenge and a warning for our times.

The title itself is courageous and prophetic, for in 1962 Christians in the USA prided themselves, as they still do, as living in a Christian nation. In chapter 16, 'Christian Conscience and National Defense', Merton writes, 'If a Catholic priest got up and said it was obligatory for Catholics to deplore nuclear weapons and did not support his statement by showing how the pope himself had said it, he would be treated as a heretic and a Communist. Indeed, even quoting the pope he could be so treated.'

One reason for his being silenced on the subject of peace was the charge that he had been writing for 'a Communist controlled publication'. This referred to Dorothy Day's production of the *Catholic Worker*, leaflets which she wrote and her poverty-stricken clients distributed by hand, the leaflets based

on Catholic social teaching!

The value of this book lies in its prophetic nature, in Merton's ability to see beneath the surface of things, to uncover the roots of violence which are not in the rockets, planes, and nuclear bombs, but in the human heart, in our unconscious idolatry of power, control and security which so blinds us that we can support, or quietly collude with murderous plans, with a callous disregard of the sacredness of human life, while still professing to be Christians and invoking God in support of our deadly policies.

Such was the fear of Communism in the 1960s, in the USA and among Catholics worldwide, that the word 'peace' had become suspect, a sign of weak faith and of softness in face of the Communist menace. This fear of 'peace' lingered. In Britain in the 1980s, Bruce Kent, Chairman of CND, while still a priest, was called 'a useful idiot' by the Catholic Apostolic delegate, a phrase borrowed from Lenin and applied to those who did the Kremlin's work for them, encouraging the West to disarm while Russia caught up in the arms race.

Circumstances have changed since 1962, but the diagnosis which Merton made then still holds today. The belief in the power of violence to secure peace on earth, not only on the part of the

Pentagon, but by all those who pursue peace by violence, is still as strong and deep among people as it was in the early 1960s. The money spent annually on aid to the poor and starving countries is only a tiny fraction of what is spent on weapons of death. The 'Evil Empire' as Soviet Russia was called in the sixties, has now broken up, but it has not taken us long to find another enemy against whom we must arm and protect ourselves, if necessary with preemptive strikes and lots of lies. In U.S.A., Britain and France we are still spending escalating sums of money on nuclear deterrence. In Britain, for example, no political party has any hope of success in national elections unless it supports our nuclear deterrence policy. We are still strong believers that peace can only be secured by violence, in spite of two millennia of Christianity and clear messages from recent popes on the inhumanity and sinfulness of war as a method of solving our differences.

While the world of 1962 was very different from the world of today, Merton's arguments against nuclear deterrence are even more cogent now. We now have much more deadly nuclear weapons than he could have imagined and they are designed to be 'first strike' weapons, called preemptive, which means aggressive.

Costs escalate, the division between rich and poor increases, it is reckoned that 30,000 people each day die from hunger and easily preventable diseases, vital human resources for the survival of humanity, like air and water, are being plundered by the wealthy costing the lives of the poor – one billion

people are reckoned to be living at starvation level in a world of increasing affluence.

'The basic problem of our time is basically spiritual', wrote Merton in 1962. It is still the basic problem of our time. In favour of today, despite its Post-Christian character, it might be claimed that there is a sudden and widespread interest in spirituality, but the test of any genuine spirituality is in the question 'How do we relate to other human beings?' It is the manner of our relating to other human beings that reveals the truth of our relationship with God who, in Jesus, identified himself with every human being. Augustine, whose Just War thinking has influenced Christian thinking on war, could justify war under certain strict conditions. He called these 'wars of mercy'. Could any of our conflicts in the last hundred years be labelled 'wars of mercy'? Merton writes: 'If there are to be significant new developments in Christian thought on nuclear war, it may well be that these developments will depend on our ability to get free from the overpowering influence of Augustinian assumptions and take a new view of man, of society and of war itself?' (p.41).

In almost every chapter of this book Merton returns to this basic spiritual problem underlying the nuclear crisis and the problem of war: 'We will not be able to do this (i.e. make a good and peaceful use of atomic power) without an interior revolution that abandons the quest for brute power and submits to the wisdom of love and of the cross'. If we were to get rid of all nuclear weapons tomorrow but ignore the roots

of violence that are in all of us, then the nuclear weapons would soon reappear. The root of the problem lies in our trust in the efficacy of brute power. It is a belief so deep in our thinking that we no longer reflect on the destructive effect it is having on all our thinking and acting, blinding us in our decision-making and allowing us to collude quietly with mass murder.

This book challenges all of us, especially Roman Catholics. There has been progress in the last forty years, thanks very largely to Merton and those influenced by him, in our growing awareness of the evil that lurks beneath the term 'nuclear deterrence'. We are more aware of the extent and immorality of the arms trade, there is a widespread questioning of the validity of 'Just War' theory applied to modern warfare. Before the last Iraq war there were massive worldwide protests against the war, but once the war began, the protesters became more silent and the quick ending of the war seemed to justify the use of brute force. Subsequent events confirm Merton's message that power can never be the keystone of a Christian peace policy, or of any other kind of peace policy.

In Catholic teaching, the theory and practice of peace has never been a priority subject. In theological faculties throughout the world does the subject of peace, if it is considered at all, play anything like as important a part as Canon Law, Christian doctrine, liturgy and sacraments? Does our understanding of peace make any significant difference to our understanding of the meaning of authority within the Church, of the

rights and responsibilities of the laity, of the nature and limitations of the power enjoyed by the Pope, bishops and clergy? Or is peace still a subject on which religious and priests and Catholic laity (Dorothy Day, for example) should not write?

May Peace in the Post-Christian Era be widely read, may Merton's peace message disturb us all and help us to recognise the seeds of violence within us, both individually and as a Church, so that we can let Christ, the vulnerable one, be the peace of the world to us and through us.

Gerard Hughes is the author of a number of bestselling books, including God of Surprises, God, Where Are You and A Walk to Jerusalem.