

Merton Today: No Guilty Bystander

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Thomas Merton was in Louisville on 28 May 1968 when he heard the news that Philip Berrigan had been sentenced to six years in prison for anti-war activities. Merton's reaction tells us something about where Merton was at in his thinking and how far he had moved since entering Gethsemani: "Six years! It is a bit of a shock to find one's friends so concretely and tangibly on the outs with society". He concluded that both Philip and his brother Daniel were being persecuted for saying openly what more and more Americans were beginning to believe – namely, that the United States was becoming a totalitarian society:

Their way of saying it is a bit blunt, and a lot of people are so dazed by the statement that they don't grasp it at all. Those of us who do grasp it are, to say the least, sobered. If, in fact, I basically agree with them, then how long will I myself be out of jail? I suppose I can say 'as long as I don't make a special effort to get in' – which is what they did. All I can say is that I haven't deliberately broken any laws. But one of these days I may find myself in a position where I will have to (1).

Merton's interests had been turning to books, essays and poems of a distinctly non-pious nature, as he engaged directly with the intellectual, moral, political and social issues facing society – issues such as racism, war, the technological revolution, civil rights and the role of government. Following the publication of *Disputed Questions* in 1960, Merton wrote no fewer than nine books in which he responded to these issues with a radical Christian social critique. Might he have given himself over completely to this kind of hard-hitting criticism if his superiors had not ordered him to stop writing about such political issues in 1962? The writing ban brought to a head difficulties, compromises, and ambiguities that accompanied the change in Merton's sense of self and vocation. Writing to Fr Dan Berrigan about the ban, Merton had this to say:

Look, I hate to be vulgar, but a lot of the monastic party line we are getting, even where in some respects it is very good, ends up being unadulterated crap. In the name of lifeless and graven letters on parchment we are told that our life consists in the peaceful and pious

meditation on scripture and a quiet withdrawal from the world. But if one reads the prophets with his ears and eyes wide open he cannot help recognizing his obligations to shout very loud about God's will, God's truth and justice of man to man. I have gone through the whole gamut in this business. In the beginning I was all pro-contemplation because I was against trivial and meaningless activism. But now I have been told that I am destroying the image of the contemplative vocation, when I write about peace. In a word, it is all right for the monk to break his ass putting out packages of cheese for the old monastery, but as to doing anything that is really fruitful, that is another matter altogether (2).

The level of intolerance evident in such caustic remarks is a far cry from the sentiments expressed by the young convert who, two decades earlier, had been overawed with the prospect of having the initials OCSO affixed to his name. Now, Merton the Novice Master wanted the young monks at Gethsemani to know something about the state of the world outside of the monastery. He put it bluntly: there could be no monastic prayer worth talking about without such exposure, such grounding.

A comment made to Dorothy Day earlier in 1961 - like similar comments to other people - suggests that Merton continued to reconsider his obligations as a writer: "As for writing," he tells her, "I don't feel that I can in conscience, at a time like this, go on writing just about things like meditation, though that has its point. I cannot just bury my head in a lot of tiny and secondary monastic studies either. I think I have to face the big issues, the life and death issues: and this is what everyone is afraid of" (3). He later admitted to Ernesto Cardenal, "I think it is really a waste of time for me to write more books on 'the spiritual life'. I have done enough already" (4).

The Merton who had written a series of widely-read modern classics of the spiritual life - such as *Seeds of Contemplation* (1949), *The Ascent to Truth* (1951), *Bread in the Wilderness* (1953), *Living Bread* (1956), and *Thoughts in Solitude* (1958) - was now turning out volumes of essays on civil rights, nuclear weapons, the Vietnam War... and was expressing radical views on social and political issues. The change probably owed something to his maturing and the gradual de-romanticisation of monastic life; but more significantly, it was also due to a deepening of his understanding of the vocation of the monk, and the meaning of contemplation. In 1964 he wrote that:

The contemplative life is not and cannot be a mere withdrawal, a pure negation, a turning of one's back on the world

with its suffering, its crises, its confusions and its errors. First of all, the attempt itself would be illusory. No man can withdraw completely from the society of his fellowmen; and the monastic community is deeply implicated, for better or for worse, in the economic, political, and social structures of the contemporary world (5).

He went on to assert that it was the task of the monk to speak out of his silence and solitude from the margins of the monastery on behalf of those who were too close to the centre of things, too immersed in the daily grind of life to be able to distance themselves and have a detached view of things: "My solitude is not my own, for I see now how much it belongs to them - and that I have a responsibility for it in their regard, not just in my own" (6).

Merton was in a very real sense a theologian of resistance, a monk who continued in the tradition of Christian resistance to the principalities and powers, a tradition badly in need of nourishment today. But he was a social critic rather than a political activist. However commentators interpret significant episodes or publications in relation to changes in Merton's thinking, there can be no doubt that the period from 1963 until his death in 1968 was crucial for the development of his social and political thought. It was a time of considerable social and political ferment throughout the western world, with race riots in the

southern American states, violent unrest in the black ghettos of America's largest cities, student uprisings in France and anti-Vietnam War protests seemingly everywhere. Perhaps the key book here is *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, published in 1966. This book more than any of his earlier works (other than perhaps *My Argument with the Gestapo*), shows Merton to be fully aware of the turmoil in the world - and also of the winds of change blowing beyond the secluded confines of Gethsemani.

Some commentators have detected earlier influences on Merton's thinking, with the Catholic Worker Movement of the early 1960s, a period of Catholic radicalism in the USA during which Merton was greatly influenced by Dorothy Day. In turn, he was to influence the thinking of Catholic radicals associated with the *Catholic Worker* and what became known as the peace movement. Indeed, it was an article Merton wrote for the *Catholic Worker* newspaper in 1961 which led to his being silenced on issues of war and peace. This is part of that article:

The present war crisis is something we have made entirely for and by ourselves. There is in reality not the slightest logical reason for war, and yet the whole world is plunging headlong into frightful destruction, and doing so with the purpose of avoiding war and preserving peace. This is

true war-madness, an illness of the mind and spirit that is spreading with a furious and subtle contagion all over the world. Of all the countries that are sick, America is perhaps the most grievously afflicted. Truly we have entered the 'post Christian era' with a vengeance. Whether we are destroyed or whether we survive, the future is awful to contemplate (7).

Merton soon found himself influencing a new generation of radical Christians. In 1964 he led a retreat at Gethsemani on the spiritual roots of protest. The retreat was attended by some of the key figures to influence the Christian conscience of the 1970s and beyond; figures such as the Berrigan brothers, A. J. Muste, Jim Forest, and John Howard Yoder. Merton's influence stretched to an even wider constituency through his letters, essays and books. As is well known, he was an inveterate writer: his friend, Jim Forest, once made the comment that Merton couldn't scratch his nose without wanting to write about it! His correspondents included people as varied as Ernesto Cardenal, Joan Baez, Eldridge Cleaver, William Stringfellow, Thich Nhat Hanh and James Baldwin. Indeed, Baldwin commented at the height of the race riots that he knew of only two white people who could walk through Harlem without fear of being lynched: one was Robert Kennedy and the other, Thomas Merton. What Merton offered

these people was the foundation for a theology of resistance. He stressed: "Theology does not exist merely to appease the already too untroubled conscience of the powerful and the established. A theology of love may also conceivably turn out to be a theology of revolution" (8).

In reality, this theology of resistance was a form of Christian anarchism, the spiritual centre of which was the Catholic Worker movement, in which traditional pietism about self-sacrifice and poverty was transformed from rhetoric to living commitment. Dorothy Day herself provided a living bridge between the resistance of the 1960s and the buried movements of the earlier 1920s. Great revolutionary figures like Tolstoy and Kropotkin were living memories for her; they were the inspiration of her youth, the venerable leaders she knew as a young revolutionary. Police brutality on American streets, protest fasts, tax resistance and imprisonment for draft refusal, were no surprise to Dorothy. Her Communist movement had been through all that decades before, and had never lost its radical rejection of state power. In the retreat at Gethsemani, and more so through his writings and correspondence, Merton helped to nurture a spirituality that transformed prayer into protest, and contemplation into resistance to the powers and principalities of a violent world.

It could be said that the anarchism of the Catholic Worker movement's political heritage combined with the monastic spirituality of Merton to shift a whole generation of Catholic radicals

away from party organisation and class struggle. Political and sociological analysis was foreign to their temperament, and economics was a dirty word. Their actions were intended to give existential expression to a spirituality of personal resistance and disaffiliation rather than to build an organisational base for a mass movement. To depart from a world built on war and racism, to step outside 'the system' and experience the reality of alienation, murder and imprisonment – this was the new resistance.

Central to Merton's thinking in all this was his belief that the 'Constantinian model' of church - in which theology served to reinforce and provide ideological support for the dominant political system - had long passed its sell-by date (assuming it should ever have had one in the first place!). As he put it: "the time has come for judgement to be passed on this history. I can rejoice in this fact, believing that the judgement will be a liberation of the Christian faith from servitude to and involvement in the structures of the secular world" (9). He believed that there was something seriously wrong with a model of Church which was so much a part of the political establishment that it was incapable of passing judgement upon it.

Wherever the institutional church promoted or assumed what today we might call 'the theology of empire', it was in effect clinging to that model of church which existed solely to bless the activities of the state. Merton saw that what was needed was a theology of resistance: resistance to racism,

exploitation, discrimination, injustice, violence, and all the other trappings of empire. "The problem of violence then is not the problem of a few rioters and rebels but the problem of a whole structure which is outwardly ordered and respectable and inwardly ridden by psychopathic obsessions and delusions" (10). Powerful figures in the ecclesiastical world opposed Merton's peace publications, whilst no less powerful figures in the political world pressed for his silencing. His friend, Daniel Berrigan, described Merton's fate as being swift as a guillotine. The censors of the order were in no mood to tolerate his peace writings, seen by some in authority as compromising his monastic vocation.

Another friend, Gordon Zahn, believed that Merton made the peace movement respectable. During World War II and afterwards, people like Dorothy Day and conscientious objectors like Zahn himself were written off for the most part as belonging to the lunatic fringe. And then Merton, a renowned spiritual writer shocked many people by denouncing nuclear war and drawing them into the Catholic peace movement. Merton's involvement with the peace movement meant more than a bystander's conversion to action: it was also a matter of atonement. On 8 September 1963, he made note of a conversation with the eminent Catholic moral theologian of the day, Bernard Haring, who had come to see Merton at Gethsemani to talk about his peace writings. According to Merton, Haring thought it was important for his writings to continue, telling Merton that he should be writing about peace in order to make reparation for St

Bernard preaching a crusade: if a monk could preach a crusade then a monk could certainly be allowed to write about peace.

Drawing on the influence of Gandhi and Dr Martin Luther King, Merton came to believe that the practice of nonviolence constituted not only the best means for bringing about change but was also a powerful witness to a radically different way of life. Gandhi's greatness in Merton's eyes, was his profound insight into the connection between nonviolence and truth, a connection Merton considered crucial if renewal of either the person or society was ever to take place. Nonviolence was important because it was the only method of social change that took full account of the dignity of the human person since it replaced force with an appeal to the person's basic humanity. For Merton, commitment to nonviolence is, in the final analysis, an affirmation of the sacredness of human life based upon his own contemplative experience of the presence of God as the still point of each person's true self.

With the publication of the Vatican II document, *Gaudium et Spes*, Merton felt he had been given a green light to continue writing and commenting on the issues of peace and war. He welcomed the document's condemnation of acts of indiscriminate war and of blind obedience and commented: "In the language of most American Catholics today this rates as an incitement to treason" (11). In his 'Open Letter to the American Bishops' in 1963, he called for a total renunciation of nuclear weapons: "The

common man, the poor man, the man who has no hope but in God, everywhere looks to the church as the last hope of protection against the unprincipled machinations of militarists and power politicians" (12). For Merton the bomb manifested a society based on a "true war madness, an illness of the mind and spirit that is spreading with a subtle and dangerous contagion all over the world" (13).

It is clear from what Merton writes that the security concerns and imperialist temptation he describes during the Cold War on Communism find their counterpart today in the midst of our current fixation with the "war on terror".

Merton confronted ideological warriors in the Cold War period, people such as Herman Kahn and Edward Teller. Their names crop up throughout the essay *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*, which grew out of his urgent sense of the danger posed by nuclear weapons just months before the Cuban missile crisis. It is disturbing how their Machiavellian theories of power politics mesh with today's belligerent neo-conservatives. Both groups of ideologues set up their theories by creating obsessions. They focus on generating a fear for the future of our affluent and consumer society with its privileges, comforts, and indifference to the plight of others, so that we come to feel our insecurity as a basic spiritual reality. In the chapter on the legacy of Machiavelli, Merton describes how a progressive degradation in Western political thought has finally reduced all human morality to a pure will to power. The

advances in military technology, he argues, have exacerbated our modern political crisis far beyond anything envisaged by Machiavelli in his book, *The Prince*. In fact, in today's world the Prince has been replaced by the 'sovereign state', and the revolutions which sought to liberate humankind from the tyranny of absolute monarchs have instead enslaved it under the subtle tyranny of an abstraction.

Merton saw that one of the greatest dangers in the modern world was the absence of the spirit of doubt and questioning which resulted from contemplation. Nowhere does he bring this out more clearly than in his 'Devout Meditation on the Death of Adolf Eichmann'. Eichmann, he says, was the perfect citizen, obedient to the authority of the state, respectful of the law, and a dutiful servant who did what he was ordered. However, he had abdicated the responsibility of thinking for himself by handing the role over to others, including the state. As Merton points out in the Meditation, Eichmann seems not to have experienced any sense of guilt about doing what was expected of him. He dutifully and uncritically obeyed his orders which just happened to involve the extermination of tens of thousands of people. As Merton put it: "The sanity of Eichmann is disturbing. We equate sanity with a sense of justice, with humaneness, with prudence, with the capacity to love and understand people. We rely on the sane people of the world to preserve it from barbarism, madness, destruction. And now it begins to dawn on us that it is precisely the sane people who are the most dangerous" (14).

Merton believed that we are living in a post-Christian era in spite of our superficial religiosity. He uses the term 'post-Christian' provocatively, implying that many have cut themselves off from any belief in the transcendent, let alone in a God we know as a person. We have lost a sense of the good as what is just and right in itself and are dangerously adrift in a sea of moral relativism which predicates our security and peace on the threat of conflict and war. Merton's great hope was that an awakened Christian community, fully engaged with the hard questions of war and peace, could awaken our modern, sleepwalking, secular society from the nightmares of its own making.

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Notes

1. John Howard Griffin, *Thomas Merton: The Heritage Years*. Burns & Oates, Tunbridge Wells, UK, 1993, p.144.
2. Michael W Higgins, *Heretic Blood: The Spiritual Geography of Thomas Merton*. Stoddart, Toronto, 1998, pp.46-47.
3. Ed. William H Shannon, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, New York, 1985, p.140.
4. TM to EC, 25.2.63, cited in David D Cooper, *Thomas Merton's Art of Denial: The Evolution of a Radical Humanist*. University of Georgia Press, Athens and London, 1989, p.148.
5. *Seeds of Destruction*, Farrar, Straus

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& Giroux, New York, 1964, p.13.

6. *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, Doubleday, New York, 1966, p.142.

7. *New Seeds of Contemplation*, New Directions, New York, 1966, pp. 112 ff.

8. *Faith and Violence*, Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, Indiana, USA, 1968, p.9.

9. Preface to the Japanese edition of *The Seven Storey Mountain* (1966), cited in *Thomas Merton's Struggle*

with Peacemaking. Benet Press, Erie, PA, 1984, p.22

10. *Faith and Violence*, p.3.

11. *Faith and Violence*, p. 41.

12. Reprinted in the *National Catholic Reporter*, 29.4.83.

13. *New Seeds of Contemplation*, New Directions, New York, 1966, pp.122-123.

14. *Thomas Merton on Peace*, A R Mowbray, Oxford, 1976, p.83.