Thomas Merton - Theologian of Resistance

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'The men of the 25th and 50th centuries', wrote one commentator, 'when they read the spiritual literature of the 20th century, will judge the age by Merton.'[1] It is a statement with which many would concur. Jean Leclercq called Merton the man whom Christianity needed in a time of transition,[2] while David Tracy called him the most significant Christian figure in twentieth-century America.[3] Many similar claims have been made about this man. As we approach the twenty-fifth anniversary of his death, no doubt more such claims will be made.

I have two areas of doubt in relation to any proposed celebration of Merton. One is the danger of a Merton cult. Already that danger is a reality in some circles. For years now, various publishing houses have been competing with each other in the production of Mertoniana, much of it from the early period. Yet, as Daniel Berrigan once remarked, to judge Merton by *The Seven Storey Mountain* would be like judging Aquinas by the graffiti on his playpen.[4] Merton himself openly disowned, and dissociated himself from, much of this early material. My second area of doubt is that a celebration of Merton would be a peculiarly religious activity. This would be particularly ironic and damaging. Above all else, Merton was a transitional and marginal figure: transitional in relation to the shift from one phase of Catholic Christian culture to another; marginal to the Christian culture as a whole; influential and significant way beyond the confines of institutional Christianity.

Merton died on the same day as Karl Barth. In many respects, theologically, they were poles apart. Barth listed mysticism along with

atheism as one of the ideologies alien to the gospel. Yet it was Barth who wrote of early monasticism that it was 'a highly responsible and effective protest and opposition to the world, and not least to a worldly church, a new and specific way of combating it, and therefore a direct address to it.'[5] Barth and Merton in fact had a good deal in common. Both were theologians of resistance. Merton played a similar role in 1960s America, the America of Vietnam, of racial conflict, of the nuclear threat, to that played by Barth in the Hitler period. Merton himself saw similarities between the two periods. And as Barth inspired Niemöller, so Merton inspired the Berrigans. Both Barth and Merton wrote of the transcendence, of the darkness, of the hidden God.

In other ways they were very different. Barth represented the end of an era of arid evangelicalism in which God was wholly other, and in which both mysticism and social analysis were highly suspect. Merton represented the beginning of an era of integration, in which mysticism and the social gospel were seen to stand or fall together.

I want, then, to consider Merton as a theologian of resistance, one who helped to nourish the ground for a tradition of Christian resistance to the principalities and powers, a tradition which is in need of much further nourishment today. Merton was a social critic rather than a social activist, and his social criticism had developed over the years. It was not always so. *The Sign of Jonas* (1952) is widely seen as a major turning-point in his thinking about society, as is *Seeds of Destruction* (1964). From about 1958 onwards, according to F. J. Kelly, we can discern in Merton 'a vastly expanded social consciousness'.[6] The period from 1963 until his death in 1968 was the crucial period for the development of his social thought. By 1966, when *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* was published, the transition from the other-worldly, pre-Second Vatican Council Merton to the post-Second Vatican Council social theologian was almost complete.

The influences on Merton's social thinking were complex. It is important to note the date of his death, December 1968, in relation to the changes which were occurring within world Christianity. 1968 was the year of the student uprisings in France, the peak year of the New Left, the year of the shift from the psychedelic drug culture towards oriental mysticism. It was the year of Martin Luther King's murder, the year of uprisings in the black ghettoes of the USA. In Britain it was the year of Enoch Powell's

'rivers of blood' speech, and of the second Race Relations Act. Theologically, 1968 was the year in which the term 'theology of liberation' was first used by Gustavo Gutierrez, though it was some years before it became widely known. Merton was greatly affected by the black rebellions and by the growth of the counter-culture. He was deeply influenced by Martin Luther King; but he died before the growth of liberation theology in both Latin America and the USA. It was not until 1972 that Rosemary Radford Ruether, with whom he had some important correspondence, published her *Liberation Theology,* in which she attempted to relate the liberation movements to the emerging feminist theological tradition. Merton died before all that had got under way, and he died before the charismatic renewal had really taken root.

We therefore need to look for theological influences in an earlier period of Catholic radicalism. I think the key figure is that of Dorothy Day and the *Catholic Worker,* the Catholic anarchist newspaper founded on May Day 1933 and still selling at 1 cent. 'The faithful persistence of Dorothy Day and the *Catholic Worker* is bearing much fruit', wrote Jim Wallis, founder of *Sojourners,* in 1985.[7] Merton was influenced by, and himself influenced, the thinking of these early Catholic radicals. It was an article which Merton wrote for the *Catholic Worker* in 1961 which led to his being silenced on issues of war and peace. This is part of what he wrote:

> 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. On all sides we have people building bomb shelters where, in case of nuclear war, they will simply bake slowly instead of burning quickly or being blown out of existence in a flash. And they are prepared to sit in these shelters with machine guns with which to prevent their neighbour from entering. This in a nation that claims to be fighting for religious truth along with freedom and other

values of the spirit. 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.[8]

In his turn, Merton was a key figure in influencing a new generation of radical Christians. In 1964 he led a retreat on the spiritual roots of protest which was attended by some of the key figures who were to influence the Christian conscience of the 1960s and 1970s: the Berrigans, A. J. Muste, John Howard Yoder, and others. He was a major influence on Ernesto Cardenal, Joan Baez and Eldridge Cleaver. According to Henri Nouwen, who is often seen as his successor, he influenced an entire generation of American Catholics, while his effect on the evangelical radicals of the Sojourners generation, as well as on Anglican radicals such as William Stringfellow, is clear. Merton enabled these people to develop a theology of resistance. For 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.'[9] The section of his book *Faith and Violence* entitled 'Towards a Theology of Resistance' is of major and abiding importance.'[10]

However, in examining the influences on Merton, there is one major influence which is missing, and its 'missingness' is illustrated by one quotation in which Merton describes the relationship between spirituality and social change. 'For the world to be changed, man himself must begin to change it, and he must take the initiative. He must step forth to make a new kind of history. The change begins within himself.'[11] That quotation may ring bells, and remind readers of some other passages. For the missing influence is, of course, Karl Marx. Consider two quotations from Marx alongside the Merton quote:

> The materialistic doctrine that men are products of circumstances and upbringing ... forgets that circumstances are changed precisely by men and that the educator must himself be educated.[12]

> Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please: they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past.[13]

In these two passages Marx is, first, repudiating the mechanistic doctrine (often mistaken for Marxism itself) and asserting the crucial role of human beings in shaping history and effecting social change; but, secondly, stressing that new history is made out of the old. Those truths need to be allowed to stand alongside, and to modify, Merton's rather simplified view of how change occurs. Yet I can see see no evidence that Merton ever read Marx, though he had certainly read Fromm on Marx, and it is inevitable that, as a sensitive, intelligent 1960s American, he had read Marcuse.[14] But Marcuse's Marxism was a very gentrified, very elitist, very Bohemian kind of Marxism. Indeed to call it Marxist at all is perhaps to speak ill of the dead.[15]

Merton's relationship to Marxism is interesting. He uses a number of concepts which are also used by Marx and by writers within the Marxist tradition: false consciousness, unmasking of illusion, alienation, and so on. In his oft-quoted letter to Jean Leclercq, he made the observation that 'the role of the monk in the modern world, especially Marxist, is not survival but prophecy.'[16] His last talk, printed in *The Asian Journal,* was on monastic and Marxist perspectives. He was clearly fascinated by Marxism. Yet there is no evidence of any serious attempt to grapple with the issues raised by the Marxist tradition: issues such as class, profit, and the economic roots of conflict. Yet I suspect that Merton realized that the Christian/Marxist dialogue needed to move into a new phase, possibly moving beyond the conceptual and cultural limitations of both traditions.

At heart, Thomas Merton was a personalist. He was deeply concerned with the dehumanizing influence of technology, which he saw as 'an expensive and complicated way of cultural disintegration'.[17] This is linked with his understanding of the human person as essentially theomorphic and essentially contemplative. His critique of modern technocratic society was based upon its effect on the human person. Theologically, Merton's stress on the divine image, and on the ordinariness of contemplation, are very important. He agreed with Julian of Norwich that there is a part of our nature which never consents to sin. He wrote of a point at the centre of our being which was untouched by sin, a point of pure truth.[18] With Michael Ramsey, he held that contemplation was part of the normal equipment of Christian sanctity.[19] But modem society had made contemplation unnatural. He saw here a central task for Christian

theology:

> Our duty to preserve the human person in his integrity, his freedom and his individuality, and to arm him spiritually against the peril of totalitarianism, is not just something it would be nice for us to discuss and perhaps to study. It is an urgent task which demands insistently to be carried out. ... It is the most important task of the Catholic intellectual.[20]

For this task a social theology was a necessary prerequisite. However, Western Christianity, and American Christianity in particular, Catholic and Protestant, had for years been dominated by individualism. Merton loathed individualism, and held it to be extremely dangerous.

> Individualism is nothing but the social atomism that has led to our present inertia, passivism and spiritual decay, yet it is individualism which has really been the apparent ideal of our western society for the past two or three hundred years. This individualism, primarily an economic concept with a pseudo-spiritual and moral façade, is in fact mere irresponsibility.[21]

However, the movement away from Christian individualism towards some kind of political theology does not automatically or necessarily lead to a theology of resistance or liberation. The very term 'political theology' was first used by Carl Schmitt, who helped prepare the way for the Nazi State. Merton saw clearly the dangers of the growth of the Christian Right with its pathological anti-Communism. In an article in *Peace News* in 1964 he wrote:

> The mystique of American Christian rightism, a mystique of violence, of apocalyptic threats of hatred, and of judgment, is perhaps only a more exaggerated and most irrational manifestation of a rather universal attitude common to Christians in many countries: the conviction that the great evil in the world today can be identified in Communism and that to be a Christian is simply to be anti-Communist. Communism is the antichrist. Communism is the source of all other problems, all conflicts. All the evils in the world can be traced to the machinations of Communists.[22]

Twenty years later, in 1984, President Reagan was to identify in Soviet Communism the 'focus of evil in the modem world'.

It is worth noting in passing that Merton held that 'a man cannot be a perfect Christian — that is a saint — unless he is also a Communist', though he rejected what he termed the 'spurious Communism of the Marxists'.[23]

Central to Merton's critique of the Christian Right was his belief that the Constantinian era, the era of a Church/State alliance, in which theology served to reinforce and provide ideological support for the dominant social system, was now over. 'The time has come for judgment to be passed on this history. I can rejoice in this fact, believing that the judgment will be a liberation of the Christian faith from servitude to and involvement in the structures of the secular world.'[24] This is, of course, highly relevant to the present debate about the relationship of the Church of England to the State. The case against establishment is not simply that it does not work, though that is true, or that it perpetuates the falsehood of a national religion (the present Archbishop of York being a leading exponent of this position); the case is that there is something intrinsically alien to the gospel in a Church which is so entangled, so compromised with the secular order that it is incapable of passing judgment upon it.

Modern establishment religion which allies itself to an unjust, and therefore violent, social order clings to the Constantinian age and seeks to preserve it as 'Christian civilization', seeks to preserve it if necessary by nuclear destruction. Merton's concern with political oppression, racial violence and nuclear war was part and parcel of his understanding of theology as resistance and critique rather than as part of the ideological apparatus of a dying order. His comments on violence, written in 1968, speak to us in Britain in the aftermath of the Scarman Report and the urban uprisings of recent years. 'The problem of violence then is not the problem of a few rioters and rebels but the problem of a whole social structure which is outwardly ordered and respectable and inwardly ridden by psychopathic obsessions and delusions.'[25] The practice of nonviolence within such a society is not simply a tactic, but a witness to a radically different way of life, a different understanding of reality, and is therefore essentially subversive.

Merton was extremely critical of those who attacked the violence of rioters or vandals and ignored the structural violence of the State. For the State

> simply legalises the use of force by big criminals against little criminals — whose small scale criminality is largely *caused* by the large scale injustice under which they live.[26]

> Modem technological mass murder ... is abstract, corporate, businesslike, cool, free of guilt feelings and therefore a thousand times more deadly and effective than the eruption of violence out of individual hate.[27]

The responsibility of the Christian, and of the monk as a kind of walking sacrament of all Christians, is to witness and to struggle against the violence of the State whose sacrament is the bomb. And so I turn to Merton's approach to nuclear weapons.

In *Faith and Violence* Merton referred to the condemnation in the Vatican document *Gaudium et Spes* of acts of indiscriminate war and of blind obedience. He wrote of it: 'In the language of most American Catholics today this rates as an incitement to treason.'[28] In his own open letter to the American bishops in 1963, in preparation for the Second Vatican Council, 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.'[29] The bomb, Merton held, was more than a destructive instrument. It symbolized and 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.'[30] Merton's thinking on the bomb is expressed with contemporary impact in his article 'Red or Dead: The Anatomy of a Cliché':

> Those in this country who are now seriously thinking that it would be worthwhile to risk the destruction of the whole world rather than allow it to become Communist are not only defeatists who have lost their grasp of the democratic ideal, they are thinking like Hitler. They have a Nazi mentality. And

> unfortunately they have much more powerful weapons of destruction than the Nazis ever knew. Their so-called 'thought', their puerile aberrations, are no small matter. In so far as they are prepared seriously to implement their thinking by destructive action, these men are already war criminals. And those who follow them in their line of thought are in danger of becoming criminals themselves.[31]

Similarly, in his writings on racism, Merton pointed to the dilemma of the white liberal in wanting to support the black civil rights struggle without recognizing that the critique of racism is a critique of the *entire* social and economic order. Merton opposed white participation in the march on Washington in 1963 on the grounds that it would obscure the black claim that society must change if blacks are to enter it as equals. In 1963 he warned that if white society was not able to change, then violence would follow. 'He [the Negro] is telling us that unless we can enter into a vital and Christian relationship with him, there will be hate, violence and civil war indeed; and from this violence perhaps none of us will emerge whole.'[32]

The Chicago theologian Martin Marty attacked Merton as irresponsible, but later apologized. Merton himself followed up his earlier comments with his 'Letter to a White Liberal' of 1967. In this he wrote of the reactions of American blacks:

> Though he knows you will not support all his demands, he is well aware that you will be forced to support some of them in order to maintain your image of yourself as a liberal. He also knows, however, that your material comforts, your security, and your congenial relations with the establishment are much more important to you than your rather volatile idealism, and that when the game gets rough you will be quick to see your own interests menaced by his demands. And you will sell him down the river for the five hundredth time in order to protect yourself. For this reason, as well as to support your self-esteem, you are very anxious to have a position of leadership and control in the Negro's fight for rights, in order to be able to apply the brakes when you feel it is necessary.[33]

Merton recognized the reality of structural institutional racism, a term first popularized by Stokely Carmichael in 1967, before most Americans did. He saw that racism was not a matter of personal awareness, a disfiguring personal disease, but was an integral part of the structures of an unjust order. He saw that no progress can be made, in Church, political parties or wherever, in eliminating racism unless it is first recognized. He saw that much white liberal rhetoric was rooted in a paternalistic contempt of black people.

Finally, the role of the monk as a subversive. Merton saw the monastic vocation as one of continual interrogation, uninterrupted critique, *diakrisis,* discernment of the signs of the times. He wrote of monasticism as a statement, a protest. The monk is concerned with the recovery of authentic language. 'When speech is in danger of perishing or being perverted in the amplified noise of beasts, perhaps it becomes obligatory for a monk to speak.'[34] The monk plunges into the heart of the world in order to 'listen more intently to the deepest and most neglected voices that proceed from its inner depths.'[35] The monk is a marginal figure in the world.

At the heart of Merton's social criticism was his concern to inspire doubt and radical questioning. Berrigan's famous claim that the time would soon come when the pursuit of contemplation would be a strictly subversive activity was a claim rooted in Merton's thought.[36] A central part of the contemplative role is the cultivation of that seed of holy discontent, that refusal to be at ease in Zion, that relentless unmasking of illusion and falsehood. For such a task, clarity of perception is vital, and this involves both a contemplative listening to God in silence and also a listening to what Sheila Rowbotham has called 'the language of silence' in the world.[37] Merton saw that one of the greatest dangers in the modern world lay in the absence, or suppression, of this spirit of doubt and questioning. His approach to this issue comes out dearly in his 'Devout Meditation on the Death of Adolf Eichmann'. Eichmann, he says, was entirely sane — too sane. He had a profound respect for law, he was obedient to authority, he served his government well. He seems to have suffered no guilt, no stress, no psychosomatic illness. He dutifully, and uncritically, obeyed his orders, which happened to involve the extermination of thousands of people. Merton goes on:

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 other 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.[38]

Were Merton alive today he would have seen no need to alter his words.

Notes

1. Clifford Stevens in *American Benedictine Review,* March 1969, p.7.
2. Thomas Merton, preface to *Contemplation in a World of Action* (New York: Image, 1973), p.12.
3. Cited in Gerald Twomey in *Thomas Merton: Prophet in the Belly of a Paradox* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), p.1.
4. Daniel Berrigan, No *Bars to Manhood* (New York: Mentor, 1970), p.139.
5. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 4.2 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975), p.13.
6. F. J. Kelly, *Man before God: Thomas Merton on Social Responsibility* (New York: Doubleday, 1974), p.xix.
7. Jim Wallis in *Sojourners,* January 1985. On Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker movement see Dorothy Day, *The Long Loneliness* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981); William D. Miller, *Dorothy Day: A Biography* (New York: Harper & Row 1981); Mel Piehl, *Breaking Bread: The Catholic Worker and the Origins of Catholic Radicalism in America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982); and Nancy L. Roberts, *Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1984).
8. Reprinted *in New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1966), pp. 112 ff. See also James H. Forest, *Thomas Merton's Struggle with Peacemaking* (Erie, PA: Benet Press, 1984).
9. Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), p.9.
10. *Faith and Violence*, pp.3-13.
11. Thomas Merton, *Disputed Questions* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1960), p.65.
12. Karl Marx, *Third Thesis on Feuerbach.*
13. Karl Marx, *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte.*
14. According to William Shannon, who edited Merton's letters, he was well read in both Fromm and Marcuse. The influence of Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man* is clear from the text of Merton's final talk, 'Marxism and Monastic perspectives'. See Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal* (London, Sheldon

Press, 1974), pp. 334-6. See also Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (London: Sheldon Press,1986), pp.527, 563.

15. On Marcuse see Alasdair MacIntyre, *Marcuse* (London: Fontana 1970).

16. Letter to Jean Leclercq cited in Monica Furlong, *Merton: A Biography* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), p.320.

17. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Image, 1968), p.73.

18. *Conjectures*, p. 142. For Merton's assessment of Julian see his *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Delta, 1967), pp.128-53.

19. See Thomas Merton, *What is Contemplation?* (Burns & Oates 1948), for an early statement of this position. Cf. also his 'Is Mysticism Normal?' in *Commonweal* (1949-50), p. 95. For Ramsey's view see Michael Ramsey, *Sacred and Secular* (London: Longman, 1965), p.45.

20. 'Christianity and Mass Movements' in *Cross Currents*, 9.3 (1969), p. 211. [The article is included in Thomas Merton, *Disputed Questions,* as 'Christianity and Totalitarianism'.]

21. *Disputed Questions,* p. x.

22. *Peace News,* 18 September 1964, p.6.

23. Cited in George Woodcock, *Thomas Merton, Monk and Poet: A Critical Study* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1978), p. 96. [The original quotation comes from Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, chapter 24: 'He who is not with me is against me.']

24. Preface to the Japanese edition *of The Seven Storey Mountain* (1966) cited in Forest, op. cit., p. 22. [The preface is included in Thomas Merton, *Reflections on my work* (Glasgow: Collins, 191989), pp.69-76.]

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

26. *Faith and Violence*, p.4.

27. *Faith and Violence*, p.7.

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

29. The Open Letter was printed in *Vox Regis* (Christ the King Seminary, Bonaventure, New York, December 1965) and reprinted in *National Catholic Reporter,* 29 April 1983. [The letter is included in Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom – Letters in times of crisis*, with the title 'Open letter to the American hierarchy' (New York: Ferrar, Straus & Giroux, 1994), pp.88-94.]

30. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1966), pp.122-3.

31. This article, originally written for *Fellowship,* is published in Britain by Pax Christi (St Francis of Assisi, Pottery Lane, London W1 14NQ) and the Fellowship of Reconciliation (9 Coombe Road, New Maiden, Surrey) as a 10p leaflet.'

32. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy,

1964), pp.53-4.

33. *Seeds of Destruction*, pp.33-4.

34. *Seeds of Destruction*, pp.170-1.

35. Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1973), p.25.

36. Daniel Berrigan, *America is Hard to Find* (London: SPCK, 1973), p.77.

37. Sheila Rowbotham, *Dreams and Dilemmas* (London: Virago, 1983), p.8.

38. *Thomas Merton on Peace* (New York: McCalls, 1971), pp.160-5. [The excerpt is from Merton's essay, 'A devout meditation in memory of Adolf Eichmann', which is included in Thomas Merton, *Raids on the unspeakable* (Tunbridge Wells, Kent: Burns & Oates, 1977), pp.29-33.]

At the time that this article was first published John Habgood was the Archbishop of York. The Scarman Report was commissioned by the UK Government following the 1981 riots in Brixton, an area of London with high unemployment, high crime rates, poor housing, no amenities and with a predominantly African-Caribbean population.

The article was first given at a conference at the Church of Christ the King, Gordon Square, London, on 2nd May 1987, and was then published by SPCK in the journal *Theology* in November 1988. It was reprinted by The Jubilee group in 1993 with some revisions (as part of a small pamphlet which also included a chronology of Merton's life and a select bibliography) to commemorate the 25th anniversary of Merton's death on 10th December 1968. The pamphlet also included the following details about The Jubilee Group, a loose network of socialist Christians, mainly in the Anglican Catholic tradition:

> Since the Jubilee Group began in 1974, a major emphasis in all our work has been the interaction of contemplation and action, and the need for all Christian action to be rooted in a deep life of prayer. Merton has been an important influence on many of us. We hope that this short pamphlet will introduce many others to the thinking of this truly prophetic figure.

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