

**In Praise of Insanity:  
revisiting Thomas Merton's  
'A Devout Meditation in Memory of Adolf Eichmann'**<sup>1</sup>

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**T**HIS VERY BRIEF ESSAY by Merton was written in the 1960s at a time when America was experiencing serious unrest. There was a serious questioning of long held values and an establishment that resisted any kind of real questioning. Merton was known for his commitment to civil rights, the peace campaign and social justice in general. He refused to be drawn into stereotyping and consistently challenged the American view of Russia and her people. He could be withering in his criticism of established Catholicism's facility to go with the Government tide and its inability to dig deep into its radical roots.

Merton begins the essay by saying that the most disturbing fact about Eichmann was that he was examined by a psychiatrist and found to be sane. If the Nazis had been psychotics some of their appalling cruelties would have at least been easier to understand. Merton asserts that Eichmann was:

thoughtful  
orderly  
unimaginative

and that he had a profound respect for systems and law and order.

He was:

obedient  
loyal  
a faithful officer of the state.

He did not develop any psychosomatic illnesses, had a good appetite and he slept well. This is all the more disturbing given the evidence of Eichmann's involvement in the systematic murder of the Jewish people. Once on a visit to Auschwitz he was disturbed at what he saw but he was devoted to duty and proud of his job.

Merton asks why is Eichmann's sanity disturbing and answers the question for himself by reminding us that we equate sanity with a sense of:

justice  
humaneness  
prudence

and the capacity to love and understand other people. We rely on the sane people of the world, Merton argues, to preserve it from barbarism, madness and destruction. Merton then provocatively challenges us by saying that we then realise that it is the sane who are the most dangerous. It will be the sane ones who will push the nuclear buttons. They will have perfectly good reasons for this — indeed logical and well adjusted reasons. They will obey sane orders that have come down from the sane chain of command. As Merton says with not a little irony:

"When the missiles take off it will be no mistake."<sup>2</sup> Thus a concept of sanity where spiritual values have lost their meaning is in itself meaningless.

What is the meaning of a concept of sanity that excludes love, considers it irrelevant and destroys our capacity to love other human beings, to respond to their needs and sufferings, to recognise them also as persons, to apprehend their pain as one's own? In inimitable Merton style he is not content to leave it at that and asks the question: but what about Christianity and sanity? What business have we to equate sanity with Christianity?

"The worst error must be to imagine that a Christian must try to be sane like everyone else, that we belong in our kind of society."<sup>3</sup>

There have been plenty of sane Christians in the past. Torture is nothing new, is it? He again provocatively suggests:

"We ought to be able to rationalise a little brainwashing and genocide, and find a place for nuclear war, or at least for napalm bombs, in our moral theology. Certainly some of us are doing our best along these lines already. There are hopes. Even Christians can shake off their sentimental prejudices about charity and become sane like Eichmann. They can even cling to a certain set of Christian formulas and fit them into a Totalist Ideology. Let them talk about justice, charity, love and the rest. These words have not stopped some sane people from acting very sanely and cleverly in the past."<sup>4</sup>

Merton then argues that most of America would agree with *Time* magazine that it is the pacifists and the ban the bomb people who are quite seriously a little crazy. He concludes that sanity is no longer an end or value in itself. If the modern person of the 60s were to be a little less sane, a little more doubtful, a little more aware of their own absurdities and contradictions then there might be the possibility of survival. But if we remain too sane then perhaps in a society like ours the worst insanity is to be totally without anxiety, totally sane.<sup>5</sup>

A brief essay then which is filled with an astonishing range of insights. The hermit sitting at the edge of society and radically challenging the current values. As Merton said in another essay, the monk and the authentic hippy share the same vocation which is to sit on the edge of society and be critical. A noble vocation desperately misunderstood in the world of the 60s if, in fact, ever understood in any time or place.

Merton, the social commentator, in touch with the issues of the day and more than happy to bring a sense of irony to anybody's pious platitudes. Whilst he never at anytime considered himself a theologian he knew enough to be scathing of those who would hide behind a facile and superficial moral theology and tried to give a Catholic gloss to what was ultimately morally reprehensible.

But perhaps, most importantly of all, we have the uncomfortable insights of the prophet. If we think back to the context of America and the American Catholic Church in the 1960s, to take the sanity of Eichmann and apply its implications to American political life and the essence of institutional Christianity and Catholicism must have been quite shocking. No wonder some lovers of *The Seven Storey Mountain* found it exceedingly difficult to deal with the Merton of the 60s. There were no indulgences to be gained from going on peace marches, fighting for racial justice or standing with the poor and attacking the systems that seemed to generate an inherent underclass. And anyone who could speak of the Russians as a people to be loved, and not nuked for the dangerous and subversive Reds that they were, must be suspected of subversiveness themselves. Such is the vocation of the prophet.

And, of course, the authentic prophet speaks for all time. So, thirty years on, do Merton's prophetic insights hold true?

A lot has happened in thirty years. In the West we continue to elect sane leaders who have involved the world in a range of wars and military conflicts. The arms industry cannot survive without these conflicts and politicians never disappoint them. Our own Foreign Secretary only this year has given perfectly sane and rational reasons why arms should be continued to be sold to East Timor despite the clear and unequivocal evidence of the high levels of suppression of its people. At one of Mrs. Thatcher's election campaigns the biggest cheer of the night was for the comedian who suggested bombing the Russians. Billions of pounds are spent on nuclear satellite shields so that we might all sleep safely in our beds. And weren't the women of Greenham Common more than just a little bit crazy? Why were they not at home being proper mothers and/or wives or at least behaving in the way that proper women should. What a scandal for our country that we should embarrass our American military friends with the presence of these women who lived in such an undignified and insane manner.

The gap between rich and poor has widened considerably in the past thirty years and in Britain we have never been able to meet the minimum figure for overseas aid which is actually minuscule compared to our gross national product. And politicians have tried to hi-jack the Gospel to their own ends. Mrs. Thatcher assured us that the Good Samaritan could only be helpful because he had generated the money to be so. Our present government, we are told, is littered with Christian socialists who have no difficulty at all in targeting the most vulnerable and exposed because we all must worship now at the temple of spending limits. The streets must be cleared of our beggars and homeless for this is no symbol of a dynamic new country. And our Prime Minister tells us that, of course, there will still be room for compassion but that it must be a compassion with hard edges. Revisit the story of the prodigal son and reflect on the total and unqualified compassion and love shown to the wandering child who had returned home. No casting up of guilt, no hard edges, just unequivocal, unreserved love.

Lord Longford is painted by the media as a clown and buffoon for arguing that Myra Hindley should eventually be paroled and not doomed to the rest of her life in prison. He challenges the underlying assumptions of vengeance which lie behind the sane rationalisation of never truly rehabilitating a fellow human being.

He is naive, being conned and above all insensitive to the feelings of the victims' families when all he is doing is questioning a theology and a society that cannot bring itself to offer authentic forgiveness. And now that we no longer have the Russians to satanise we can find plenty of other candidates, be they Iraqis, Muslims, Libyans, gay people or Aids sufferers. In France, because of Jean Marie Le Pen's National Front's stigmatising of gay people, no French town or city would risk opening a hospice for people with Aids related illnesses. There is now just one in Paris and one opening in Provence to serve the needs of the whole country. In our own country we treat genuine asylum seekers as if they were spongers and keep them in the most inhumane conditions sometimes for as long as a year at a time. Merton's concept of sanity which he found so disturbing is clearly alive and well.

And what of Christianity? How has it fared in the thirty years since Merton's essay? Well, institutionally it remains as sane and rational as ever which would be much to Merton's disappointment but, I am sure, not to his surprise. The institutional Church seems to be having a dialogue of the deaf, for it seems incapable of listening to and hearing what ordinary people are saying, and the gap is being filled by fundamentalist groups and New Age philosophies. While these at times may have serious links with people's authentic search for the spiritual, they fail to connect to a radical sense of social justice. And it seems to me that one of the most powerful aspects of the contemplative tradition for us ordinary people is that our silence and meditation must take us to a radical sense of the needs of the other — our fellow human beings.

My own tradition, Roman Catholic, rationalises the exclusion of women from real ministry. It excludes its own members from eucharist if they are divorced and in a second marriage and has no concept of eucharistic hospitality towards our fellow Christians whom it still has the arrogance to describe as non-Catholics. It explains this sane and rational approach to hurting people by an appeal to Church Law and Doctrine and to the concept that the Church has to think in centuries. Which is indefensible, given that we have to live in the eternal now and deal with our day-to-day brokenness and fallibility.

And the Churches are working together to make the millennium a real Christian celebration. They argue that Christianity should be at

the heart of this and we can be fairly confident that they will avoid embarrassing the Government. How can the Churches influence politicians if they do not play the politician's game? Oh for a Christianity that would be so insane and irrational as to hive off its riches for the poor at the millennium, that would provoke our government to a radical programme of overseas aid and whose members could be found on the 31st December, 1999 sitting on pavements with the homeless or in inhumane institutions with the forgotten or in our prisons with some of the 60,000 plus prisoners, 50,000 of whom at least do not need to be there. Of course, there will be Christians who will do this for they are already doing it but you can be pretty sure that they are regarded as a little crazy. Meanwhile our institutional Church leaders will bless the new century side by side with the politicians and the law makers who give us such a sane and comfortable life. Why be party poopers?

Oskar Schindler has been a very uncomfortable hero for many Catholics. For although he rescued many Jews and, when confronted with a stark choice between good and evil, chose good, he was also known to be a womaniser and bit of a drinker. This human fallibility does not qualify you for plaster sainthood or Butler's *Lives of the Saints*. Lacking perfection, how could Schindler possibly be a role model for others? And yet in an ironic way he epitomises Merton's plea for us to be a little less sane, a little more doubtful, a little more aware of our absurdities and contradictions. What Schindler did was irrational, insane and highly dangerous. But, when pushed on it, he said that actually the choice was so stark that there was no choice. For all his fallibility and absurdities and contradictions he had the insight to see his Jewish workers as his fellow human beings, to love them and to be able to respond to their needs and sufferings, to apprehend their pain as his own.

Merton would have been able to relate to who Schindler was and to what he did, for he would have recognised a fellow prophet. And Merton would rejoice in the dictum of John of the Cross that in the evening of our lives we will be judged on love. Not religious practice or dogma or doctrine or Church Law but that radical sense of love which lies at the heart of the gospel and which makes God's kingdom a possibility here and now, if we were but mad and insane enough to realise it.

### Notes and References

1. Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (Tonbridge Wells, Kent: Burns & Oates, 1977) pp.29-33
2. *Op.cit.*, p.31
3. *Op.cit.*, pp.31-2
4. *Op.cit.*, p.32
5. *Op.cit.*, p.33