

The Courage not to Abstain from Speaking:

Monasticism, Culture and the Modern World in the Public
Interventions of a Disturbing Monk

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THIS IS THE ONLY REAL city in America'; Merton's first reaction to the Abbey of Gethsemani, recorded in his *Secular Journal* for April 7, 1941 (p.91) casts a teasing light on some of his reflections on monastery and society in the early sixties. It is a significant phrase to use, though. In this last period before entering Gethsemani, Merton seems to have been turning his mind to questions about true and false community, to the contrast between the pseudo-cities of modern America and their dreadful parodic image in the streets of Harlem, where those who are not really citizens are herded together within sight of prosperity and stability and left to die. As the *Journal* finishes, he is trying to get clear whether his choice is indeed between Harlem and Gethsemani. And the consciously dramatic framing of this question at the end of the *Journal* suggests that in the middle fifties, when this material was polished for publication, he was still thinking about his vocation in terms of where the 'real' city was to be found.

What changed in the early sixties? This is very clearly the period in which the role of the 'guilty bystander' was shaped, the period which saw the writing of most of what became *Conjectures*. I want to point to a few factors in the early sixties that may help explain something of the drastic shift going on - factors which arise primarily

from Merton's reading, but which are immediately intensified by biographical and historical currents, his worsening relationship with the monastic hierarchy and the mounting crisis over racial exclusion in the USA with its attendant violence. The private journals are of cardinal importance here; but there are things in *Conjectures* that are, oddly, not to be found in the journals, above all the very substantial discussions of Bonhoeffer, which contribute much insight.

The first factor is one that we encounter early in the journals for 1960. In May and June, he was reading Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition*, and, as Michael Mott recognises in his biography (*The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, p.396), he found this work profoundly unsettling. It is one of the books in which Arendt sets out her conviction that Christianity had a near-fatal effect upon the whole idea of civic life: classical civilisation had understood the polis as the 'space' in which human beings exercise their freedom for meaningful co-operative action, for work towards those goods that need plural agents working in harmony to secure them; but the Christian suspicion of 'the world' leads to an undervaluing of strictly political action of this sort. The active life becomes a generalised set of responses to the affairs and needs of the world,

and the distinctive vocation of the classical city disappears (see E. Young-Bruehl, Hannah Arendt: *For Love of the World*, pp.318-22, and George Kateb, Hannah Arendt: *Politics, Conscience, Evil*, pp.3-14).

Merton (*Turning Toward the World*, pp.5-6) picks up the idea of a space in which intelligible interactions with other free adults may happen, and ruefully asks (in the light of a frustrating attempt to telephone his publisher) whether his own spiritual space is really New York, the world of professional and straightforward business dealing; but he returns, in mid-June (pp.11-13), to develop a fuller response which almost turns Arendt on her head. The book challenges the historic conviction of the supremacy of contemplation over action - but it does so on the basis of regarding contemplation as a distant relation from which certain kinds of provocative wonder are absent. Merton, however, sees it as 'the deepest and most important defense of the contemplative life that has been written in modern times'(11). What he means by this is clear from his summary of Arendt's arguments: the active life degenerates when it is separated from its roots in proper (wondering) contemplation, and turns into activity whose goal is simply to forward a process. And to elevate the contemplative in such an environment is to miss the point: in a world in which there is not enough free and adult engagement with reality in the company of other free agents, it is positively damaging to behave as if the real problem were 'worldliness'. We are not worldly enough. As Arendt concludes, we have made ourselves a culture in

which the genuinely public has virtually disappeared in favour of the 'social' - the universal housekeeping that has replaced the classically demarcated spheres of public and domestic. In the classical world, politics was grounded in the public debate about values and the nurturing of admirable public lives, generous and deserving of imitation; the domestic realm was the 'hidden' sphere of managing the necessities. Modernity (distorted by the Christian heritage) has no real debate about values, no concept of public greatness, and a focus on management and process.

Hence Merton in turn concludes that the task of the modern contemplative is to expiate this history and recover the sense of public greatness - not public success but something of the Aristotelian (and Thomist) vision of greatness of soul. It is not that the contemplative repudiates the 'process' but that s/he learns how to control it, thus reasserting the value of the unique individual as the necessary element in the construction of public order and public health (pp.12-13). Merton takes the whole discussion off in a direction by no means obviously signalled in Arendt's schema, identifying the process as that which inevitably destroys the properly personal and sees - for example - holiness as lying in the satisfaction of certain conditions that can be specified in the abstract. And so we begin to see emerging in Merton's response to what was evidently a crucial book for him an implicit notion of the contemplative community as a true polis - but in a quite different sense from the one suggested in the *Secular Journal*. The civic excellence he

discerned in Gethsemani in 1941 had a great deal to do with the vision of the monastery as a perfect productive unit, making excellent things (p. 94, 'bread, cheese, butter...'; he would live to regret this positive evaluation of the cheese) because its work was a sort of solemn play, a form of labour that was not dictated by considerations of effectiveness and purposefulness and so was supremely effective and purposive. Merton in these pages is suitably careful about not identifying the excellence of the abbey with its external beauty and order. What matters is the motivation, the doing of ordinary things well because they are done for a purpose beyond the practical, done as 'a mixture of penance and recreation' (93). But what is missing in this account, intriguing in itself, is the ideal Arendt sketches of a space for free collaboration, discourse, shared self-definition.

And such a reimagining of the civic aspect of contemplative life leads Merton to an impatience more marked than ever with myths of the Christian civitas. By July 1961, he has moved on significantly from some of what his first reading of Arendt had suggested. He had toyed (TTW, p.12) with the idea that figures like de Gaulle and St Louis of France could be held up as models of Christian 'great souls'; but in his entry for July 7th 1961 he questions whether even these really represent a Christian civic virtue that can be treated as an indestructible paradigm (TTW, pp. 138-9). By February 23rd, 1963, this has become a sharply hostile critique of the ideal of 'Christian civilisation', as exemplified precisely by de Gaulle and by the appeal to a lost Christian Europe,

to the ghost of Charlemagne. Christian witness in the polis is more necessary than ever; but 'Christian policy' is a dangerous chimera, given the actual record of professing Christians in the management of public affairs.

Here then is one determining element in Merton's progress in the sixties towards open intervention in the public sphere. But it is evidently sharpened, even embittered, by his growing sense of the monastery not as an exemplary civitas but as a polity all too clearly operating like other political societies. In the late summer of 1960, he is struggling, not very articulately, with the contradictions of a life in which he has been forced to recognise the falsity of rejecting 'worldly' political commitment, yet lives in an institution where he both has to accept the clichés of conventional American politics (the monks' vote for the right presidential candidate - Kennedy - is assiduously sought) and to hold back from anything that could be called political action. 'I am in effect a political prisoner at Gethsemani', he writes, with characteristic drama (TTW 34); then, equally characteristically, identifies his own complicity in this, the degree to which it suits him.

Protests about the 'secular' atmosphere of the monastery and the Order multiply as the journal proceeds (e.g., pp.65, 88, 171, 222), and August 1961 sees a particularly savage note prompted by the reading of a refectory book on convent life ('an immoral book', one that glorifies conformity and repression under a 'coy' and winsome style, TTW 150). Not coincidentally, the entry for two days later reflects on

the secularisation of monastic time (150-1): the sacred world of traditional practice, contemplation, meaningful labour and liturgy, is undermined by secular attitudes to technologised production and pointless reform of the timetable. Organise the practical side of monastic life, and there is proper space for the sacred - regarded as another, parallel world of performance and production (an occasion for another very Mertonian broadside about the choir; c.f. 76-7). Later on (October 1962), Merton has a telling comparison between how the world views the USA and how a community views an abbot whose exercise of power has become stale and resented; obedience is exacted on the basis of the promises and slogans of years ago, but, while it still commands conformity (the power is indisputable), it cannot command love. It is a prescient picture of American hegemony, and we shall be returning to the theme; but it is also a revealing glimpse of the politics of the monastery in general and Gethsemani in particular.

In short, Merton has come to believe that the monastic life as he is living it fails in the distinctive vocation that is given to monasticism in the modern age, the vocation he decodes from Hannah Arendt. It is secular in the wrong ways and unworldly in the wrong ways. Because it reproduces the anxiety, the disillusion, the empty speech of the culture around, it offers no hope of transformation; because it repudiates 'the world' in order to maintain a space of its own, it cannot give space to a world which is in urgent need of authentically political discourse and exchange. Merton was obviously moved and engaged by aspects of

Bonhoeffer's dissolution of the conventional Church-world divide, quoting in CGB (p.288) Bonhoeffer's remarkable claim in his prison letters that 'the Church alone offers any prospect for the recovery of the sphere of freedom (art, education, friendship and play, "aesthetic existence" as Kierkegaard called it)...What man is there among us who can give himself with an easy conscience to the cultivation of music, friendship, games or happiness? Surely not the ethical man, but only the Christian.' Freed from the crushing and resentful sense of self-conscious obligation that weighs on the 'ethical' person, the believer has space for the cultivation of the human (though compare CGB 176 on how ethical concepts made 'homeless' by modern barbarism return for shelter to the Church). It is a curious echo of that fleeting insight in the *Secular Journal* about monastic work as playful as well as penitential. The impatience about monastic subculture has to do with a recognition that, once monastic life and work have become dutiful and profitable, an aspect of a successful corporate identity, it has ceased to be a truly alternative politics.

But how to become sufficiently worldly and sufficiently unworldly in the monastery. One of Merton's greatest gifts in the sixties - indeed throughout his life - was his ability to analyse cliché; and he is self-aware enough to know that mere counter-cultural noises will not necessarily escape the trap of cliché, mirroring the dead discourse of the established mainstream. 'The question is - how to clearly, definitely and openly make such a stand without lending oneself to exploitation by one

or other of the big power groups', he asks in April 1961 in relation to clarifying a position about opposition to nuclear armaments (TTW, 107). Taking a stand by means of a published statement is, surely, all that is possible; but it is a necessary step in 'fulfilling my obligations as a human being in the present crisis' (August 1961, TTW 157). Yet - and this is an early reaction to the 1962 prohibition of publishing on the nuclear issue - may it not be that the obligation to 'form a judgement' or take a stand is a lesser obligation than the search for inner truthfulness (TTW 222)? 'We are tempted to do anything as long as it seems to be good' when we begin to recognise the corruption and emptiness that hides within our well-intentioned efforts (ib.). And he has already noted early in 1962 (TTW, 202-3) the seductive pressure to 'say something', to collude with the messianic expectations of various different 'publics', in and out of the peace movement. These observations follow closely on his notes about a letter from Czeslaw Milosz responding to his early articles on peace: reading between the lines, it seems as though Milosz has warned about the danger of facile sloganeering on peace as on other subjects, and about the risks of making polarisation worse. 'There are awful ambiguities in this peace talk,' Merton admits, and he wonders if he has been writing 'noble nonsense' (201); a few weeks later, he mentions 'weariness of words' in this same context (206). Yet he is not willing simply to accept Milosz's criticisms as invalidating his own sense of an imperative somewhere in this. You cannot turn away from action, but not all action is wise or creative: what might right action be for

a contemplative (202)? There is cause for caution about the mixture in the peace movement of 'moral sloppiness' and proper and generous protest (211).

Perhaps, Merton ventures, the goal is not statement but 'silent and conclusive action' and 'meaningful suffering', that is, frustration accepted in freedom (206). And when he tries to think this through more fully, at some point in August 1962 (238-9), he acknowledges the risks of treating the peace question as one of theory, an attractive idea which allows for the exercise of aggressive, adversarial, fundamentally insecure posturing. Non-violence must be studied carefully, but then realised in the details of monastic life: 'Short of this, the monastic life will remain a mockery in my life'. The point is in fact made earlier, rather poignantly, in the journals (176), this time in the wake of thinking about Zen: 'Perhaps peace is not something you "work for"'. It either is or it isn't. You have it or not. If you are at peace there is peace in the world. Then share your peace with everyone and the world will be at peace.'

Whether Merton discovered how to achieve this 'silent and conclusive action' is hard to discern. The problems of 1965, when his relations with some in the peace movement were complex and strained near to breaking point, the 1967 exchange with Rosemary Ruether - these point very clearly to the continuing ambiguities in his witness. Despite what sounds like a commitment to 'civil disobedience' in 1962 (TTW 239), apparently involving a commitment to some sort of passive resistance to injustice within the monastic system, he was never easy

about direct action. In a shrewd essay of 2000 on Merton's vision of the city ('A City is Something You Do...' in Thomas Merton. *A Mind Awake in the Dark*, Abergavenny 2002, ed. Paul Pearson et al., pp.130-140), Gary Hall, a Methodist minister working in situations of extreme urban deprivation, notes that Merton underrates the cathartic effects of direct action, even what seems to be violent action, in releasing tension. It may not be good in itself, but Merton's critique of it 'betrays his distance' (138), and does less than justice to his basic insights about the city as space for meaningful action (Hall does not mention the Arendt discussions, but the connections are evident). But, allowing for all these reservations and complexities, the very fact of Merton's agonised and inconsistent self-questioning, the apparent resolutions and radical second thoughts, might be thought to add up to a particular kind of public intervention, not planned or structured in any of the ways Merton himself thought about, yet with its own authority. As so often in Merton, when you are inclined to think that he has settled for a dramatic and faintly delusory self-image, you discover, sometimes within a few pages (as will have become clear from a good many of the texts referred to here), that he has spotted the false note himself and moved on. The silent action is not so much a coherent form of witness, satisfactory to Merton and his imagined public, as a consistent habit of turning on his own language, his own 'scripts', in the name of a better truthfulness.

But the feeling after a 'silent action', the longing for a life that will exhibit another order for the city, needs to be

read also against the background of a second set of factors in Merton's intellectual discoveries in the early sixties. The very first page of CGB uses a word that will not have been very familiar to his readers: writing (memorably) about Karl Barth and Mozart, he speaks of Barth's daily listening to Mozart as an attempt 'to awaken, perhaps, the hidden sophianic Mozart in himself, the central wisdom that comes in tune with the divine and cosmic music and is saved by love, yes, even by eros'. 'Sophianic': the word reflects the fact that, when the original journal note on this was written (September 1960; TTW, 49-50), Merton had been reading a book by the French Orthodox theologian, Olivier Clement, *Transfigurer le Temps*, which had undoubtedly revived his earlier fascination with the notion, particularly strong in some modern Russian writers, of Sophia, the personified divine wisdom that pervades creation. He had read a little of the work of Sergii Bulgakov by 1959 (see, for example, the journal references in April 1957, SS, 85-6), when he spelled out in a letter to Victor Hammer something of Bulgakov's enormous intellectual scheme centring upon Sophia (Witness to Freedom, pp.4-6), and by 1963 he had written his celebrated prose poem on the subject. But I suspect that the reading of Clement (see especially TTW 39-42) had taken Merton's understanding of the theme in a new direction. He has picked up from Clement the point that our fallen experience of time is always bound up with absence; the restoration of the divine image is a discovery or recovery of the radiance of a present moment, the ordinary world of humanity here

and now transfigured by transparency to God. 'The Christian struggles,' wrote Clement, 'to transform the earth into a sacrament, to transform culture into an icon of the heavenly Jerusalem'. The holiness that the believer seeks is never something sought for an individual: it is a matter for sadness so long as it is not shared by all, so that one of the characteristic features of true holiness is an expectant waiting for the sanctification of others (Clement, p.207, tr. RW). This is what gives the saints the strength to resist all penultimate political solutions, all totalitarianisms. Time becomes, for the Christian, both a perpetual present and a time of positive expectation - a paradox, but a true one, recognising that the repose and stability of the saint is also, while the world lasts, a looking forward to the act that God alone can bring to completion beyond our history. So, a dynamic, but also a detachment that allows immersion in the actually present; a powerful model for Merton to absorb, and I believe that at this juncture the deeper discovery of this eastern idiom was a significant aspect of his new valuation of the space of common life in the monastery and beyond, his search for an honest form of 'silent action' - though the ambiguity of talking of 'silence' here will need some further comment.

But it is another Orthodox writer who makes for Merton a further connection. In July 1963, he is reading an article by Paul Evdokimov on early monasticism; and later, Evdokimov's vision is placed, significantly, towards the end of CGB, as if to indicate that it can be read as something of a climactic point. He is struck by the Russian's description of

monasticism as something that does not situate itself on the edge of the world, but 'in the face of the world'. In the journal, Merton thinks first - understandably, perhaps - of the temptations here, the seduction of making a pseudo-society to replace the one you have left. But by the time he has written this up in CGB, he has integrated the argument far more fully into his own perspective. 'The monastic consciousness of today in America is simply a marginal worldly consciousness' (CGB 308); the monasticism Evdokimov writes about is a phenomenon that proclaims the end of history, in the sense of making manifest the hidden dimensions of history. It does not situate itself in a tactfully remote and fairly safe corner of the secular map, but ignores the terms of secular territory and simply displays humanity as it 'pre-historically' is. Thus (TTW 349) the monk is not someone who acts 'on' the world from a vantage point outside, but someone who lives and acts out of the depths of the world, the centre of the world.

Merton remains in some respects cautious, but it is clear that he has been marked by Evdokimov's argument. Even if the 'desert phase' is over in monastic history (and Evdokimov devoted great energy to arguing that the appropriate form of monastic commitment today was not celibate separation but an 'interiorised' monasticism that had been taught by the desert monks about the proper 'locus' of Christian discipleship, at the heart of the world, within and beyond history), the radical summons to another truth at the heart of what we think we see remains. Something has

been uncovered in the laboratory of the desert which now has to be lived out in new forms. And, as Merton stresses in CGB, that discovery is primarily about the need for the monk to 'vomit up the interior phantom, the doubter, the double' - that is the shadowy self-image which can so easily be concealed under the ascetic cloak, which becomes a means of establishing one's own rightness (309). Unless this image is purified, monasticism becomes another illusory 'city': 'One lives marginally, with one foot in the general sham. Too often the other foot is in a sham desert, and that is the worst of all' (310).

So the insight that saw the monastery as a true city was not one that Merton ever abandoned; and the social critique of the mid-sixties especially grew out of the sense of obligation Merton evidently felt to speak for true civic identity, this being the job that the contemporary Christian has most indisputably been given. What we witness as he tries to find ways of speaking with integrity in such a context is a painful lack of clarity about what action (including speech) is really possible for the monk - particularly the monk as construed by modern Catholic convention. The monastic identity against which Merton is rebelling is one in which unworldliness is a mixture of proclaimed cultural detachment and unconscious reproduction of the prevailing cultural norms. There is thus no new world announced by the modern monastery. And the same is true, *mutatis mutandis*, of the modern Church, which faces exactly the same problem of false detachment and false conformity together. To define the place where the Church or the

monastery or the individual ascetic may settle with a reasonable degree of security is to accept the terms on which the godless world works. The paradox is that when the Church and the monastery accept their 'homelessness' in the world, accept that Christendom will not return and there is only a minority future (see, for example, TTW 138), they are free to offer a far more comprehensive and hopeful vision. The vision is not of the possibility of a secure enclave, an Indian reservation in the modern world, but of a genuinely civic and political life open to all, and a vision of the material world itself as sacramental; it is a reclaiming of the present, the prosaic, the human.

And as such it is also a place where speech becomes possible again. The secure enclave will either speak a hermetically sealed dialect or it will speak a version of the tired and empty language of politics in the world around. The true city is a place where language is restored; where language is not about manipulating signs to secure submission or compliance but an exchange of the perceptions of free persons, seeking to discover what can be done in common, what the goods are that can be sought together. Merton in these years is beginning to refine his ear for self-serving nonsense, for poisoned language. He notes in September 1961 (160) that he and the abbot lack a common language and meet only 'in the realm of perfectly acceptable clichés. Not cliché words but cliché ideas'. In the light of his deeper commitment to the monastery as a place of renewed public speech, this is more than just a complaint about relations with authority. And his

crossness about the drive for liturgical reform (e.g. 87-88, 144) is less about the content of new liturgical composition than about the glib slogans used to promote it.

It is, of course, Hannah Arendt's account of the Eichmann trial that prompts some of his most searching thoughts on false and diseased speech. Eichmann's remarks as he faces execution are a perfect embodiment of dead language - or rather not so much dead as lethal, infecting the world with death, in their flat denial of moral depth, guilt, memory, history itself, we might say. In CGB (265), Merton elaborates his briefer comments in TTW (310) with the prophetic warning that we have not seen the last of Eichmann. Eichmann's astonishing platitude at the foot of the gallows ('After a short while, gentlemen, we shall all meet again. Such is the fate of all men') is heard by Merton as a promise that our future will be full of Eichmanns; in these words, the technological mass murderer blithely identifies himself with his executioners and warns that his name is legion.

I have written elsewhere of the echoes we find in Merton of Auden's powerful little poem about Czechoslovakia in 1968: Merton is contemplating a monster who 'cannot master Speech': 'The Ogre stalks with hands on hips, / While drivels gushes from his lips'. The resonance is clear with Merton's prose-poetic work of the middle sixties as it appears in, for example, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (especially 'Atlas and the Fatman'). And if speech is a casualty of the politics of the self-enclosed world, it is obvious that for the Christian, and

the monk in particular, a central aspect of the Christian renewal of the space of public exchange has to be a renewal of language. Merton has no option but to 'break silence', from this perspective. As we have seen, the pitfalls of interventions in spoken and written form became very more familiar to Merton, and he is drawn by the model of 'silent action' and the pursuit of an inner resolution; but there is no obvious way around the challenge to act so as to make something different happen in words.

In poetry, yes; perhaps in some sorts of direct and personal exchange; in proper liturgy. But the difficulties Merton faces are very like those analysed so unforgettably by Bonhoeffer in his prison letters; the words of faith are too well-known to believers for their meaning to be knowable. And outside the language of faith, the temptations are to use your words as a demonstration of individual drama, an indulgence of the ego. Caught between clichés and posturings, what is the believer to do? Merton has set himself the problem that was to shape his work from the early sixties onwards. And, tellingly, it is far from clear whether we can say that he ever arrived at a resolution; what matters is that his practice as a writer, privately in the journals and publicly, shows why the question is serious. He acknowledges that almost any words in the modern cultural setting will be worn and shabby or illusory and self-serving. When the public space has been so eroded, it is not surprising if we cannot find words appropriate for free people; and the modern monastery, with its second-hand, unnoticed worldliness and its

confusions about time and liturgy, has no authentic words to help. But what the monastic life can still do, it seems, is to sustain lives that will not be content with clichés, even if they do not know how to avoid them. As has already been hinted, the speech that is called out is not - though Merton's romanticism pushed him quite near to seeing this as the ideal - a purified transparent language, but rather a record of recognising the failures without yielding to them or treating them as natural.

When we read the later Merton, we need to be careful about rushing to identify this or that as an example of a 'prophetic' voice. Merton certainly spoke words of uncomfortable truth to the systems of his day, yet he also drew back from binding himself to words and actions that threatened to become the breeding ground for new clichés. He wrote finely on war and peace and the nuclear menace; but he declined finally to become a house guru for the peace movement, in ways that could annoy and disturb his friends as well as his critics. The remarkable and often-noted thing about so much of his massive correspondence is its 'ventriloquial' character: he speaks uncannily with the voice of whoever he is writing to, from Sufi scholar to teenage girl. And while this undoubtedly has something to do with his passion for approval and acceptance, it is also a mark of his reluctance to commit his deepest identity to one voice only. Of course, it is a deeply ambiguous feature of his writing, but it is also connected with a self-critical grasp of his own speech: he does not and cannot simply develop a single Mertonian register (though every

reader will know how utterly distinctive and recognisable he can be), but plays with the tone and vocabulary of his partners in speech, both to say what he knows he has to say and to discover something else, something not knowable or expressible in one consistent voice alone.

Perhaps a monastery - or a Church - might be a place where there is time and room for people to explore each other's languages like that, delivered from the oppressive need to refine and concentrate one authoritative voice, whether the individual's or the institution's. And perhaps it is in this way that - picking up Bonhoeffer's insight - that cultural and moral seriousness, driven out from the vulgarised and over-managed modern social world, finds a proper home in the Christian community. But there is one last turn to the argument. Put in the way I have just expressed it, there is a manifest danger of a sort of dilettantism: the Church as a protracted seminar on human good. We have to remember that the exchange and exploration of Mertonian conversation is not exempt from the pervasive risk of self-serving that belongs to human beings in virtue of their fallen state, the shadow that language itself carries in a world of power, greed and self-protecting images. Late in 1963 (DWL, 26-7; c.f. CGB, 317-8), Merton contemplates Barth's startling definition of being human as standing where Jesus is, 'as a bearer of the wrath of God'. Being human is to be, down to the very root, under wrath - that is incapable of assuring ourselves of God's favour, alienated from who we are in God's purpose. God alone can

assure us; but to hear that assurance we must know what wrath means. 'I think I will have to become a Christian', Merton muses, having read Barth on Jesus' encounter with Pilate, which according to Barth says everything that needs to be said about the Church and the polis (DWL 27). Politics - in the ordinary sense - in the Church, the Church pretending to engage with the world by cautious public pronouncement, above all the reduction of the gospel to specific contemporary agendas, all this is what Barth memorably calls 'the dog in the nice room', the presence guiltily slinking in where it doesn't belong. In contrast, the real preacher of the gospel knows that humanity, totally under wrath is also totally taken to the far side of that wrath because it is absorbed in Jesus and there is no going back: Jesus' victory is the only truly serious thing and everything else can be looked at with patience and humour.

No account of Merton's wrestling with the political vocation can ignore this. In these thoughts on one particular period in Merton's evolution, I have been trying to understand him as finding a way within a territory defined by three points of orientation, a territory mapped out with reference to Arendt, to Clement and other Orthodox writers, and to Bonhoeffer and Barth. The Christian life has to justify its implicit claim to be the true 'civic' existence, a space for the conversation of free people; it is equipped for this by the grace of experiencing a true present, a sophianic depth in things; and, for it not to be a static ideological construction, confident that it has found a definable sacred space to occupy and defend, it

must be permeated with the knowledge of 'wrath' always present, always overcome - an utterly inescapable human failure that is repeatedly made the material of God's work and so cannot be absolutised or accepted with resignation. The civic language of Christianity seeks to utter all this. Merton's many voices and many turnings and returnings on himself exhibit some of what this civic language might be.

A last image. So much of this discussion has been about territories and spaces in one way and another, and about the dangers of territories defended, walled off, in ways that stifle the vision of active common humanity. Early in TTW, in an entry in July 1960 (21), Merton comments on the mounting crisis in Cuba, and the USA's determination to hold on to one of its military bases at all costs, against the will of Castro's government. In the context of Merton's wider discussion of what is authentically political and civic, this is a significant issue, putting in question, as he sees it, the USA's own foundational vision and myths of political liberty and civic discourse (the Boston Tea Party, the Declaration of Independence). For the reader in 2004, meditating on the anti-political and anti-civic pressures of our day, what leaps from the page is the name of the base: Guantanamo.

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