# If it is your brick, take it:

## Thomas Merton on the Ethic of Nonviolence

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Two desert fathers had been living together as hermits for many years and had never got into a fight. One of them said to the other, 'Why don't we do like everybody else in the world and get into a fight?' The other fellow said, 'O.K., how do you do it?' He said, 'Well, fights start over possessions, owning something exclusively, so that the other fellow can't have it. Let's look around and get ourselves a possession and then have a fight over it.' So he found a brick and said, 'I will put this brick between us' and I will say, 'This is my brick,' and you will immediately say, 'No, it is mine,' and then we will get into a fight. So the man got the brick and put it down between the two of them and said, 'This is my brick.' And the other said, 'Well, brother, if it is your brick, take it.'

The most basic principle of the ethic of nonviolence is that all life is sacred. Such an ethic holds that each person is a son or daughter of God and that all have been created by God to live in peace and love with each other and in harmony with nature. The ethic of nonviolence, which is an ethic of love, roots itself in such values as care, cooperation, compassion, equality, and forgiveness.

Jesus spent his life teaching and practicing nonviolence. He called his followers to embrace God's nonviolent reign of peace by taking on others' violence in a non-retaliatory way and accepting suffering in order to right wrongs. Jesus taught: 'If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to that person the other as well. If a person takes you to law and would have your tunic, let that person have your cloak as well' (Matthew 5.38-41). In a final act of nonviolence before he died, Jesus cried out: 'Father, forgive them for they know not what they do' (Luke 23.34).

In 1983, in the pastoral letter, *The Challenge of Peace*, the United States Catholic Bishops used the term 'nonviolence' to describe Jesus' way of peacemaking. In their letter, the Church leaders stated: 'The vision of Christian nonviolence is not passive about injustice and the defense of the rights of others; it rather affirms and exemplifies what it means to resist injustice through nonviolent methods'.[2]

A decade later, in their letter, *The Harvest of Justice is Sown in Peace*, the United States Catholic Bishops once again spoke about nonviolence. They stated:

> Nonviolence implies both a philosophy and a strategy which shuns force and pursues a range of alternative actions (e.g. dialogue, negotiation, protests, strikes, boycotts, civil disobedience, and civilian resistance) in order to bring law, policy, government itself or other armed parties in line with the demand of justice.... As a nation we have an affirmative obligation to promote research and education in nonviolent means of resisting evil. We need to address nonviolent strategies with much greater seriousness in international affairs.[3]

### Thomas Merton: A Voice Against Violence

In the 1960s, Thomas Merton, a Trappist priest at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky, became a voice of protest against all forms of violence. Merton declared:

> [B]y being in the monastery I take my true part in all the struggles and sufferings of the world. To adopt a life that is essentially... nonviolent, a life of humility and peace, is itself a statement of one's position.... It is my intention to make my entire life a rejection of and protest against the crimes and injustices of war and political tyranny, which threaten to destroy the whole human race and the world with it.[4]

During the last years of his life, Merton spent his energies writing about nonviolence. In developing an ethic of nonviolence, he adopted Gandhi's philosophy of *Satyagraha*, i.e. soul or love force that always attempts to overcome evil by good, anger by love, and untruth by truth. Merton learned from Gandhi that, if one wants to become immersed in a nonviolent lifestyle, one must become more and more open and committed to the truth.

Through his study of Gandhi's writings, Merton became convinced that nonviolence is a power superior to the forces of brutality in the world and that the power of nonviolence will ultimately be victorious over all forms of violence and deception. From Gandhi's life and writings, Merton also gleaned the insight that human rights, including those of one's oppressor(s), deserve the utmost respect. Agreeing with Gandhi, Merton maintained that nonviolence is the only way to achieve peace and justice in the world.

### The Nexus of Contemplation and Nonviolence

During the earlier years of his writing career, Thomas Merton wrote extensively about contemplation. Just as the study of Gandhi's philosophy of *Satyagraha* contributed to Merton's development of an ethic of nonviolence, so, too, did his reflections on contemplation enable him to better comprehend what it means to embrace a life-long commitment to peacemaking.

Merton defines contemplation as the 'deep and intimate knowledge of God by a union of love'.[5] In the solitude of contemplation, one comes in contact with the wellspring of God's peaceful Silence. One rests in hidden wholeness who is at the center of all that exists. For Merton, 'Our deep awareness that we are truly at one with everything and everyone in the Hidden Ground of Love we call God demands of us that we live a nonviolent

love'.[6]

The contemplative person seeks to integrate a life of contemplation and action. Love is the hinge that unites action and contemplation. Regarding this, Merton reflects: 'Action is charity looking outward to others and contemplation is charity drawn inward to its own divine source'.[7]

Contemplation leads to a life of concern for others. The true contemplative plunges into the heart of the world and actively seeks to fulfil human needs such as respect for personhood, gainful employment, adequate housing, and availability of proper nutrition. Likewise, the socially responsible contemplative person prayerfully critiques the violence of the 'war machine, bombs, ... racism, materialism, and physical and spiritual poverty in contemporary Western life'.[8]

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The contemplative person issues an emphatic 'No' to human society bent on violence. Regarding this, Merton notes that. 'Each one of us has to resist an ingrained tendency to violence and to destructive thinking. Every time we renounce reason and patience in order to solve a conflict by violence, we are sidestepping this great obligation and putting it off'.[9] For Merton, the nonviolent healing of our culture is inherently linked to an appreciation for and the experience of contemplation.

The ethic of nonviolence involves one's total orientation to life. According to Merton, living nonviolently is the great prophetic Christian witness for our time. The nonviolent person actively resists social evils by confronting them in peaceful ways and, thus, builds a New World by loving as Christ loves.

Merton sought to apply the ethic of nonviolence to the following blatant social evils of his day: racism, addiction to war, and nuclearism. What follows is a discussion of his reflections regarding each of these issues. In writing about these social issues, Merton sought to live out his admonition: 'We are obliged to take an active part in the solution of urgent problems affecting the whole of society and our world'.[10]

### The Cancer of Racism

Thomas Merton viewed racism as an obvious sign of the crisis of violence that prevailed in America during his lifetime. He described the black civil rights movement in the United States as 'one of the most positive and successful expressions of Christian social action... seen anywhere in the twentieth century'.[11] Merton looked upon African Americans' nonviolent efforts for liberation as 'the greatest example of Christian faith in action in the social history of the United States'.[12]

Merton's sensitivity to the reality of the oppressive situation of African Americans in twentieth century America grew out of his experience in 1940 of working at Catherine de Hueck Doherty's Friendship House in Harlem. There, he gained keen 'insight into the patience with which, at that time, the Negroes still endured a deprived and exploited existence'.[13]

Merton linked the struggle for black liberation in the United States to Gandhi's *Satyagraha*, i.e., truth or soul force. Regarding this, Merton wrote:

> The mystique of Negro nonviolence holds that the victory of truth is inevitable, but that the redemption of individuals is not inevitable. ... The Negro children of Birmingham, who walked calmly up to the police dogs that lunged at them with a fury capable of tearing their small bodies to pieces, were not only confronting the truth in an exalted moment of faith, a providential *kairos*. They were also in their simplicity bearing heroic Christian witness to the truth, for they were exposing their bodies to death in order to show God and man that they believed in the just rights of their people, knew that those rights had been unjustly, shamefully, and systematically violated, and realized that the violation called for expiation and redemptive protest, because it was an offence against God and his truth.[14]

In his writings on racism, Merton stresses that in America whites historically enslaved blacks in inferiority and powerlessness by imposing economic and social degradation upon them. Merton notes that in various periods of American history whites conceived of blacks as subservient and subhuman, i.e. as non-persons.[15] Over time the deep-seated sin of racial prejudice ate away at American society like a cancer.[16] Within this disgraceful situation, by refusing to accept the evil of white iniquity and injustice against them, blacks offered the message of salvation to their white oppressors.[17] African-Americans sought to awaken White Americans' consciences to the need to reform society according to the norm of Christian love.

For Merton, the elimination of racism in the United States requires that whites experience a 'profound change of heart, a real shake-up and deep reaching metanoia'.[18] White Americans need to repent of their lamentable injustices and cruelties to African-Americans, which are sins against Christ.[19]

In his writings, Merton stresses that in Christ there is no racial division. All are equal. Thus, White Americans need to call out to African-Americans and vice versa. All must become brothers and sisters in the fullest sense of the word.[20] In Merton's view, only by doing so will it be possible to eliminate racism in America.

Thomas Merton deeply admired Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as a model of Christian opposition to racism. Merton applauded King's philosophy of nonviolence in the struggle against racial prejudice in the United States. He described King as a courageous and edifying Christian who grounded his thinking and actions in Christ's law of love, which he believed would unite people, even enemies, in truth.[21]

In the development of his philosophy of nonviolence, King, like Merton, was profoundly influenced by Gandhi's writings on and lived commitment to nonviolence. Dr. King noted that:

> As I delved deeper into the philosophy of Gandhi my scepticism concerning the power of love gradually diminished, and I came to see for the first time that the Christian doctrine of love operating through the Gandhian method of nonviolence was one of the most potent weapons available to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom.[22]

King taught that nonviolence is a way of life for strong, courageous rather than weak persons. He stressed that nonviolence is a discipline that demands active nonresistance against evil and seeks to build the beloved community of humanity through friendship and understanding. Nonviolence directs itself against evil forces rather than persons who are doing evil.

In 1963, when King accepted the Nobel Peace Prize, he stated:

> Nonviolence is not sterile passivity but a powerful moral force, which makes for moral transformation. Sooner or later, all the people of the world will have to discover a way to live together in peace. ... If this is to be achieved, people must evolve for all human conflict a method, which rejects revenge, aggression, and retaliation. The foundation for such a method is love.[23]

In a letter to Ping Ferry, Merton described Dr. King's receiving the Nobel Peace Prize as 'one of the greatest things that has happened in recent years'.[24] Later, when the thirty-nine year old King was assassinated, Merton expressed his deep hope that his friend's death would stir the conscience of the United States in a profound way.[25] In a touching letter to Dr. King's wife, Merton eulogized her slain husband by declaring:

> He has done the greatest thing anyone can do. In imitation of his Master, he laid down his life for his friends and enemies. He knew the nation was under judgment and he tried everything to stay the hand of God and man. He will go down in history as one of our greatest citizens. My prayers are with you and with him. May he find the rest and reward, which God has promised to all who trust in his mercy.[26]

## Working for the Abolition of War

In the 1960s, Thomas Merton became a staunch proponent of the abolition of war. He declared: 'I feel now perfectly convinced that there is one task for me that takes precedence over everything else: working with such means as I have at my disposal for the abolition of war'.[27] Merton believed that this task was a moral obligation incumbent on the entire human race, since, in his opinion, any war could eventuate in a nuclear war[28] and, thus, lead to a nuclear holocaust that would end civilization, as we know it. Regarding this, he asserted:

> There can be no question that unless war is abolished the world will remain constantly in a state of madness and desperation in which, because of the immense destructive power of modern weapons, the danger of catastrophe will be imminent and probable at every moment everywhere.[29]





In his writings, Merton challenged the human community to rediscover the 'early Christian ideal of peace and nonviolent action,'[30] which he believed had been abandoned in his day, to a large extent. He wrote: '[W]e have to work, sacrifice, and co-operate to lay the foundations on which future generations may build a stable and peaceful international community'.[31]

Merton contended that the way to begin the international journey to lasting peace was to develop a program of gradual, multilateral disarmament of nations through nonviolent negotiations. In this way, rather than continuing to budget billions of dollars to secure more and more caches of armaments, the world nations could monetarily ensure the global population access to the food, medicine, housing, and education needed to live decent human lives.

## Vietnam War: The Rape of a Culture

Merton viewed the Vietnam War as a prime example of humankind's addiction to violence. America's aim in this war was to save Vietnam in the name of the 'free world'. The strategy to accomplish this goal was to kill Vietcong. Since American military could not distinguish between Vietnam civilians and Vietcong, countless Vietnam civilians lost their lives each day during the conflict. The United States murdered and maimed approximately two million Vietnamese, mostly civilians and reduced the rest of the population of that country to refugee status during this war. United States B-52 bombers defoliated the Vietnamese wilderness and the United States military sprayed herbicides on Vietnamese rice paddies.

For Merton, the Vietnam War was one of the worst blunders in United States history.[32] It was an atrocity that involved the 'callous ravaging of human life and the rape of the culture'[33] of Vietnam. Reflecting on the fact that the violence during this war ignored the human reality of those the United States claimed to be helping, Merton queried:

> Are we so psychologically constituted and determined that we find real comfort in a daily score of bombed bridges and burned villages, forgetting that the price of our psychological security is the burned flesh of women and children who have no guilt and no escape from the fury of our weapons? ... We believe that any end can be achieved from the moment one possesses the right instruments, the right machines, and the right technique. The problem of war turns into a problem of engineering. We forget that we are dealing with human beings instead of rocks, oil, steel, water, or coal.[34]

Merton noted that the United States dropped more bombs on Vietnam than it exploded during World War II in its entirety.[35] Additionally, he asserted that he was on the side of all those who were 'burned, cut to pieces, tortured, held as hostages, gassed, ruined, destroyed'[36] during this brutal, futile war. In essence, Merton insisted that the Vietnam War provided irrefutable evidence that the

United States had become a 'warfare state'.[37]

### The Nuclear Specter

In Thomas Merton's lifetime, the United States alone possessed a 'stockpile of nuclear weapons estimated at sixty thousand megatons'.[38] Without taking into consideration the nuclear caches of other nations in the global community, this alone was enough to wipe out civilization and destroy life on planet earth. Thus, in his writings, Merton insisted on the moral imperative that the international community rid itself of existing weapons of mass destruction and cease building new ones. About this, he emphatically asserted:

> To allow governments to pour more and more billions into weapons that almost immediately become obsolete, thereby necessitating more billions for new and bigger weapons, is one of the most colossal injustices in the long history of humankind. While we are doing this, two thirds of the world are starving or living in conditions of subhuman destitution.[39]

In the case of nuclear war, Merton maintained that the conditions agreed upon for a just war are inapplicable. He stated: 'A war of total annihilation simply cannot be considered a "just war", no matter how good the cause for which it is undertaken'.[40] For Merton, nuclear war would be a moral evil second only to the crucifixion.[41] It would lead to the suicide of nations and the wholesale disappearance of life.

Convinced that in good conscience one can refuse to support any measure that leads to nuclear war, Merton encouraged Christians to not engage in any job that contributes to the making of nuclear weapons. He insisted that, 'The first duty of the Christian is to ... take the stand that all-out nuclear, bacterial or chemical warfare is absolutely forbidden by all standards of natural and divine morality, because it means the destruction of the world'.[42] Additionally, Merton held that the most conscientious response to the possibility of nuclear war would be for sane people 'everywhere in the world to lay down ...their tools and starve and be shot rather than co-operate in the war effort'.[43]

Merton was deeply disturbed by what he viewed as the lack of anti-nuclear sentiment evidenced by Church leaders of his day. In a letter to Dorothy Day dated 23 August 1961, he commented, 'But why this awful silence and apathy on the part of Catholics, clergy, hierarchy, lay people on this terrible issue on which the very continued existence of the human race depends?'.[44] Similarly, in a letter to Ernesto Cardenal, he reflected:

> I do not criticize; but I observe with a kind of numb silence the inaction, the passivity, the apparent indifference and incomprehension with which most Catholics, clergy and laity, at least in this country, watch the development of pressures that build up to a nuclear war.[45]

In October 1961, when Merton started writing his *Cold War Letters*, 'the United States and the Soviet Union were risking nuclear war in a confrontation at the Berlin Wall. ... In that year between the Berlin Crisis and the Cuban Missile Crisis, Merton wrote ... 111 letters'.[46] These letters evidence the fact that he was struggling with the imminent threat of nuclear holocaust. For instance, in one of his letters, Merton wrote:

> [I]n this awful issue of nuclear war... what concerns me... is the ghastly feeling that we are all on the brink of a spiritual defection and betrayal of Christ, which would consist in the complete acceptance of the values and the decisions of the callous men of war who think only in terms of mega corpses and megatons, and have not the slightest thought for human beings, the image of God.[47]

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The presence of nuclear weapons intruded personally on Merton's life when a Strategic Air Command (SAC) plane flew over his hermitage on the property of the Abbey of Gethsemani. About this experience, he observed:

> I have seen the SAC plane, with the bomb in it, fly low over me and I have looked up out of the woods directly at the closed bay of the metal bird with a scientific egg in its breast! A womb easily and mechanically opened! I do not consider this technological mother to be the friend of anything I believe in.[48]

### Vaporization in Hiroshima and Nagasaki

In his prose poem, *Original Child Bomb*, in a starkly factual way, Merton narrates the United States bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the consequent wholesale decimation of the inhabitants of those cities. Through its bombing operation, the United States vaporized 130,000 Japanese citizens of Hiroshima and 30,000 people in Nagasaki.

For Merton, the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki violated the just war theory, since civilians were the primary victims of this atrocity.[49] Merton notes that the 'idea was to unleash the maximum destructive power on a civilian center, to obliterate that center and destroy all other will to resist in the Japanese nation'.[50]

After the bombing, in a letter to Honorable Shinzo Hamai, Mayor of Hiroshima, Merton wrote:

> I never cease to face the truth, which is symbolized in the names

> Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Each day I pray humbly and with love for the victims of the atomic bombardments, which took place there. All the holy spirits of those who lost their lives there, I regard as my dear and real friends. I express my fraternal and humble love for all the citizens of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.[51]

In a word, Merton decried the decision of the United States' government to employ the atom bomb to end World War II. Reporting on a post-war questionnaire conducted by *Fortune* magazine, he noted that it 'revealed that half the respondents felt that the decision to use the bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki had been right, while nearly a quarter of them regretted that more atomic bombs had not been used on other Japanese cities'.[52]

## Conclusion

This essay began with a parable from the fourth century Desert Fathers. Merton's inclusion of this story in *The Wisdom of the Desert* eloquently enunciates the essence of nonviolence. 'If it is your brick, take it' communicates the truth that what is sorely needed in our world today is peaceful responses to scenarios ripe for violence. Those who practice nonviolence in thought, word, and deed provide the materials necessary to construct a peaceful world, one brick at a time. They use their bricks to build the beloved community.

During the last three years of his life, in his cinder block hermitage Thomas Merton reverently and contemplatively engaged in simple activities such as walking, eating, sleeping, washing dishes, sweeping the floor, praying, enjoying the fragrance of darkness, the music of daylight, and rain as the language of God. These simple rituals enabled Merton to become a more nonviolent person through his awakening to the harmony inherent in all of life.

For Merton, the moral imperative of our time is to sow seeds of nonviolence in our world. It is to treat each person with reverence. It is to not allow anger, hatred, or resentment to linger in one's heart. It is to embrace love as the power that refuses to retaliate in the face of provocation and violence. Finally, it is to envisage a world freed of racism, war, and nuclearism wherein sisters and brothers across the globe are able to join hands in abiding peace!

## Notes

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3. United States Bishops' Conference, *The Harvest of Justice is Sown in Peace* (Washington, D.C. 1993), pp.10-11.
4. Thomas Merton, 'Preface' to the Japanese Edition of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, trans. Tadishi Kudo (Tokyo: Chou Shuppanasha, 1966).
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10. Thomas Merton, *Life and Holiness* (New York: Doubleday, 1963), p.100.
11. Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence* (South Bend, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), p.130.
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13. George Woodcock, *Thomas Merton: Monk and Poet* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1978), p.130.
14. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964), p.44.
15. See Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence*, p.121.
16. See Thomas Merton, *Passion for Peace*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Co., 1997), p.175.
17. See Thomas Merton, *Passion for Peace*, pp.184 and 186.
18. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction*, p.310.
19. Ibid, p.66.
20. Ibid, p.61.
21. See Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Renewal*, ed. Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1990), p.182.
22. Martin Luther King, Jr., 'Pilgrimage to Nonviolence,' http://www.christiancentury.org/article.lasso?id=1191.
23. Martin Luther King, Jr., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James Washington (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), pp.224-5.
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25. See Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers,1989), p.365.
26. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1985), p.451.
27. Thomas Merton, *Cold War Letters*, eds. Christine M. Bochen and William H. Shannon (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2006), p.9.
28. See Thomas Merton, *Cold War Letters*, p.15.
29. Thomas Merton, *The Catholic Worker*, October, 1961, p.1.
30. Thomas Merton, *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*, ed. Patricia A. Burton (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2004), p.132.
31. Thomas Merton, *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*, p.93.
32. See Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy*, p.107.
33. Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence*, p. 106.
34. Ibid. p.45.
35. Ibid. p.3.
36. Ibid. pp.109-10.
37. Thomas Merton, *Thomas Merton on Peace*, ed. Gordon C. Zahn (New York: McCall Publishing Co., 1971), p.xviv.
38. Thomas Merton, *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*, p.23.
39. Thomas Merton, *The Nonviolent*

*Alternative*, p.118.
40. ibid. pp.85-6.
41. See Thomas Merton, *Passion for Peace*, p.46.
42. Thomas Merton, *The Nonviolent Alternative*, p.17.
43. Thomas Merton, *Passion for Peace*, p.46.
44. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love*, pp.139-40.
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50. Thomas Merton, *The Nonviolent Alternative*, p.99.
51. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction*, p.297.
52. Thomas Merton, *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*, p.66.

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