

An Army That Sheds No Blood: Thomas Merton's Response to War

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One of Thomas Merton's lesser known publications, now out of print, is a small booklet produced in Italy and issued by New Directions: *Clement of Alexandria: Selections from the Protreptikos*. It appeared just two years after publication of a related book, *The Wisdom of the Desert*, Merton's collection of stories and sayings from the inventors of Christian monasticism.

Both books reveal Merton's attraction to writers of the early Church. Clement was among the earliest, born in Athens about 150 AD, at the end of the Apostolic Age. He later made his home in Alexandria, where he became a renowned Christian teacher and apologist—and later came to be regarded as one of the Fathers of the Church, that community of renowned theologians of the early centuries who were not only scholars but articulate mystics.

Merton found in Clement a kindred soul—'one of the Fathers I like best, with whom I feel the closest affinity' he records in a journal entry made in the summer of 1961. The 'serene interior light' of Clement's writings reminded Merton of the Gospel of St. John and the Pauline epistles—'the light which burned clearly in the souls of the martyrs, kindled by the agape of the primitive Church'. Merton sees Clement as someone 'who fully penetrates the mystery of the...Risen Christ.

...a victory over death, over sin, over the confusions and dissension of this world, with its raging cruelty and its futile concerns, a victory which leads not to contempt of man and of the world, but, on the contrary, to a true, pure, serene love, filled with compassion, able to "save" for Christ all that is good and noble in man, in society, in philosophy and in humanistic culture'. And Clement wrote his serene words, Merton points out, not in the desert but in the city, 'amid its crowds'.

In presenting the case for Christ to his well-educated pagan contemporaries, Clement drew from various wells, not only from the Gospels, Paul's letters and other Christian sources, but also from the work of the Greek philosophers, especially Plato. As Merton writes, 'Clement was...a man of unlimited comprehension and compassion who didn't fear to seek elements of truth wherever they could be found, for the truth, he said, is one...to be found most perfectly in the Divine Logos, the Incarnate Word, Jesus Christ'.

Clement's theology, Merton stresses, is a theology of light, the nature of which is to banish darkness. A further attraction was the purity of Clement's writing, a transparency through which Christ shone like a sunrise. 'The whole moral philosophy of Clement', Merton writes, 'can be summed up by his conviction that Christ is the true Master, the one who guides his

disciple in every aspect of the Christian life'. In Christ 'everything is significant, everything comes to life, even the most simple and ordinary task acquires a spiritual and supernatural dimension'. It is hard to think of anyone about whom Merton ever wrote in more glowing terms. His little book about Clement was a modest effort to make this all-but-forgotten name better known to readers of our own time, eighteen centuries later.

Not least appealing to Merton was Clement's writings about war and peace. One line, as Merton translated it, provides a synopsis: the Church is 'an army that sheds no blood'. Merton's translation of excerpts from Clement's *Protreptikos* is headed 'Soldiers of Peace', and includes the following lines:

And shall not Christ who has uttered His summons to peace even to the ends of the earth

Summon together His own soldiers of peace?

Indeed, O Man, He has called to arms with His blood and His Word an army that sheds no blood:

To these soldiers He has handed over the Kingdom of Heaven.

Sadly, while certainly there are a great many Christians today who give an impressive witness to being part of such an army, it's not a remark many would apply to contemporary Christianity as a whole. For centuries Christians, by the hundreds of thousands, have been combatants in practically any war one can think of, killing each other when not killing non-Christians, and by and large doing so with the unreserved blessings of clergy—if not, as happened with the Crusades, at their

actual summons.

Merton's vision of peace was similar to that of Clement of Alexandria and he gave witness to wanting to be such a person well before becoming a monk. One of the many surprises in his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, is Merton's thorough recounting of his decision, despite his disgust with Hitler and Nazism, to be a conscientious objector. As he explained:

[God] was asking me to make a choice that amounted to an act of love for His truth, His goodness, His charity, His Gospel. ...He was asking me to do, to the best of my knowledge, what I thought Christ would do. ...After all, Christ did say, 'Whatsoever you have done to the least of these my brethren, you did it to me'. (pp.111-2)

Remarkable words—one very rarely heard anyone, still less Catholics, saying

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such things at that time. In their struggle to be accepted in a society whose default setting was anti-Catholic, American Catholics were notable for being more red-white-and-blue than many of their neighbours. It wasn't every day a Catholic writer, or indeed Christians from other major churches, talked about their behav-

iour, in wartime no less than peacetime, being modelled on Christ's example. Against whom did Christ raise a deadly weapon? No one. How many were killed by Jesus Christ? Not a single person. He both taught and practiced love of enemies. He rescued people from death. Far from killing others, he was renowned for acts of healing. Dying on the cross, he forgave his executioners. Having risen from the dead, he said to his disciples, 'Peace be with you'.

Major themes in Merton's later writing and work, not only regarding peace but even his debt to people from non-Christian religious traditions, was already clearly expressed in *The Seven Storey Mountain*. There is development, of course. His early parochialism and convert zeal evaporated. Even more significantly, his understanding of what it meant to 'be in the world but not of it' was gradually transformed. His conversion was an on-going process. A significant part of it in the last two decades of his life was his realization that a monk, in his place of relative refuge, is sometimes called to see the world with a clarity that often eludes those who are in the midst of the world, and not just to see what is happening but to attempt to speak up in a way that might prevent disaster.

Almost anyone who knows anything about Merton is likely to recall that moment of illumination when, in 1958, he waited for the light to turn green at a busy intersection in downtown Louisville. I need not recite the familiar text. In a moment that contained all the time in the world, he saw those around him as bearers of the divine image, as persons loved by God, each of them as dear to God as anyone in any monastery. He knew not one

of these strangers by name but the fate of each of them became a matter of eternal significance. That transfigured moment helps us better understand the final decade of Merton's life where his letter-writing took off. It seemed he was writing to just about everyone in the phone book, from popes to the authors of banned books, from great scholars to people like me who sometimes went to prison for acts of protest. Three years after the epiphany, not many months before his little book on Clement was issued, Merton submitted his first article to *The Catholic Worker*—'The Root of War is Fear'.

Merton saw 'war-madness' as 'an illness of the mind and spirit that is spreading with a furious and subtle contagion all over the world'. Perhaps in our ears this may sound a bit extreme but one has to recall that, at the time Merton was writing these observations, advocates of nuclear war were promoting the benefits of a pre-emptive nuclear attack on the Soviet Union using arguments similar to those we have heard more recently in justification of the US pre-emptive war on Iraq. Scores of US nuclear weapons tests were occurring, first in Nevada and then, after the weapons became too destructive for open-air detonation in United States, in the Pacific Ocean. Millions of children in US schools took part in 'duck-and-cover' drills to learn how hiding under their desks with the hands over the back of their necks might save them in the event of a nuclear attack. The 'war-madness' Merton spoke of was truly a mass psychosis. Millions of people, myself among them, did not anticipate dying of old age. Indeed I didn't expect to live to be thirty. There was a poster on my room at the

Catholic Worker that bore the simple message, 'Get Ready to Die'. These words were perhaps the verbal equivalent of the skull one was supposed to find in the cell of a medieval hermit.

Here is Merton's description of these times taken from his article from *The Catholic Worker*:

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.

Merton went on to sketch out a vision of how Christians should respond to the dangers facing us in the post-Hiroshima world:

What are we to do? The duty of the Christian in this crisis is to strive with all his power and intelligence, with his faith, his hope in Christ, and love for God and man, to do the one task which God has imposed upon us in the world today. That task is to work for the total abolition of war. 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.

Merton never wavered from these basic ideas. As a writer aware that many people had great respect for his work and that he was one of the relatively few whose voice might make a difference, and also aware that he might not be given an extended opportunity to say what was on his mind before his superiors hit the off switch, he plunged ahead with other writings, including a poem—'Chant to Be Used Around a Site for Furnaces'—about the Holocaust and the camp commander of Auschwitz, Rudolph Höss. It ends with Höss addressing the reader: 'Do not think yourself better because you burn up friends and enemies with long-range missiles without ever seeing what you have done'. This too was published in *The Catholic Worker* and widely reprinted elsewhere.

Merton wasn't finished with the implications of the death machine such bureaucrats faithfully served. In an essay on Adolf Eichmann, the chief architect of the Holocaust, Merton had this to say:

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 ones who are the most dangerous. It is the sane ones, the well-adapted ones, who can without qualms and without nausea aim the missiles and press the buttons that will initiate the great festival of destruction that they, the sane ones, have prepared.

(Raids on the Unspeakable)

Merton's peace writings provoked a good deal of criticism. Given the climate of the time, it's not surprising that some—many of them Catholics—saw him as having become 'a Communist dupe', a popular phrase in those days. A monk, it was said, 'should write about prayer and meditation, the rosary and fasting, not about such "political" issues as war. Who does Thomas Merton think he is? What happened to the author of *The Seven Storey Mountain*?'

It was quite a storm and achieved its goal. Merton, having been accused of writing for 'a Communist-controlled publication' was silenced. But it is remarkable how much Merton was able to write and publish before the plug was pulled. Merton had just finished writing a full-length book, *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*, when he received a letter from Dom Gabriel Sortais, Merton's Abbot General ordering him not to continue publishing articles on war and peace. Only six months had passed since the publication of Merton's first peace essay in *The Catholic Worker*.

Merton obeyed the order in the sense that *Peace in the Post-Christian Era* was not published in book form in his lifetime. But Merton's abbot, Dom James Fox, made it possible for *Peace in the*

Post-Christian Era, and also a collection of letters, *Cold War Letters*, both to be published by the monastery in mimeographed editions that were privately circulated, widely read and proved influential. Dom James decided that such privately circulated books were not covered by the silencing order, only work sold commercially on the open market. Merton also continued to write and publish shorter pieces on war and peace, but using various pen names. Some were laconic but reveal-

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ing, like Benedict Monk, while others playful. Who else but Thomas Merton could have written something signed Marco J. Frisbee?

Eventually, after Dom Gabriel's death late in 1963, quite a lot of what Merton wanted to say about peace to people whose only access to his writings was via book stores was published in such volumes as *Seeds of Destruction*, *Raids on the Unspeakable* and *Faith and Violence*.

It is noteworthy that the not-quite-silenced Merton did all this without

abandoning his vocation or his religious order. His actions reflected his conviction that he would do very little good for peace in the world if it was at the cost of scandalizing and alienating his own community. As he put it to me in a letter sent at the end of April 1962:

If I am a disturbing element, that is all right. I am not making a point of being that, but simply of saying what my conscience dictates and doing so without seeking my own interest. This means accepting such limitations as may be placed on me by authority, and not because I may or may not agree with the ostensible reasons why the limitations are imposed, but out of love for God who is using these things to attain ends which I myself cannot at the moment see or comprehend.

What is striking about all this is Merton's determination to do whatever he could for peace, coping with all sorts of limitations as best he could.

Throughout those next several difficult years, what Merton was able to do without interruption, in his own name and also without the heavy burden of censorship, was to carry on a great deal of significant correspondence with people like Dorothy Day, Daniel Berrigan, Tom Cornell, myself and others deeply engaged in efforts to prevent war or reduce conflict. The full text of nearly all them is available in *The Hidden Ground of Love*, and now exist, in an abbreviated form, in a section of the one-volume anthology, *Thomas Merton: A Life in Letters*. Meanwhile, Orbis Books has brought out

both *Cold War Letters* and *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*.

Correspondence is important work. Evelyn Waugh so admired Merton-the-letter-writer that he once advised Merton to give up writing books in order to have more time for correspondence. Letters matter—certainly Merton's did. I can recite by heart parts of certain letters Merton sent me. Through his letters, Merton played the role of spiritual father to many people engaged in the world.

In my own case, I don't know how I would have gotten through that nightmarish time without those letters. Peace work is not always, or even often, peaceful. Peace groups attract all sorts of people. The peace activist is at least as subject to passions and vanities as anyone else. There are countless opportunities for self-righteousness, self-pity, arrogance, ambition, neglect of relationships, and despair. The religiously motivated peace activist can come to decide that the Church is not worthy of his or her presence. Ideology can take the place of spiritual life and faith. Attending the liturgy, participating in Eucharistic life, praying the rosary, prayer of any kind, going to confession, fasting—all such things can be seen as unimportant or even a waste of time. In such a context, more than most others, the peacemaker is desperately in need of a the kind of patient guidance I was fortunate enough to receive from Merton, who was motivated by a genuine vision of peace and not simply driven by anger at the makers of war.

One of Merton's main stresses, in my case at least, was to acquire a deeper compassion. Without compassion, he pointed out; protesters tend to become more and more centred in anger and, far from con-

tributing to anyone's conversion, can actually become an obstacle to changing the attitudes of others. As he put it in one of his early letters to me,

We have to have a deep patient compassion for the fears of men, for the fears and irrational mania of those who hate or condemn us.... [These are, after all] the ordinary people, the ones who don't want war, the ones who get it in the neck, the ones who really want to build a decent new world in which there will not be war and starvation.

Another letter that came to mean a great deal to me went to a level deeper, from compassion to love. This one was sent to Dorothy Day:

Persons are not known by intellect alone, not by principles alone, but only by love. It is when we love the other, the enemy, that we obtain from God the key to an understanding of who he is, and who we are. It is only this realization that can open to us the real nature of our duty, and of right action.

Not least important to me was a letter I received at a time when I was feeling that the work we were doing was having no positive impact whatsoever. Here is a brief extract from his response, written in 1966:

Do not depend on the hope of results. When you are doing the sort of work you have taken on, essentially an apostolic work, you

may have to face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless and even achieve no result at all, if not perhaps results opposite to what you expect. As you get used to this idea, you start more and more to concentrate not on the results but on the value, the rightness, the truth of the work itself.... The range tends to narrow down, but it gets much more real. In the end, it is the reality of personal relationships that saves everything.

These letters are really about stages of conversion. Merton won his original renown for a book about conversion. It's hardly surprising that he realized that, for all of us, conversion is ultimately our only hope. To become a peaceful person, to

'In the end, it is the reality of personal relationships that saves everything'

live in a way that contributes to peace, to live in a way that helps save life rather than in a way that contributes to the killing of others, to live in such a way that others may decide to live differently—that is an extraordinary achievement. Indeed it is never fully achieved. It's an on-going process, as all conversion is. Along the way we make mistakes, some of them serious. Repentance, confession, reconciliation, and many fresh starts are needed. This was true in the early Church and remains true in our own time. All armies are built one-by-one. This is also

true of the army that sheds no blood.

Again and again Merton made clear his conviction, echoing Clement of Alexandria, that the highest form of Christian discipleship presupposed the renunciation of violence. This is how he put it in an important passage included in 'The Christian in World Crisis', an essay included in *Seeds of Destruction*.

The Christian does not need to fight and indeed it is better that he should not fight, for insofar as he imitates his Lord and Master, he proclaims that the Messianic Kingdom has come and bears witness to the presence of the Kyrios Pantocrator [Lord of Creation] in mystery, even in the midst of the conflicts and turmoil of the world.

Merton's good friend, Clement of Alexandria, could have written the same words.

Jim Forest is the author of *Living With Wisdom: A Biography of Thomas Merton*, recently republished in an expanded, revised edition. Merton and Forest exchanged many letters from 1961 until weeks before Merton's death in 1968. The Merton-side of the exchange is included in *The Hidden Ground of Love*.

A version of this paper was given at two conferences arranged by the Thomas Merton Society of Canada in March 2009. The full text is available at: <http://incommunion.org/forest-flier/jimseesays/sheds-n-blood/>