

Seeking Truth

An Account of a Talk Given to Sixth-form Students at Oakham School

Stephen Dunhill

In the early summer of 2011 I was invited by the chaplain of Oakham, the Reverend Alex Aldous, to give an evening talk to the sixth form about Thomas Merton. The format was to be a talk of about forty minutes, followed by a question and answer session of another twenty minutes. As to the specific subject matter, I was given a completely free rein.

Where to start? I tried to think of parallels between the lives of the present day students and that of

Merton. Protected as he was by his family's wealth Merton appears to have shown no real concern for the social or political problems of his day, whether as a schoolboy or as an undergraduate. Bear in mind that this period spans the Great Depression with its concomitant social, political and economic upheavals. Merton only started to immerse himself in social concerns at the end of the 1950s – concerns which are very much with us, notably the threat of nuclear war, con-

ventional warfare, and racial and civil rights. I decided to focus on these three areas, aiming to include as far as practicable Merton's own writings to illustrate my arguments.

The evening started with dinner in the headmaster's dining room, hosted by the headmaster, Nigel Lashbrook, with a few selected teachers and students. Many of the students were from outside the UK and had come to Oakham for a year of study at sixth form level. I found them all very polite, easy to engage in conversation and with enquiring minds. After dinner we repaired to a small hall for my talk. In all there were five adults, including the headmaster and about fifteen students. Looking down on us were portraits of previous headmasters including F. C. Doherty who was appointed the same term as Merton arrived.

I started with a brief biography of Merton, to give a thumbnail portrait of this old Oakhamian. Although I did not dwell too long on his student career, I tried to point out how he seemed to lack any real focus in his life at this time, and after the death of his father how alone he felt in the world. With the present chaplain in the room I did not linger too long over the details of 'Buggy' Jerwood, of whom Merton wrote:

...Buggy Jerwood, the school chaplain, tried to teach us trigonometry. With me, he

failed. Sometimes he would try to teach us something about religion. But in this he also failed.¹

It was at Oakham, through the enlightened headship and personal tuition of Doherty, that he was able to study Latin, Greek, French, German, and Italian (and drop mathematics!) helping to develop his superb facility with so many languages. These formed a vital part of his writings and monastic life; but he could never have foreseen that at the time.

Merton's concerns and subsequent writings about social issues started to emerge at the start of the 1960s. In a letter to Dorothy Day in August 1961 Merton wrote:

...I don't feel that I can in conscience, at a time like this, go on writing about things like meditation, though that has its point. I cannot just bury my head in a lot of rather tiny and secondary monastic studies either. I think I have to face the big issues, the life-and-death issues.²

During 1961 and 1962 Merton was primarily concerned with the Cold War, in particular the increasing tension between the USA and communist Eastern Europe. This culminated in the Cuban Missile crisis of October 1962 when the whole world held its breath, with its eventual climb-down by Russia,

when tension gradually eased. Up until that time there was a genuine fear, widespread in the West, of global nuclear holocaust. Merton's outspoken and widely disseminated writings about this global situation eventually led in April 1962 to his Abbot informing him that the head of the Cistercian order had forbidden him to publish any further articles on war or peace, this censorship not being revoked until 1967. In a letter to James Forest in April 1962 Merton wrote:

...The reason given is that this is not the right kind of work for a monk, and that it 'falsifies the monastic message.' Imagine that: the thought that a monk might be deeply enough concerned with the issue of nuclear war to voice a protest against the arms race, is supposed to bring the monastic life into *disrepute*. Man, I would think that it might just possibly salvage the last shred of repute for an institution that many consider dead on its feet.³

Although Merton continued to write on nuclear war by using pen names and open letters to friends, by 1963 he had moved on to address other concerns, in particular the war with communism that America was waging on a far bloodier field of conflict, Vietnam. But the problem Merton confronted is still

with us, in many ways on a larger scale. By 1963 four countries, USA, Russia, UK and France, had nuclear weapons. That number is now seven, including China, India and Pakistan. In addition it is believed that North Korea and Israel also have them; and there is much international concern that Iran is actively developing a nuclear capability. Merton's writings on this subject are as prescient now as when they were first written.

From 1963 when Lyndon Johnson rapidly escalated America's involvement in Vietnam the number of American personnel rose from 10,000 'advisers' to half a million combat troops by the end of 1967. After failed peace talks in 1968 there was a realization that the war could not be won, and in 1969 Nixon put in place a withdrawal plan – the South Vietnamese were to be trained up to deal with their own defence allowing the US to withdraw totally. This was accomplished by 1975, and Saigon fell to the North Vietnamese almost immediately. Replace Vietnam and Saigon with Afghanistan and Kabul and the scenario is all too familiar. America's vast army could not be put in the field by volunteers alone and so the draft was introduced in 1965. Had the (male) students I was addressing been at an American high school 45 years previously they would have had it hanging over their futures.

In 1962 and 1963 Merton was in regular correspondence with a

wide range of peace activists including Dan and Phil Berrigan. Responding to the trial of Eichmann in Jerusalem in 1961 Merton wrote:

... you will probably find that the pacifists and the ban-the-bomb people are, quite seriously just as we read in *Time*, a little crazy.⁴

Certainly society viewed the Berrigan brothers, both Catholic priests, as more than a little crazy, with their violent opposition to the war. At one time they were on the FBI ten most wanted fugitives list. Merton could not endorse such violent protest, preferring non-violent means. By 1965 his intense interest in Ghandi had inspired many articles and a book, *Ghandi on Non-Violence*. As he wrote in the preface to the Vietnamese edition of *No Man is an Island* in 1966:

Compassion teaches me that my brother and I are one. That if I love my brother, then my love benefits my own life as well, and if I hate my brother and seek to destroy him, I seek to destroy myself also. The desire to kill is like the desire to attack another with an ingot of red hot iron: I have to pick up the incandescent metal and burn my own hand while burning the other. Hate itself is the seed of death in my own heart, while it seeks the death of the other. Love is the seed of

life in my own heart when it seeks the good of the other.⁵

But Christian protest against the war took a darker turn in 1965. In June 1963 five Buddhist monks and one nun had self-immolated themselves in Saigon in protest against the war. In March 1965 Alice Harz, an 82 year old Quaker, did the same in Detroit, as did Norman Morrison, another Quaker, outside the Pentagon in November 1965. As Merton wrote in his diary:

They will probably try to write him off as a nut, but he seems to have been a perfectly reasonable person, a Quaker, very dedicated. What can one say of such a thing? Since I do not know the man, I do not know that his motives were necessarily wrong or confused – all I can say is that objectively it is a terrible thing. Certainly it is an awful sign, and perhaps there had to be such a sign. Certainly the sign was powerful because incontestable and final in itself (and how frightful!). It broke through the undifferentiated, uninterpretable noises, and it certainly must have hit many people awful hard. But in three days it becomes again incontestable and in ten it is forgotten. O God, what a tragic world we live in! Meanwhile the Catholic Workers are all burning their draft cards.⁶

Four days later Roger Laporte, one of the staff of The Catholic Worker, set fire to himself in front of the United Nations building. Laporte died the next day from second and third degree burns covering 95 percent of his body. Despite his burns, he remained conscious and able to speak. When asked why he had burned himself, Laporte calmly replied, 'I'm a Catholic Worker. I'm against war, all wars. I did this as a religious action.' For Merton this was too much and he withdrew as a sponsor of The Catholic Peace Fellowship. Merton subsequently rejoined, but he felt unable to exercise any influence over the peace movement. Along with his growing interest in Buddhism he lost the impetus to continue involvement in the peace movement.

There were more and more violent demonstrations against the war. Many students, faced with the ever-present threat of conscription, became involved. The student protests reached their climax in 1970 when a largely peaceful protest march by students at Kent State University in Ohio was confronted by the National Guard and four students were shot dead, nine wounded, and one permanently paralysed. In protest huge riots followed and 900 campuses were temporarily shut. I wonder what cause, what injustice, would stir our present day students to take to the streets in such numbers?

As a form of protest self-

immolation is still with us. In December 2010, just ten months before my talk, Mohamed Bouazizi, an unemployed graduate, set himself alight in Tunisia in protest against corrupt local officials. This act triggered political unrest which led one month later to the ousting of the president, leaving a complicated political impasse in its wake. Since then there have been a further eight immolations across North Africa, in each case a supreme statement of despair and powerlessness in the face of authoritarian and repressive governments.

By the 1960s civil rights abuses were still widespread, particularly in the south. Rosa Parks's symbolic and defiant refusal to give up her seat to a white passenger in 1955 led to much civil unrest; and by 1963 there was much violence on both sides. Protestors were split into two camps, non-violent action spearheaded by the Christian Martin Luther King, and violent action led by the Muslim Malcolm X, and H. Rap Brown who alarmed white America with statements such as, 'violence is as American as cherry pie' and 'if America don't come round we're gonna burn it down.'

Merton was in correspondence with several civil rights leaders when, in 1963, a white extremist bombed a church in Birmingham, Alabama, and killed four black children attending Sunday school, including Denise McNair. A press photograph of her was widely circulated, in which she is clutching a

white doll. Merton responded with his heart through the poem 'Picture of a black child with a white doll':

Your dark eyes will never need
to understand
Our sadness who see you
Hold that plastic glass-eyed
Merchandise as if our
empty-headed race
Worthless full of fury
Twanging and drooling in the
southern night
With guns and phantoms
Needed to know love.⁷

With his head Merton was never more than a critic of the black struggle for equality as he felt powerless to play a part, feeling that as a white, middle-class monk he lacked authority in the movement. But his criticism cut right to the heart of the matter in an essay entitled 'From non-violence to black power':

The non-violent struggle for integration was won on the law-books – and was lost in fact. Integration is more myth than real possibility. The result has been that non-violence both as a tactic and as mystique has been largely rejected as irrelevant by the American Negro.

Rap Brown's statement that 'violence is as American as cherry pie' is steeped in the pungent ironies which characterize the new language of ra-

cial conflict. Yes, violence is thoroughly American and Rap Brown is saying that it is in fact the real American language. It is the language the black American has now elected to speak. Oddly enough he got himself a much better hearing when he did so.

America sat up and began paying a great deal of attention. 'Black Power' became an explosive and inexhaustible theme in the white media. It turned out to be a much better money-maker than non-violence. Black Power was clearly a message that somehow white America *wanted* to hear. Not of course that white America was not scared, it was deliciously afraid. And glad. Because now things were so much simpler. One had perfectly good reasons to call out the cops and the National Guard.⁸

Ultimately King's Christian non-violence gave way to Muslim-inspired violence. Although civil rights laws were enacted in 1964, 1966 and 1968 they were largely ineffective; and in April 1968 Martin Luther King was assassinated. At the time he had been planning a visit to Gethsemani to meet with Merton. Although civil rights in America have steadily improved since the 1960s this is not the case in many countries of the world. Also Muslim-inspired extremist

violence is still with us, America itself suffering the attack on the World Trade Centre in 2001 resulting in 2,753 deaths and leading to an increasingly global and violent 'war on terror'. America can still find plenty of reasons to 'call out the cops and the National Guard.'

Whatever his concerns with the problems of the world, Merton was at heart a monk and a man of prayer within the Catholic church. As he wrote in a circular letter to friends in 1968:

But the problems of man can never be solved by political means alone. Over and over again the Church has said that the forgetfulness of God and of prayer are at the root of our trouble. This has been reduced to a cliché. But it is nevertheless true. And I realize more and more that in my own vocation what matters is not comment, not statements of opinion, not judgements, but prayer. Let us pray for one another and try in everything to do what God asks of us.⁹

I ended my talk with some direct advice Merton gave to students. In 1964 Roberto Gri, a young Italian student, wrote to Merton asking for advice on how to study. I read the letter containing much practical advice. Merton's final sentence was:

Do not study merely to pass exams or to please your teach-

ers, but to find truth and to awaken deeper levels of life in yourself.¹⁰

Any questions?

Although asking this of my audience after the talk, I found re-searching the talk had also led me to ask many more questions both about Merton, and how I can respond to the challenges posed by the modern world in the light of his writings.

Notes

1. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Inc, 1948, published in Britain by Sheldon Press, 1975) p.73.
2. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love - Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, Ed. William H. Shannon (Farrar, Strauss, Giroux 1965, published in Britain by Flame, an imprint of Collins, 1990) p.140.
3. Merton, op. cit. (1965) p.266-7.
4. Thomas Merton, *Passion for Peace - The Social Essays*, Ed. William H. Shannon (Crossroad Publishing Company, 1995), p.201.
5. Thomas Merton, *Reflections on My Work*, Ed Robert E. Daggy (Crossroad Publishing Company, 1989, published in Britain by Fount Paperbacks, 1989) p.136.
6. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life, the Journals of Thomas Merton, Volume Five 1963-1965*, Ed. Robert E. Daggy (HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), p.313.
7. Thomas Merton, *The Collected*

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poems of Thomas Merton (New Directions, 1977), published in Britain by Sheldon Press 1978 p.626.

8. Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence - Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), p.123.

9. Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy - Letters to New and Old Friends*, Ed. Robert E. Daggy (Farrar, Strauss, Giroux 1989, published in Britain by Flame, an imprint of Collins, 1989) p.117.

10. Merton (1989), op. cit. p.335.

Stephen Dunhill is a retired teacher living in Northumbria and has had a life-long interest in Thomas Merton ever since his father, an Anglican priest, gave him a copy of *The Seven Storey Mountain* when he was 27, with the words, 'I think it is about time that you read this'. He has been on the committee of the Thomas Merton Society for six years.