

All Bystanders Now?

Gary Hall

This essay has grown out of a joint presentation with Donald Grayston at the ITMS centenary conference in Louisville in 2015. It is offered in tribute to a friend who will be dearly missed.

Introduction

In *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, first published in 1966, Merton has little to say about the 'bystander'. At least, he has little to say about the notion that monastic commitment 'inevitably makes one something of a "bystander"'.¹ In fact, that's it: the book's preface is the only place where Merton directly connects monasticism and the bystander motif.

He had used the term differently in his 1958 'Letter to an Innocent Bystander', published initially in French, then in English in the 1961 essay collection, *The Behavior of Titans*, and also included in *Raids on the Unspeakable*. There, the bystanders addressed are not monks *per se*, but 'intellectuals who have taken for granted that we could be "bystanders" and that our quality as detached observers could preserve our innocence and relieve us of responsibility.'² Merton includes himself amongst these intellectuals, and as a monk he is certainly detached, in the sense he would affirm with passion and clarity in the 1963 Japanese preface to *The Seven Storey Mountain*.³ But the detachment of this monk was an active disengagement, a determined non-participation in social patterns and structures which repeatedly give rise to violence, injustice, and dehumanising tribalism. If the idea of the bystander is commonly understood to mean one who witnesses a crime and does nothing, this is not Merton. He intervened in the harm he was seeing by ceasing to collude with or benefit from a mainstream society geared for war. He turned his gaze and his whole self in another direction. From this perspective, those who continue to contribute to, and benefit from, death-dealing social habits and structures are more bystander than he. Our

seeing this more clearly is an effect of Merton's continuing work amongst us.

In his 'Letter' of 1958 Merton distinguishes between, on the one hand, the decision not to intervene when confronted with a crime, and, on the other, a passive yet purposeful resistance which awaits a more specific outcome. The first amounts to complicity with those who 'fight one another for power over the whole world';⁴ the second is a form of engaged action. The issue at stake is the very possibility of non-participation in a system of tyranny: 'Can complicity be avoided? ... Does the fact that we hate and resent tyranny and try to dissociate ourselves from it suffice to keep us innocent?'⁵ The implication is that no such innocence is attainable; but by the time Merton is writing *Conjectures*, he is less concerned with abstract questions of guilt and innocence than with re-framing assumptions about what it might mean to make a difference, to respond actively to dehumanising social trends and forces. Whether or not we describe the monk as a 'bystander' is a small matter in the light of what that monk can reveal to us about our own bystanding, our adapting to a society characterised by violence, injustice and what Merton broadly describes as dehumanisation. The Merton of *Conjectures* seems to embrace the bystander appellation with irony and a subtle inversion of common assumptions about intervention, resistance and effectiveness. In the book's preface, after all, the term remains suspended between inverted commas.

Bauman's *Society under Siege*

Moving into the twenty-first century, the suggestion that we could ever separate ourselves from a media-saturated, globalised context seems laughable. Other prophets, however, have continued the struggle. Zygmunt Bauman, the Polish sociologist and philosopher, died in January this year. His essay, 'From Bystander to Actor', was included in the 2002 collection, *Society Under Siege*.⁶ In it, Bauman begins with a close analysis of a range of arguments about public action and inaction, then identifies two 'new' consequences of living in a media-saturated society with easy access to superfluous information:

The first: 'bystanding' is no longer the exceptional plight of the few. We are all bystanders now – witnesses to the inflicting of pain and the human suffering it causes. The second: we all confront (even if we don't feel) the need for exculpation and self-justification. Few if any do not feel the

need to resort at one time or another to the expedient of guilt denial.⁷

Thus he arrives at the essence of the contemporary bystander condition. Bauman is relentless, arguing that 'a strong case can be made for the bystander's guilt – at least a guilt by *omission*.'⁸ He goes so far as to say that there is little difference in 'causal load' between the inaction of the bystander and the action of the perpetrator, and a *legal* verdict of the bystander's innocence does nothing to absolve or redeem the onlooker from *moral* guilt.⁹ In Bauman's terms, this is a particular guilt in which all people share – or at least, all people who have ready access to media information and the opportunity to make choices; for 'the certainty (or high probability) of a general non-resistance by the on-lookers may carry a heavier responsibility for the ill actions and their effects than the mere presence of a number of ill-intentioned villains.'¹⁰

This is stark. Bauman describes a metaphysical guilt based on no direct, causal connection between a person's suffering and the action (or inaction) of other people. There is no end, in other words, to the responsibility implicit in human solidarity. After all, causal links are difficult to establish in a globalised era when 'virtually no human action, however locally confined and compressed, can be certain to have no consequence for the rest of humankind.'¹¹ For Bauman, coexistence and survival depend on far more than good relations between people who happen to be closely related or in geographical proximity.

In this twenty-first century context, he suggests, hope for a more human future lies in the counter-cultural influence of 'communities of committed speech'.¹² What might this mean? Bauman gives us only hints at the end of an extensive analysis of the problem as he sees it. The little he gives us, however, hints at a way of interpreting how Merton continues to contribute to the personal faith and theological discourse of readers facing perennial concerns with media saturation in a globalised era. In other words, Merton not only exposes from his monastic perspective the implications of uncritical participation in dominant social patterns; he also becomes a node in a web of communication associated with a biblical counter-narrative.

Communities of Committed Speech

The idea of 'communities of committed speech' seems, at first glance, similar to descriptions of a worshipping Christian community as a 'distinctive community of discourse'¹³ whose 'peculiar speech' gives rise

to a 'distinctive identity' rooted in forms of language and thought which 'did not originate with us'.¹⁴ In other words, we might simply be describing local churches, their liturgical language and homiletic traditions, in relation to the universal Church perpetually engaging with her scriptures. With Merton, this is of course part of the picture - indeed a vital element of a complex and shifting picture. Yet with Merton there is a vivid reminder of more, through his combining a creatively inhibiting submission to the distinctive discourse of the Church (in its Catholic, Trappist, American, mid-twentieth-century form) with a global literature from across the ages. Merton's commitment was not so much to a bounded form of speech as to the ways in which those different forms combine and interact, enriching understanding, insight and communication. He brought together a diverse range of actual discourses in the crucible, the unifying constant, which was his particular life.

The evolving corpus of Merton literature extends the effect, holding in conversation, or bringing together in encounter, a diverse range of readers interested in what interested Merton, seeking God and seeking to live with others in ways which align with that search for God. So if Bauman's tantalising notion of 'communities of committed speech' in any way describes what is happening around the reading of Merton, then the 'committed' descriptor says something about ways in which people are willingly *held* in forms of conversation ultimately rooted in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. In other words, the ways in which Merton continues to draw people to one another, and into the sphere of influence of a communion of saints and artists whose speech is responsive to a Word of God, might represent a version of what Bauman was suggesting with his model of communities which derive their corporate life-scripts from sources other than those channelled via dominant media.

A global imagination

Bauman does not speak from a position of Christian faith, though his writings have proved fertile ground for a number of Christian theologians. He is cited, for example, in the introduction to a collection of essays called *Conversing with Barth*,¹⁵ where Nicholas Lash reflects on 'the deepening, dangerous and unprecedented *interconnectedness* of every fact, event and circumstance'.¹⁶ Lash goes on to quote Bauman's wistful observation that 'one thing which has thus far escaped globalization is our collective ability to act globally'.¹⁷ Lash adds texture to the troubling question of how to act *at all* in ways which make a

difference, suggesting that those who take seriously the aspiration for collective, global action need to direct their attention and efforts not only towards social structures, programmes and institutions, but also to less tangible factors:

It seems to me ... that at least as important as the construction of appropriate institutions will be the development of what one might call a genuinely global *imagination*: a sense of solidarity with the whole of humankind - past, present and to come.¹⁸

The call to develop a sense of global solidarity resonates with Merton's observation that we need to recover, or at least be more attuned to, 'our original unity'.¹⁹ How might that happen? For Merton, one resounding answer is the kind of communication which tends towards what he describes as communion. The answer is given not so much in the form of description (in fact, Merton rarely describes this kind of communicating in anything other than general terms), as by cumulative example, through the various modes of writing and distribution which continue generating interpersonal engagement. In Lash's view, there is a necessary condition for the emergence of a global imagination with a sense of unity and interdependence; namely 'that humankind, in all its vast and frequently conflictual diversity, be brought, in some measure, into something like a common *conversation*'.²⁰

It is difficult to imagine what a common conversation might mean, but we can deduce something of what Lash imagines from the fact that he is introducing a book called *Conversations with Barth*. The book is a collection of academic responses to the body of writing referred to as Barth.²¹ By contrast, the body of writing we refer to as Merton includes numerous accounts and examples of interactions which either look more like what we recognise as a prelude to 'communion', or which point in that direction. Traces of conversations, albeit usually literary, and 'internal dialogues' are included in the Merton corpus in such a way that present-day readers repeatedly imagine themselves addressed by a person who has revealed enough of his own thinking to invite empathetic attention, disarm undue suspicion and avoid mystification. Then readers frequently find themselves in actual conversation with one another.

The idea that humankind might be brought into a 'common conversation' seems preposterous as soon as we bring to mind everyday realities. It even sounds like the kind of aspiration which might be

advertised by a major media corporation. But if it simply means that we are open to hearing from any other person, or that we carefully try to understand the situation of any other person, this is a different matter. It is, then, realistic to hope that groups or networks of people commit to nurturing and encouraging ways of living in tune with a common vision of an interdependent human family. Such 'communities of committed speech' differ from (though might include) the kind of professional gatherings which generate academic papers, or the conferences which come together under 'world' banners of one kind or another - too often with scant regard for local contexts, cultures and continuities, or for the slow and careful attention out of which insight, understanding and practical wisdom emerge. The sense of solidarity or mutuality which Lash describes in his brief preface might indeed depend on a 'common conversation', but such a conversation means a great deal more than, say, the ambiguous exchanges of people with privileged access, either by language, opportunity or education.

A common conversation

Lash does indeed hint at something much richer, and suggests that Christianity's specific contribution to the evolution of this global imagination arises from 'its own self-constituting narrative, or what we usually call the doctrine of the Church'.²² Church in this instance is understood in broad terms as symbolising and dramatising an 'exceptionless communion of the whole of humankind'.²³ Christianity's specific contribution is enacted by numerous particular people in particular situations, people who cannot all know one another and who therefore never in real terms have a 'common conversation', but who are each embedded in the ever-changing web of narratives, symbols and interactions which together constitute the Church. Some of these people are representative in distinctive, if not necessarily institutional or otherwise formal, ways, representative not only of the church to which they are committed, but specifically of the kind of global solidarity or original unity which runs counter to more sinister forms of 'mass thinking' on the one hand, or divisive individualism on the other. If those who gather around such representative people and their work are anything like Bauman's communities of committed speech, refusing to be cast as bystanders in a version of the world perpetuated by the rapacious global media industries, then we have a response to the detrimental impact of globalisation which looks less like a common conversation than like a web of local conversations with global effect. The complexity of life

together can be paralysing if we focus on the global scale in an attempt to imagine effective global actions. By contrast, communities of conversation inspired by figures such as Merton are encouraged 'to concentrate not on the results but on the value, the rightness, the truth of the work itself ... struggl[ing] less and less for an idea and more and more for specific people. 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.'²⁴

Acting authentically and effectively

Though dissimilar in so many ways, there are resonances between Merton and Bauman. Both were continually concerned with how to act authentically and effectively in response to social forces and trends which tend towards destruction. Merton modelled and articulated long-term commitment for the common good whilst, like Bauman, he grappled with 'confidence in the effectiveness of public speech and in its potency to prompt concerted collective action'.²⁵ As to whether public speech (which, in Bauman's essay, includes writing) can be *effective*, Bauman concludes that 'trust in the effectiveness of committed speech ... needs to be laboriously built and entrenched jointly with the ethically motivated institutions that are now either absent or too weak for the task'.²⁶ Merton's focus was elsewhere. As contemplative poet, essayist, correspondent and diarist, he thought quite differently about the public effects of writing. Introducing *Raids on the Unspeakable*, the author is advising his own book:

You are not so much concerned with ethical principles and traditional answers to traditional questions Your main interest is not in formal answers or accurate definitions, but in difficult insights at a moment of human crisis. Such insights can hardly be either comforting or well defined: they are obscure and ironic. They cannot be translated into a program for solving all the problems of society, but they may perhaps enable a rare person here and there to come alive and be awake at a moment when wakefulness is desirable You have considered the critical challenge of the hour, that of dehumanization, and have dealt with it as you could, with poetry and irony rather than tragic declamation or confessional formulas.²⁷

The marked contrast with Bauman's probing analysis is due in no small part to contrasting understandings of what writing can *do*, and of how it does it. The reader of Bauman is led to understand that his work as professional sociologist and culture critic is itself an indication of what Bauman believes writing can do. He affirms a confidence in the power of thoughtful, precise articulation of aspects of the human condition as a contribution towards effecting social change for the better. Merton on the other hand, whilst aiming for similarly powerful expression, more commonly trusts in the potential of poetics and the possibility of epiphany, within an eschatological framework which Bauman does not share. Where Bauman aims to convince through precision of analysis, Merton tends to write for a different outcome. In *Raids* he puts ultimate hope in 'a rare person here and there', whereas Bauman envisages a commitment 'undertaken by a great number of people rather than by a few exceptionally broad-minded, warm-hearted and dedicated individuals with strong ethical convictions'.²⁸ That contrast aside, it is in the *relationship* between the insightful, committed individual and the wider community of commitment that we may see a link between Bauman's essay and a way of understanding the continuing effectiveness of Merton amongst his readers. Despite Merton's advising the young activist Jim Forest not to depend on results,²⁹ we might nevertheless read his vocation as monk-writer in terms of its effective contribution to what Bauman describes as a particular kind of community-building speech, 'committed speech, dialogical in its intention, aimed from its start and throughout the ensuing dialogue at the approval of the others to whom it has been addressed: at showing that the topic with which the speech is concerned is *worthy* of approval.'³⁰

Allowing Bauman to inform our understanding of the continuing public effect of Merton's life-work does not imply that Merton's intentions, methods, style or role are equivalent to those of the social-cultural analyst. Indeed, the distinctiveness of Merton's legacy can become clearer when we *contrast* Bauman's sustained reflections on 'the bystander' not just with what Merton had to *say* about the bystander, but with the effects he appears to have set in motion through forms of writing which continue to generate impressions of a persona to whom readers can relate. That persona may be for us the bystander, the witness, effectively calling us back to attending to present social conditions and events in the light of, on the one hand, the contemplative, theological, poetic traditions in which Merton was immersed and, on the other hand, a self-critical awareness of our participation in the destructive and

divisive tendencies of a globalised world. For those of us who have not followed Merton into the monastery or some equivalent liminal place, he remains always distant, even if experienced as curiously intimate. The committed reader, willingly held in a supportive yet demanding tension by the counterpoint who is Merton, is thereby sustained in a form of extended relationship beyond our immediate context, a relationship with the cross-section of readers and writers, friends and correspondents, with whom Merton was engaged, and those with whom he continues to engage now.³¹ Thus the monastic bystander (if such he is) generates something like the communities of committed speech which Bauman considers a necessary condition for moving beyond the quite different kind of bystanding he describes in his 2002 essay.

For Bauman, only 'a steady, long-term commitment' transforms spectators into 'moral actors' in a globalised world. Focused actions may have only temporary or local effects, and in appearing to ameliorate a situation may in fact diminish the sense of urgency (and therefore action) for changing structures more substantially. Bauman identifies the decisive factor around which sustained commitment stands or falls as being 'confidence in the effectiveness of public speech and in its potency to prompt concerted collective action'.³²

Conclusion

Merton lamented a collapse of confidence in public speech. He did not propose collective action as traditionally understood; indeed, he repeatedly wrote against it. He did, however, generate multiple continuing conversations and creative, collaborative communications we might be willing to describe as corporate activity, mutual interaction - at best, even communion. Prayer, study, contemplation, writing, thinking, teaching, voluntary poverty, solitude and so forth were his direct responses to what he perceived as the human crisis. His responses reveal, now as then, the limitations and illusions implicit in many of the actions and interventions imagined as being more engaged and effective. Separating himself from the locus of a 'hive mind' and the overwhelming influence of corrupted language in order to recover connectedness and authentic language, he embraced human solidarity and the guilt which comes with it. Standing by, he scans the horizon for signs of the Unspeakable, the 'theological point of no return, a climax of absolute finality in refusal, in equivocation, in disorder, in absurdity, which can be broken open again to truth only by miracle, by the coming of God'.³³ Then out of silence, time and again, he stirs up acts of 'committed speech',

radical action which rests, ultimately, on wholehearted confidence in the Word behind all inspired words.

Notes

1. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (London: Sheldon Press, 1977), p. 6.
2. 'Letter to an Innocent Bystander', in Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (London: Burns & Oates, 1977), p.35.
3. The preface is included in Thomas Merton, *Reflections on my Work*, edited by Robert E. Daggy (London: Fount Paperbacks, 1989), pp. 68-76. For example: 'By 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 non-assertive, non-violent, a life of humility and peace is in itself a statement of one's position.' (p. 74)
4. *Raids*, p. 36.
5. *Raids*, p. 37. This theme is echoed in the passages in *Conjectures* where Merton responds to Arendt's writings about the trial and sentencing of Adolf Eichmann. For Merton, in essence, 'this judgement falls not on Eichmann alone, but on our whole society.' (See pp. 280-283.) For a further examination of these ideas see: James G.R. Cronin, "No such thing as innocent by-standing": the bystander motif in the social writings of Thomas Merton' in *Universal Vision: A Centenary Celebration of Thomas Merton*, Fiona Gardner, Keith Griffin and Peter Ellis (eds.), *The Merton Journal* (Advent, 2014) volume 21, no.2, pp. 72-84.
6. Zygmunt Bauman, *Society Under Siege* (Cambridge UK: Polity Press, 2002), pp. 201-221. The essay was published earlier in *Human Rights* 1 (2002).
7. Bauman, *Siege*, p. 24.
8. Bauman, *Siege*, p. 206.
9. Bauman, *Siege*, p. 207.
10. Bauman, *Siege*, p. 207.
11. Bauman, *Siege*, p. 208.
12. See e.g. Bauman, *Siege*, p. 220.
13. William H. Willimon, *Peculiar Speech: Preaching to the Baptized* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), p. 6.
14. Willimon, p. x.
15. Nicholas Lash, 'Preface' to *Conversing with Barth*, John C. McDowell and Mike Higton (eds), (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), pp. viii-ix.
16. Lash, p. viii.
17. Lash, p. viii, quoting Bauman, 'Whatever Happened to Compassion?' in *The Moral Universe*, T. Bentley and D. S. Jones (eds), (London: Demos, 2001), p. 52. Bauman develops this view in more detail in *Siege*, pp. 15-16.

18. Lash, p. viii.
19. The phrase is taken from the end of an informal talk that Merton delivered in Calcutta in October 1968: 'My dear brothers, we are already one. But we imagine that we are not. And what we have to recover is our original unity. What we have to be is what we are.' The full text of the talk is included in the appendices to *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*.
20. Lash, p. ix.
21. The Swiss Reformed Theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968) is widely regarded as the greatest Protestant theologian of the twentieth century.
22. Lash, p. ix. Lash continues: 'Church', 'ecclesia', means gathering, assembly, congregation: a people summoned, called together for some task. This people is the human race – called, out of nothing, into common life, communion, in God. This does not make all human beings Christians ...'
23. Lash, p. ix.
24. From a letter of Merton to Jim Forest, 21 February, 1966. The full text of the letter is in *The Hidden Ground of Love: the Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, William H. Shannon (ed.), (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1985).
25. Bauman, *Siege*, p. 219.
26. Bauman, *Siege*, p. 219.
27. Merton, *Raids*, pp. 2-3.
28. Bauman, *Siege*, p. 219.
29. From the same letter of 21 February 1966, referred to in endnote 24: 'Do not depend on the hope of results. ... 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. [You] gradually struggle less and less for an idea and more and more for specific people. In the end, it is the reality of personal relationship that saves everything.'
30. Bauman, *Siege*, p. 220.
31. Here we may be getting close to a concrete instance of the 'sense of solidarity with the whole of humankind – past present and to come' to which Lash alludes. See Lash, p. viii.
32. Bauman, *Siege*, p. 219.
33. Merton, *Raids*, pp. 4-5.

Gary Hall is a theological educator and Methodist Minister in Birmingham, UK. A co-editor of the *Merton Journal*, he has regularly written and presented on Merton in the UK and abroad.