

From Birmingham, Alabama to Birmingham, UK

Farai Mapamula

This paper is based on a presentation given at the 2018 Oakham conference.

Introduction

This paper explores the legacy of Merton from the perspective of a black African female Christian Minister resident in Britain today. The paper is informed by Merton's 'Letters to a White Liberal' and the poem, 'Picture of a black child with a white doll'. A question underlying this discussion is whether and how the prophetic and contemplative response of Merton, the white liberal, to racism in 1960s America might inform white Christian responses to continuing racism and divisiveness in Brexit Britain.

I made this presentation during the week in which, precisely fifty years ago, Martin Luther King had been assassinated on 4 April 1968 in Memphis. Merton heard the news on a car radio that day, as he was travelling with his guest, Donald Allchin - who has memorably told the story of that visit to previous gatherings of the Merton Society at Oakham.¹ The day after the assassination, April 5th, Merton wrote to Coretta Scott King with profound sympathies, and regret that Martin would not, after all, be visiting Gethsemani for a short retreat.²

Letters to a White Liberal

King's renowned 'Letter from Birmingham Jail'³, composed in August 1963, had contributed to inspiring Merton's own 'The Black Revolution: Letters to a White Liberal', which was first published in the November & December 1963 editions of *New Blackfriars*.⁴ The letters were then published in late 1964 as the opening essay of *Seeds of Destruction*.⁵ In

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the 'Author's Note' to *Seeds of Destruction*, written in August 1964, Merton addressed the destructive heart of white America, including any monastic communities and structures which had ever 'officially and publicly given support to totalitarian movements'.⁶

There were other catalysts for Merton's writing these letters. On 15 September 1963, the African-American 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, was bombed, killing four young girls. The previous month, Merton's poem, 'And the Children of Birmingham', inspired by the demonstrations in Alabama when hundreds of young Black marchers were attacked by police dogs and hoses, arrested and jailed, had been published in *The Saturday Review*.⁷ But it was the picture of Carol Denise McNair, one of the four girls killed in the bombing, which prompted the mournful rage of Merton's poetic response:

Picture of a Black Child with a White Doll
Carolee Denis McNair, killed in Birmingham, Sept. 1963

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

(Yet how deep the wound and the need
And how far down our hell
Are questions you need not
Answer now)

That senseless platinum head
Of a hot city cupid
Not yet grown to whore's estate
It glories and is dull
Next to your live and lovely shade
Your smile and your person
Yet that silly manufactured head
Would soon kill you if it could think
Others as empty do and will
For no reason

Except for that need
Which you know without malice
And by a better instinct
The need for love.

So without a thought
Of death or fear
Of night
You glow full of dark ripe August
Risen and Christian
Africa purchased
For the one lovable Father alone.

And what was ever darkest and most frail
Was then your treasure-child
So never mind
They found you and made you a winner
Even in most senseless cruelty
Your darkness and childhood
Became fortune yes became
Irreversible luck and halo.⁸

Thus the white semi-American man addressed the black American girl. Earlier, in 1962 before the bombing, Merton had read James Baldwin's 'Letter From a Region of My Mind' in *The New Yorker*. A version was published in 1963 as *The Fire Next Time*.⁹ When Merton responded on 19 July 1963 to questions from the *San Francisco Enquirer* about his reading, the one book he said everyone should read was Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*. 'This is the most forceful statement about a crisis that is of immediate importance to every American, and indirectly affects the whole world today,' he wrote. 'It is something that people have to know about. The Negro has been trying to make himself heard: in this book he succeeds.'¹⁰ What Baldwin had to say was clear and strong:

White Americans find it as difficult, as white people elsewhere do, to divest themselves of the notion that they are in possession of some intrinsic value that black people need, or want. ... There is certainly little enough in the white man's public or private life that one should desire to imitate. White men, at the bottom of their hearts, know this. Therefore, a vast amount of the energy that goes into what we call the

Negro problem is produced by the white man's profound desire not to be judged by those who are not white, not to be seen as he is, and at the same time a vast amount of the white anguish is rooted in the white man's equally profound need to be seen as he is, to be released from the tyranny of his mirror.¹¹

My place in the world

I was born in Zimbabwe to a Christian family with a strong sense of identity and a father who instilled in us as family a sense of justice and equality. We worked for the church in the education sector, and perhaps it is for that reason we were more fortunate than most in being able to access literature and knowledge from around the world. My father also ensured that we were made aware of different political systems, and our place in the world as a people and specifically as Black people. We were living in a colonial era and the emergence of various liberation struggles against colonialism, including our own Zimbabwean one. It was at quite an early age I heard about Martin Luther King Junior, Pan-Africanism and Kwame Nkruma, and Patrice Lumumba.¹²

In one sense, independence came and went, and I found myself on the wrong side of the political establishment. I could not stand and stare whilst injustice was being perpetrated on God's people including, in Zimbabwe, White people; and I ended up in Sheffield, UK, as a refugee. My asylum application was rejected and I ended up ducking and diving and sleeping on one friend's sofa after another. Cutting a long story short, God gave me another chance and I trained for Ministry with the British Methodist Church. It was during this time that I encountered racism amongst fellow Christians; some subtle, and some overt. With these experiences in mind, I hear James Baldwin speaking across an ocean and half a century:

I submit, then, that the racial tensions that menace Americans today have little to do with real antipathy – in the contrary, indeed – and are involved only symbolically with colour. These tensions are rooted in the very same depths as those from which love springs, or murder. The white man's unadmitted – and apparently to him, unspeakable – private fears and longings are projected on to the Negro. ... How can one respect, let alone adopt, the values of a people who do not, on any level whatever, live the way they say they do, or the way they say they should?¹³

One time I went to preach at a church where the Steward thought I was the cleaner and was surprised that I was to be their preacher that morning. One gentleman asked me if I had a 'Christian' name because he couldn't pronounce my name and suggested that I shorten it. My response was, 'I will try, thank you Mr John' — his name tag read Mr Johnson. One registrar at an event asked my name and when I gave it she look horrified, and said, 'What on earth is that?' Another sitting next to her then responded, 'Wait till you hear the surname.' All attitudes appeared to change when I told them I was one of their ministers — though I didn't wait to hear any more.

This may all seem trivial, but we know that the systematic stripping of black people's names was a way of stripping their identity and placing them under oppression and subjugation during colonialism. Reference has been made to my appearance and hair, the assumption being that I perhaps secretly ascribe to Rastafarianism, so clearly cannot be a minister! But my ancestors have always sported dreadlocks as their identity since time immemorial. The historicity of this cannot be authenticated, as there is only oral history to support the fact. Speaking as a black African woman Minister in active ministry in post-Referendum Britain, I experience subtle and sometimes overt racism from both within and outside the community that I serve. Our congregation finds itself in a context of relative deprivation and layers of diversity. It is also predominantly white with an apparent affiliation to right-wing politics. English Defence League supporters are present in the area.¹⁴ I have been reliably informed that some members of our community take part in far-right protests.

Within the local congregation, there is sometimes a sense in which black people are overlooked and their gifts not fully valued. Significant decisions are made within a small group of people, who are almost always in every committee. The white members hold power and control through this small group. Shoring up this pattern, biblical understanding and readings from white perspectives have affirmed and excused white privilege. This has permeated our ecclesial settings, and we need to face and understand how this history of white privilege has affected minorities or disempowered people who are very apt, as a defence strategy, at concealing their real insights and perceptions. It may look like deference.

Life on the margins

Yet one thing that Merton makes plain is that those who move to the margins see things they would not otherwise see. One thing they may see is that people who have been pushed to the margins have insights and perceptions which serve as valuable, even essential, barometers which reveal and challenge the hidden transcripts and distortions of biblical texts. As Baldwin recognizes, one thing which may be seen is that the 'price of the liberation of the white people is the liberation of the blacks — the total liberation, in the cities, in the towns, before the law, and in the mind.'¹⁵ My own experiences as a Zimbabwean, living under colonial rule, resonate with Baldwin here. I am under no illusion about the worldview and assumptions of my ancestors' former colonisers, oppressors and masters. As a black person, one was, and still is, valued in relation to one's usefulness, not in relation to one's human dignity or personhood.

When Merton addressed the white liberal, he pointed out that the acceptance of black people as equal would bring about radical social change.¹⁶ White southerners already knew that, but the white liberal failed to understand, with their 'well-meaning liberal policy of compromises and concessions' to pacify Black Americans.¹⁷ Merton questioned white participation in the March on Washington, saying that 'the Negro feels that the white liberal's principal contribution was to make the whole issue ambiguous and remove its revolutionary sting.'¹⁸ Merton challenged liberal talk of 'freedom' which seemed less about real liberty than about economics:

Our trouble is that we are alienated from our own personal reality, our true self. We do not believe in anything but money and the power or the enjoyment which come from the possession of money. We do not believe in ourselves, except in so far as we can estimate our own worth, and verify, by our operations in the world of the market, that our subjective price coincides with what society is willing to pay for us.

And the Negro? He has so far been worth little or nothing.¹⁹

Merton questioned the naivety of white liberals, challenging the generalised notions which replace any real communication with specific black people. People like me.

I have been pelted with eggs on my way to Church. My friends' reaction has been that it was 'just a group of lads having fun'. I asked if

anyone of them has had such an experience; the silence answered my question. From a passing vehicle I have been sprayed with water from a water gun, and have had obscenities shouted at me as an encouragement for me to 'go back home'. Were these incidents racist? It is hard to see them in any other way; and they have escalated after the 2016 EU Referendum - for many of us. Merton wrote, back in 1960s America, of how social disruption can be misread and responsibilities denied:

Instead of seeing the Negro revolution as a manifestation of a deep disorder that is eating away the inner substance of our society, *because it is in ourselves*, do we look at it only as a threat from outside ourselves - as an unjust and deplorable infringement of our rights by an irresponsible minority, goaded on by Red agitators? This would be a totally fanciful view, which removes the crisis from the context of reality into a dream-world of our own in which we proceed to seek a dream-solution. Have we forgotten that the Negro is there *because of us*? His crisis is the result of our acts, and is, in fact, *our crisis*.²⁰

He looked long and hard into what was before him, and saw white privilege and defensiveness, and an assumption that 'Whiteness and western' are normative, and anything else is 'other'. The assumption was, and still is, that Whites do not have to know anything outside of their own realities. After the Referendum, I hear more comments from local folks about the lack of desire or effort on the part of minorities to either assimilate or integrate, with comments on the line of: 'They should live, think, dress, speak and eat like us in order to belong.' There seems to be a lack of imagination about the other person's present or former life, their background and circumstances, or the story of their arriving in this particular place. All that seems to matter is that their presence should never upset a particular, imagined vision of the status quo, or threaten their hosts' preferred picture of the world.

The Law of Love—the deepest law of our nature

So how does one particular black woman, who has found Merton inspiring, insightful and stimulating, respond to words from this white man from another time and place? I appreciate and hope that we can learn from his ways of asking questions — of himself, first and foremost — and of challenging assumptions. Then let us delve deeply into what he can teach us about how our life together, both locally and globally as well as

outward and inward, can be lived in closer communion. He teaches what it means to refuse to separate our social involvement from our contemplation. The struggles of the world will always trouble us, resonate within us; and Merton challenges me and you not to be a bystander in the face of controversies and struggles, but to engage them deeply:

A contemplative will, then, concern himself with the same problems as other people, but he will try to get to the spiritual and metaphysical roots of these problems — not by analysis but by simplicity.²¹

Then there is love. Merton writes of the Law of Love as the 'deepest law of our nature' that compels us to love and to love freely, exercising the deepest capacities of our human nature.²² This is experienced as a progression from love for life, of being, towards love for ourselves, then for another, and ultimately leading us to God. This love compels us on a journey towards God through one another, perhaps especially those we imagine as 'other', a journey on which we travel beyond, even against, our natural instincts and affiliations, beyond any need for dominance, victory or defeat.

Notes

1. See 'Can we do Wales then?', A M Allchin, *The Merton Journal*, vol. 13:2, Advent 2006, pp. 2-10. See also 'An interview with Canon A M Allchin about Merton' conducted by Victor Kramer, *The Merton Annual*, vol. 17 (Louisville, Ky: Fons Vitae, 2004), pp. 235-255.
2. Letter to Coretta Scott King in Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love – Letters on Religious experience and Social Concerns*, W H Shannon, ed. (London: Collins Flame, 1990), p. 451.
3. Available on-line at https://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/documents/Letter_Birmingham_Jail.pdf (accessed 20 February 2019).
4. *Blackfriars*, Volume 44, issue 521, pp.450-496 & issue 522, pp. 498-552.
5. 'Letters to a White Liberal', Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1967), pp. 13-56. The text is also included in Thomas Merton, *Passion for Peace – The Social Essays*, W H Shannon, ed. (New York: Crossroad, 1995), pp. 154-189.
6. 'Letters to a White Liberal – Introductory note', *Seeds of Destruction*, p. 7.
7. *The Saturday Review* (10 August 1963). The poem was also included in Thomas Merton, *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (1963). Also in Thomas Merton, *Collected Poems* (London: Sheldon Press, 1978), pp. 335-337.
8. 'Picture of a Black Child With a White Doll' by Thomas Merton, from *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton*, copyright ©1977 by The Trustees of the Merton Legacy Trust. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing

- Corp. Originally published as 'Picture of a Negro Child with a White Doll' in *New Blackfriars* 46 (October 1964). The poem, with the title 'Picture of a Black Child with a White Doll', was included in Thomas Merton, *Sensation Time in the Home* (1977). Also in Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (London: Sheldon Press, 1978), pp. 626-627
9. James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (London: Penguin, 2017).
 10. Letter to M R Chandler, 19 July 1963, in Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom – Letters in Times of Crisis*, W H Shannon, ed. (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1994), pp. 165-166. In his letter Merton also listed eight religious classics that had influenced him, explaining the choice somewhat acerbically: 'These books and others like them have helped me to discover the real meaning of my life, and have made it possible for me to get out of the confusion and meaninglessness of an existence completely immersed in the needs and passivities fostered by a culture in which sales are everything.'
 11. *The Fire Next Time*, p. 81.
 12. Kwame Nkrumah was a Ghanaian politician and revolutionary. He was the first Prime Minister and President of Ghana, having led the Gold Coast to independence from Britain in 1957. Patrice Émery Lumumba was a Congolese politician and independence leader who played a significant role in the transformation of the Congo from a colony of Belgium into an independent republic and who for a few months in 1960 served as the first Prime Minister of the independent Democratic Republic of the Congo.
 13. *The Fire Next Time*, p. 82.
 14. The English Defence League is a far-right Islamophobic organisation in the UK.
 15. *The Fire Next Time*, p. 83.
 16. 'Letters to a White Liberal – Introductory note', *Seeds of Destruction*, p. 16.
 17. 'Letters to a White Liberal II', *Seeds of Destruction*, p. 32.
 18. 'Letters to a White Liberal II', *Seeds of Destruction*, p. 34.
 19. 'Letters to a White Liberal I', *Seeds of Destruction*, p. 27.
 20. 'Letters to a White Liberal II', *Seeds of Destruction*, p. 36.
 21. 'Events and Pseudo-Events' in Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), p. 147.
 22. 'Truth and Violence: An Interesting Era', Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (London: Sheldon press, 1977), p. 118.

Farai Mapamula is a Methodist Minister serving in three churches in the Birmingham District of the Methodist Church. She is involved with various other missional work in the Connexion and in the District, including a new church plant in the City Centre. She is also the Birmingham District's Equality, Diversity and Inclusion advocate. This means working alongside others to encourage and empower congregations to embrace and enjoy the gifts all God's people bring to one another.