

Guilt and Grace: Thomas Merton's American Identity

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Introduction

Thomas Merton came by his American identity honestly. Born in France to an American mother and a New Zealander father, Merton spent the bulk of his childhood in France and England, moving permanently to the United States at the age of 19. Eventually, he was naturalized as an American citizen and did not leave the country again until his extended trip to Asia in 1968. As the following pages will make clear, Merton came to embrace his identity as an American, but not without certain kinds of ambivalence. His cosmopolitan roots, peripatetic youth, and wide-ranging engagement with literature, culture, and spirituality from around the world informed his perspective on American society — a perspective which would grow ever more critical over time. Moreover, Merton's unique vantage, as both an immigrant and a cloistered monk, provided him with distinctive insights into the peculiarities, follies, virtues, and vices of the American experience.

Merton's understanding of himself as an American is illuminating as a window into Merton's life and work because it sheds light on his sense of self and of his political allegiances. But it is also edifying because it sheds light for us, his readers, on what it means to be American — and, more generally, what it means to be a citizen and member of any political community. Merton resisted the narrative simplification of the American identity. He called attention to particularly American sins and rejected the ideology of American exceptionalism. Instead, Merton understood himself as an American in a way that transcended the particular political boundaries of the United States, and instead extended to the whole of the Americas. In the expression of his sense of pan-American solidarity, Merton displayed his conviction that the true blessings of being an

American derive not from being different or set apart from the rest of the world, but from being fully a part of that world.

The American Myth

Throughout his writings, Merton lamented the moral blindness of Americans — or at least their selective moral attention. Americans, he found, tend to operate with a self-conception that plays up their collective virtues while downplaying or denying altogether their collective shortcomings. In *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, Merton described this as the 'American Myth'. The word 'myth' can connote fantasy or fabrication, but Merton employs it in a much subtler sense. He relates the notion of myth to evasion or self-delusion.¹ The constitutive evasion or self-delusion of American identity is the myth of the collective innocence and righteousness of the American nation. Merton describes it as the belief that '*America is the earthly paradise*'.² This myth is not a fictional tale of fantastical beings, nor is it even a pure falsehood. Instead, the American myth is a simplistic inflation of America's virtues accompanied by an erasure of America's sins. It is a psychological affliction which permeates American social life, and which manifests in political terms as an arrogance toward the rest of humanity. It would not be until decades later that the phrase 'indispensable nation' would come to be applied regularly to the United States, but the underlying sentiment was palpable to Merton in the 1960s.³ Americans, he wrote, have become captive to a 'daydream' of moral superiority.⁴

The Cold War, and the ideologies on which it depended, made this simplistic moral assessment especially visible. The struggle of the West against the threat of 'Soviet aggression' and the spread of 'godless communism' exemplified a paradigm of good-vs-evil that was better-suited for children's television than for geo-politics. American society had fallen under the sway of what Merton called 'the basic falsehood', which was 'that we have the monopoly of all truth, just as our adversary of the moment has the monopoly of all error'.⁵ Merton explored the moral myopia of the West most extensively in his 'Cold War Letters', circulated to friends and colleagues in mimeograph form so as to avoid the scrutiny of his monastic censors.⁶ Those letters expose the folly of Americans' insistence on the total depravity of the U.S.S.R. and all those sympathetic to its economic philosophy, as well as the righteous heroism of those who opposed it in favour of the unimpeachable freedom of market capitalism. The myth of America, Merton saw, is infused with dichotomous thinking of this kind, in which binaries reign — godly/godless, free/tyrannical,

good/evil – so much so that American identity is constituted as much by what it opposes as what it embraces. Love of the good, in Cold War America, was indistinguishable from hatred of the ‘evil empire’ to which the nation stood opposed.

The American myth, of course, is not a creation of the 20th century. In fact, Merton traces the assumption of moral purity to the nation’s founding — and even before, to the arrival of Europeans in the Western Hemisphere. In *Conjectures*, Merton attributes the drive for colonial expansion in the New World to a desire to flee sin and to discover a new paradise. Specifically, the Americas represented the possibility of ‘an entirely new start’ for a Europe which had ‘grown old in wickedness’. The New World was a ‘world without history’, where people could begin their lives, both individually and socially, afresh. Merton writes:

To escape from history, that is to say from Europe, to escape from the burden of the past, to return to the source, to begin again a new history, starting from scratch, *without original sin*. This was what America offered to the oppressed, the persecuted, the unsuccessful, the disinherited – or the merely discontented.⁷

Thus, Merton explains, the self-conception of European colonizers of the Americas was shot through from the beginning with an assumption of moral cleanliness. Their very presence on the continent was both evidence for and an expression of their escape from sin. Of course, that illusion could be sustained only so long, but whenever ‘distressing episodes’ of sin and history challenged Americans’ sense of moral cleanliness, ‘there was always another frontier; one could begin again.’⁸ Westward expansion mapped the pursuit of perpetual newness and moral innocence across the geography of North America. ‘For four hundred years,’ Merton explains, ‘American horizons kept widening. There were no limits. ... There was always a new start, over the mountains, over the plains.’⁹ Then, when the land ran out, Americans embraced President Kennedy’s ‘new frontier’ of outer space. At each step, Merton suggests, Americans have been running from the spoilage of their previous ‘paradise’. The pursuit of new frontiers is an enduring physical expression of the American myth of a people unsullied by sin.

A Heritage of Guilt

‘When a myth becomes an evasion,’ Merton writes in *Conjectures*, ‘the

society that clings to it gets into serious trouble.’¹⁰ The persistent American assumption of moral purity is not without its merits — it ‘galvanized and inebriated the Western World,’ Merton says — but it falls far short as a description of reality. The fact is, of course, that the American experience is rich with moral failing and outright moral horror, tracing back to the earliest encounters of Europeans with the peoples of the Western Hemisphere. These evils do not need to be exhaustively recounted here: the violence, exploitation, forced removals, and systemic extermination visited upon indigenous Americans by European colonizers are increasingly well-known components of the American story. Far from undermining or contradicting the narrative of American moral superiority, however, these evils have been neatly folded into the narrative. Native Americans were ‘civilized’, African-Americans ‘benevolently protected’, and foreign nations ‘liberated’. The American myth is unquestionably a characterization of *white* America. To the extent that those peoples perceived their treatment as oppression rather than beneficence, this only confirmed their inferior status ‘since they cannot appreciate the superior benevolence and culture of the white race.’¹¹ The American myth is not punctured by the failure of some to accept it.

Merton’s most direct and extended consideration of the experience of Native Americans is found in a collection of essays published posthumously under the title *Ishi Means Man*. In the opening pages of the first essay, Merton reflects on the rationales offered by the government for confining Native Americans to reservations. In particular, he highlights the hypocrisy of whites who exploited acts of violence by Native Americans as justification for their own systemic acts of oppression: a government document explained that ‘placing them on reservations was an act to protect the white settlers from acts of depredation.’¹² These ‘depredations’, of course, included such acts of desperation such as stealing horses for food to replace traditional sources of subsistence that had been disrupted by white settlers. In a later essay, Merton explains that the narrative of white innocence and Indian guilt pervades American history: ‘We were the people of God, always in the right, following a manifest destiny. The Indian could only be a devil.’ A fairer look at reality, however, reveals that the opposite was usually true: ‘It is we who were the wanton murderers, and they who were the innocent victims.’¹³

Merton also detected the same ‘daydream’ of moral purity operating in the politics of the civil rights movement. Racist opponents of civil rights progress demonstrated a ‘strong emotional need’ to blame African

Americans for their own oppression: 'It is by blaming the Negro that the white man tries to hold himself together.'¹⁴ In fact, it is by challenging the myth of white America's moral superiority that the tactics of strategic non-violence evince their strength. Nonviolence is a 'psychological weapon', Merton writes, that functions as 'an attack on the white man's trumped-up image of himself as a righteous and Christian being.'¹⁵

Interestingly, though, it is not only opponents of racial equality who betray their assumption of white moral supremacy. Merton's 1964 book *Seeds of Destruction* opens with a series of reflections titled 'Letters to a White Liberal', in which he criticizes white supporters of the civil rights movement for attempting to situate themselves as the heroes of the movement, and for supporting it only up to the point where their own status or interests might be threatened. These were people whose support for racial equality was sincere, but conditioned upon maintenance of their social, political, and economic dominance. They engaged in civil rights activism, Merton surmised, partly in order 'to support [their] own self-esteem' as enlightened, well-meaning liberals, but also partly 'in order to be able to apply the brakes when [they] feel it is necessary.'¹⁶ White Americans' supreme confidence in the purity of their intentions served to obscure the self-serving motives driving their engagement with civil rights activism. Moreover, the 'myth' of liberal white America's innocence blinds even supporters of racial equality to the reality that the fulfillment of justice might require disruptions to their positions of privilege.

These instances of white Americans' blindness to their morally egregious treatment of people of colour did not, for Merton, stand independently as discrete offenses. Rather, they represented a deep continuity in the American experience. Oppression of people of colour by European-descended white people, Merton suggested, is an intrinsic part of America, and of what it means to participate in the American identity. Merton even drew connections between the legacy of Native American oppression and the Vietnam War:

Viet Nam seems to have become an extension of our old western frontier, complete with enemies of another 'inferior' race. This is a real 'new frontier' that enables us to continue the cowboys-and-indians game which seems to be part and parcel of our national identity. What a pity that so many innocent people have to pay with their lives for our obsessive fantasies.¹⁷

The reality of the American identity is far from the 'daydream' of innocence at the heart of the American myth. Instead, Merton argues, Americans are the inheritors and perpetrators of a 'profound heritage of guilt' originating in the earliest injustices of the colonial project and continuing through the aggressions and oppressions of Americans in the present day.¹⁸ Far from contradicting that heritage of guilt, the American myth has in fact abetted and enabled its perpetration.

An Impartial American

Despite Merton's critical rejection of the American myth of moral innocence, and his insistence on confronting the moral depravities of America, past and present, Merton did not reject his identity as an American. It might have been an easy course, in a psychological sense. As both an immigrant to the country and a monk who reveled in standing apart as a 'stranger' to society,¹⁹ Merton might have kept America at arm's length, conceptualizing himself as a sort of Christian cosmopolitan, a citizen of the world, in America but not of it. Instead, Merton embraced life as an American. In 1951, he was naturalized as an American citizen, and he regularly claimed the American identity as a part of himself and his vocation. Crucially, though, Merton did not lazily conflate 'America' with 'the United States'. He held a deep fascination with Latin America over the course of his adult life, evident even prior to his visit to Cuba in 1940, recounted in what would become *The Secular Journal of Thomas Merton*.²⁰ Merton's relationship with and special affection for Latin America is a topic too broad to cover comprehensively here, and it has already been the focus of a number of other studies. Most notably, Malgorzata Poks has argued in her book, *Thomas Merton and Latin America: A Consonance of Voices*, that 'the South American continent became Merton's spiritual homeland and the locus of his hope for a better world.'²¹ Merton looked to the broader American world as a grounding for his sense of self as an American, especially when he chafed against the culture and politics of his immediate North American home.

Merton's relationship with Latin America was especially evident in his correspondence with writers and intellectuals from across the hemisphere. Merton's had significant correspondence with the Nicaraguan poet Pablo Antonio Cuadra. In his 1963 volume of poetry, *Emblems of a Season of Fury*, Merton includes an essay in the form of an open letter, titled 'Letter to Pablo Antonio Cuadra Concerning Giants'. In that text, Merton reflects on the geopolitical dominance of Russia and the U.S., 'Gog and Magog', and looks to the so-called 'Third World' as a source

of hope. Whereas the people of North America have been corrupted by their obsession with money, many Latin American communities have 'absorbed more of the sophistication of Europe' and remain 'rooted in a past that has never yet been surpassed on this continent.'²² Consequently, he describes Latin America as 'by and large culturally superior to the United States'.²³ For Merton, the richness of Latin America has been lost on too many of the white people of North America of European descent. Those inhabitants of 'the West' have demonstrated an 'unmitigated arrogance towards the rest of the human race'.²⁴ Christian missionaries failed to recognize the spiritual vitality of indigenous Americans. 'Did anyone pay attention,' Merton asks, 'to the voices of the Maya and the Inca, who had deep things to say?'²⁵ No, of course is the answer. Instead, missionaries debated whether Native Americans could even be considered fully human.

Merton explains that, over time, the failure of North Americans to appreciate their Latin American neighbors, their failure to comprehend that 'they had a culture, that they had more than something to sell', corrupted and destroyed the sense of pan-American solidarity that should have united the peoples of the Western Hemisphere. The dominance of commercial interests 'has destroyed the sense of relationship, the spiritual community that had already begun to flourish in the years of [Venezuelan independence leader Simon] Bolivar.'²⁶ The myth of North American superiority has disrupted the possibility of a broader American community – on Merton's account – to the detriment of Latin Americans and North Americans alike.

One of Merton's clearest statements of his sense of solidarity with the peoples of all the Americas appears in his preface to a 1958 volume of his *Obras Completas* ('Complete Works'), published for South American readers by a press in Argentina. Merton wrote the short essay in Spanish, and a new translation by Argentinian scholar Marcela Raggio appears in a recent edited volume, *Merton & Indigenous Wisdom*.²⁷ The themes that Merton develops in that essay anticipate the political engagement and social criticism that would define the work of his last decade of life; Raggio suggests that we might read the essay as not only a Preface to his *Obras Completas*, 'but to his writings of the 1960s'.²⁸ In the essay, Merton asserts the breadth of his American identity. He writes that 'in my destiny of being at once a contemplative, a Christian, and an American, I cannot satisfy the requirement of my vocation with anything partial or provincial. I cannot be a "North American", who knows only the rivers, the plains, the mountains, and the cities of the North.' Though there is

indeed beauty and goodness to be found in North America, 'it is incomplete.' It lacks the 'deep roots of Ancient America, the America of Mexico and the Andes', the 'fervor and intense fecundity of Brazil', and the 'strength, refinement, and prodigality of Argentina'.²⁹ To fully realize his vocation as a monk and as an American, Merton insisted, he must become 'a *complete* American, a human being of the *whole* hemisphere, of the *whole* New World'.³⁰ Merton did not reject his American identity, but he did resist the parochial narrowing of 'America' to the boundaries of the United States. Instead, his attachment to and identification with the cultures of Latin America provided relief for Merton when the arrogance and aggressions of the Cold War-era United States ran counter to his sense of self and vocation.

The Same Mess as the Rest of Them

Ultimately, for Merton, the saving of America's soul comes in awakening from the 'daydream' of moral superiority. The reality, he explains in *Conjectures*, is that America is fundamentally like any other nation: composed of humans, fallible and incomplete, marked by both virtue and vice. Merton describes Western culture, which includes American society, as 'both sentenced and redeemed'.³¹ As such America is neither perfect nor a lost cause; it is, rather, broken yet capable of genuine good. Merton calls on Americans to relinquish their grasp on the daydream of moral superiority in favor of 'accepting ourselves as we are, in our confusion, infidelity, disruption, ferment, and even desperation'.³² The myth at which he takes aim insists that America is always and everywhere a protagonist for truth and good. Instead, Merton suggests, we ought to recognize that falsehood and evil are not the sole province of our 'enemies'. Instead, we too are culpable in the failure of peace to be realized on earth.

It is tempting to read Merton's diagnosis of the American myth as a relic of the Cold War, when the Soviet Union provided a ready-made foil for the United States. Now, it might seem, everyone knows that the world is complicated and cannot be comprehended purely in terms of black-and-white. Even President Donald Trump infamously replied to critics of Russian autocrat Vladimir Putin by asking, incredulously, 'Do you think our country is so innocent?'³³ The myth of America, however, lives on in powerful ways. It remains active in every assertion of American 'exceptionalism' in foreign policy, and in every instance of unwillingness to reckon honestly with the sins of this nation – whether its long history of racial oppression, its more recent engagement with torture, its comfort

with the currency of violence, evidenced in such varied ways as reckless resistance to gun regulations and persistent support for capital punishment, or its fetishization of market freedom over human dignity, and the common good.

The sins of the United States are real and many, and they are of special consequence because of the unusual influence and might of the U.S. Still, they point to a fundamental similarity between the U.S. and the other nations of the world: their fallibility. Breaking down the myth of America's moral superiority means recognizing that Americans are, at root, no different from other peoples, and that membership in the political community of the United States confers no special status. As Merton writes, 'We have fallen into history like everyone else; we are involved, beyond repair, in the fantastic problems of everybody, and we are part of their accursed history. ... *We are in the same mess as all the rest of them.*'³⁴ This might seem like a tragedy – the loss of paradise. Honest self-reckoning is inevitably painful. But Merton also reminds us that to be 'in the same mess' as our brothers and sisters is not a burden but a profound gift. It is, as Merton described in recounting his well known 4th & Walnut experience, like 'waking from a dream of separateness'.³⁵ To be aroused from the 'daydream' of the American myth is not to lose some exceptional moral status, for this was only ever illusory. It is, rather, to recognize that we all are but people among others in the human family, striving together for goodness and justice. This, Merton reminds us, is a greater blessing than the evasive comforts of any myth.

Notes

1. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), pp. 33-34.
2. *Conjectures*, p. 34.
3. In 1996 the political journalist Sidney Blumenthal and the foreign policy historian James Chace coined the phrase 'indispensable nation' to describe America's post-Cold War role in the world.
4. *Conjectures*, p. 33.
5. *Conjectures*, p. 68.
6. The letters were published posthumously as Thomas Merton, *Cold War Letters*, ed. Christine M. Bochen and William H. Shannon (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006).
7. *Conjectures*, p. 34.
8. *Conjectures*, p. 35.
9. *Conjectures*, pp. 34-35.
10. *Conjectures*, p. 34.
11. *Conjectures*, p. 31.

12. Thomas Merton, *Ishi Means Man: Essays on Native Americans* (Greensboro, NC: Unicorn Press, 1976), p. 3. The volume was recently reissued by the Paulist Press of New York, in 2015.
13. *Ishi Means Man*, p. 28.
14. *Conjectures*, p. 33.
15. *Conjectures*, p. 33.
16. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1964), p. 34.
17. *Ishi Means Man*, p. 34.
18. *Ishi Means Man*, p. 32.
19. See, for instance, Thomas Merton, *Day of a Stranger* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith, 1981).
20. Thomas Merton, *The Secular Journal of Thomas Merton* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1959), pp. 53-91.
21. Malgorzata Poks, *Thomas Merton and Latin America: A Consonance of Voices* (Saarbrücken, Germany: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2011), p. 222. Also see Marcela Raggio, 'Thomas Merton's Americanism: A Study of His Ideas on America in His Letters to Writers', *Revista de Estudios Norteamericanos* 20 (2016), pp. 87-107; Robert E. Daggy, 'A Man of the Whole Hemisphere: Thomas Merton and Latin America', *American Benedictine Review* 42 (1991), pp. 122-39; and Mark Meade, 'From Downtown Louisville to Buenos Aires: Victoria Ocampo as Thomas Merton's Overlooked Bridge to Latin America and the World', *Merton Annual* 26 (2013), pp. 168-180.
22. Thomas Merton, *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (New York: New Directions, 1963), pp. 85-86.
23. *Emblems of a Season of Fury*, p. 85.
24. *Emblems of a Season of Fury*, p. 78.
25. *Emblems of a Season of Fury*, pp. 81-82.
26. *Emblems of a Season of Fury*, p. 85.
27. Thomas Merton, 'Preface for Latin American Readers' in Merton's *Obras Completas* (*Complete Works*), trans. Marcela Raggio, in Peter Savastano, ed., *Merton & Indigenous Wisdom* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2019), pp. 261-266. An earlier translation of the Preface, by Robert Daggy, appeared in Thomas Merton, *Honorable Reader: Reflections on My Work*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Crossroad, 1989), pp. 37-44.
28. Marcela Raggio, 'Introduction to the Preface for Latin American Readers in Merton's *Obras Completas*', in Savastano, ed., *Merton & Indigenous Wisdom*, p. 255.
29. 'Preface for Latin American Readers', p. 263.
30. 'Preface for Latin American Readers', p. 266, emphasis added.
31. *Conjectures*, p. 71.
32. *Conjectures*, p. 72.
33. Fox News, 'Bill O'Reilly's exclusive interview with President Trump', February 7, 2017; <https://www.foxnews.com/transcript/bill-oreillys-exclusive-interview-with-president-trump> (accessed March 17, 2020).

34. *Conjectures*, p. 38.

35. *Conjectures*, p. 156.

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Easter Pontifical Mass at Gethsemani - 1963

One of my most treasured possessions is my late Father's own copy of *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, in which he had marked passages that he found particularly significant. I was intrigued that, as he was an Anglican priest in the High Church tradition, he had noted the following passage, referring to the Easter Pontifical Mass at Gethsemani in 1963:

The less said about the Easter morning Pontifical Mass the better. Interminable pontifical maneuverings, with the 'Master of Ceremonies' calling every play, and trying to marshal the ministers into formation and keep things moving. Purple zucchetto and cappa magna and of course it had to be our Mexican novice who was appointed to carry the long train (this inwardly made me furious and practically choked any desire I may have had to sing alleluias). The church was stifling with solemn, feudal, and unbreathable fictions. This taste for plush, for ornamentation, for display strikes me as secular, no matter how much it is supposed to be 'for the glory of God'. The spring outside seemed much more sacred. Easter afternoon I went to the lake and sat in silence looking at the green buds, the wind skimming the utterly silent surface of the water, a muskrat slowly paddling to the other side. Peace and meaning. Sweet spring air. One could breathe. The alleluias came back by themselves.

* Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (London: The Sheldon Press, 1977), p. 288. Used with Permission of the Merton Legacy Trust. The original journal entry for Easter Sunday, 14th April, 1963, can be found in *Turning Towards the World - The Journals of Thomas Merton*, vol. 4.

Editor