

# Merton – The 'Political' Monk

## Gerry McFlynn

I have long thought that what is often overlooked in articles and books about Merton, is the dramatic change in his thinking from the author of the best-selling autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain* and a raft of 'spiritual' classics, to the committed anti-war, social and political critic who anguished over the world's problems and sought to understand them.

Since 1960, Merton's interests had been changing from spiritual writing to books and essays which tackled the moral, political and social issues facing the world. The Merton of the best-selling autobiography and such spiritual classics as *Seeds of Contemplation* (1949), *The Ascent of Truth* (1951), *Bread in the Wilderness* (1953), *The Living Bread* (1956), and *Thoughts in Solitude* (1958), was now turning out articles on civil rights, nuclear weapons, the Vietnam War and expressing radical views on a wide range of social and political issues. This change probably owed something to maturity but even more to his monastic experience of solitude and contemplation which provided him with the openness, detachment and compassion needed to understand the problems of the modern world. After *Disputed Questions* (1960), he wrote nine further books on social and political issues.

The truth is that Merton was beginning to take seriously the world he had left behind with all the enthusiasm of the new convert. He even wanted the young monks at Gethsemani to learn something about the currents then buzzing throughout the Church and the world. He put it bluntly: there could be no monastic prayer worth talking about without such exposure. A comment made to Dorothy Day in 1961 suggests that he had reconsidered his obligations as a writer and was now ready to choose the kind of language that people used when talking about their common predicaments: 'I don't feel that I can, in conscience, at a time like

this, go on writing just about things like meditation, though that has its point. I think I have to face the big issues, the life and death issues: and this is what everyone is afraid of...'<sup>1</sup>

Merton was not a theologian in the scholastic sense of that term, a professional thinker in the service of ideas and systematic theological reflection, but rather someone who wrote out of a deeply centred life of prayer and consequently knew how to speak about God authentically. He was more concerned with the 'experience' than the 'idea' of God. He was, however, a theologian of critical social and political analysis who fearlessly challenged the status quo. In 1964, he held a four-day long retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani on the spiritual roots of protest to which he invited fourteen leading peace activists representing the Catholic, Protestant, historic Peace Church and Unitarian traditions. That retreat helped to outline a spirituality that transformed prayer into protest and contemplation into resistance to the powers and principalities of a murderous world.

In addition to his books and essays, Merton also carried on a voluminous correspondence with an extraordinary number of people (estimated at around 2,000) from every conceivable background and cultural tradition. What he was doing was trying to encourage Christians, especially American Catholics, to think about the problems facing their society in a fresh and challenging way. He said: 'Theology does not exist merely to appease the already too untroubled conscience of the powerful and established. A theology of love may also conceivably turn out to be a theology of revolution.'<sup>2</sup>

Throughout the 1960s, a form of Christian Anarchism was being practised by some American Catholic radicals who were trying to marry criticism of their society to a radical criticism of the Church. The spiritual heritage of this type of politics was Dorothy Day's Catholic Worker Movement and its publication, *The Catholic Worker*. The combination of Catholic Worker anarchism and Merton's monastic spirituality deepened the bias of a whole generation of Catholic radicals against concepts of political party and factional organization and class struggle. Instead, the style of those involved in this new-found Christian non-violent direct action was fundamentally personalistic. They were more interested in the politics of experience than the politics of strategy and organization. Even their actions and symbols were chosen simply for their power to give expression to a spirituality of personal resistance and disaffiliation.

The theory and practice of non-violence was central to this

understanding of protest and resistance. Merton believed that non-violence was much more than an effective tactic; it was a witness to a radically different way of life, a different way of being. In this, he was probably influenced by the philosophy of nonviolence held by the Revd Dr Martin Luther King Jr. He believed it was the only method of social change that took full account of the dignity of the human person.

But Merton's role in the peace movement amounted to more than simply providing a forensic critique of the status quo. He went to some lengths to take on the public forces committed to the war industry, the supporters of nuclear weapons, patriotic bishops and Catholic moralists swimming in a sea of deadly caution. In an 'Open Letter to the American hierarchy' published in September 1965 prior to the final session of the Vatican Council, he called for a total renunciation of nuclear weapons.<sup>3</sup> The Bomb, for Merton, was more than a weapon of mass destruction. It was a 'true war madness, an illness of the mind and spirit that is spreading with a subtle and dangerous contagion all over the world.'<sup>4</sup> The essays collected in *Peace in the Post-Christian Era* (Orbis, 2004) and dating from the early 1960s were written out of his urgent sense of the danger posed by nuclear weapons just months before one of the most serious Cold War confrontations between the USA and the Soviet Union in what became known as the Cuban Missile Crisis. Here, his well-structured argument reveals a Christian consciousness fully engaging all the moral implications of proclaiming oneself willing to use nuclear weapons in the cause of peace.

He brought the same forensic attention to the issue of racism. In his 'Letters to a White Liberal', written in the summer of 1963 at the height of the race riots in American cities, he highlighted the dilemma of those white people who wanted to support the Civil Rights struggle but who couldn't see that this necessitated a searing critique of the entire social and economic order of American society.<sup>5</sup> It was his strong conviction on this point which led him to oppose white participation in the famous March on Washington in 1963, (a March that included such prominent liberal figures as Noam Chomsky, Norman Mailer and the poet, Robert Lowell). In short, he saw racism for what it really is: a white problem.

And he was no less scathing in his criticism of the Church and its seeming inability to read the signs of the times. He thought there was something intrinsically flawed about an institution which was so hopelessly compromised with the secular order that it was incapable of criticising it. Merton's concern with political oppression, racial violence

and nuclear war, was part and parcel of his understanding of theology as resistance and critique, rather than as support for the ideology of the existing order. Merton saw that the crime that broke out of the ghetto was only

the fruit of a greater and more persuasive violence – the injustice which forces people to live in the ghetto in the first place. The problem of violence then is not the problem of a few rioters and rebels but the problem of a whole structure which is outwardly ordered and respectable and inwardly ridden by psychopathic obsessions and delusion.<sup>6</sup>

For Merton, the contemplative life only made sense if it was understood in relation to the social and political mess of society. 'The contemplative life,' he wrote in 1964, 'is not, and cannot be, a mere withdrawal, a pure negation, a turning of one's back on the world with its suffering, its crises, its confusions and its errors. ... the monastic community is deeply implicated, for better or for worse, in the economic, political and social structures of the contemporary world.'<sup>7</sup> We are all, according to Merton, in the phrase he used for the title of one of his books, 'guilty bystanders'. He believed passionately that it was the task of the monk to speak out of his silence and solitude with an independent voice in order to clarify for others the true value of the human person. Writing of his experience at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, he perceived that: 'My solitude, however, is not my own, for I see now how much it belongs to them – and that I have a responsibility for it in their regard, not just in my own.'<sup>8</sup>

There was even a sense in which Merton might have seen his conversion to the peace movement as a means of atonement for the Christian war-making of the past. On 8 September 1963, he recorded a conversation he held on his peace writings with a leading Catholic moral theologian, Bernard Haring, who had come to see him at Gethsemani to discuss his peace writings.<sup>9</sup> Merton records Haring telling him that he should be writing about peace to make reparation for St Bernard's preaching of the Crusades – and that if a monk could preach a Crusade, then a monk could certainly be allowed to write about peace!

At the heart of all Merton's critical writing was his insistence on the place of contemplation in a world of action (the title of another of his books). In practice, this meant a refusal to be at ease in the world with all its problems combined with the willingness to offer an alternative vision

of how things should be. Such a task requires clarity of perception, a process that involves both listening to God as well as listening to the language of suffering in the world.

One of the most consistent themes of all Merton's writing was the distinction he drew between the true inner self and the false external self. In this regard Merton was as critical of himself as anyone else. He was aware of

the need for constant self-revision, growth, leaving behind, renunciation of yesterday, yet in continuity with all yesterdays (to cling to the fact is to lose one's continuity with it, for this means clinging to what was not there) My ideas are always changing, always moving around one center, always seeing the center from somewhere else. I will always be accused of inconsistency – and will no longer be there to hear the accusation.<sup>10</sup>

Maybe that was Merton's real genius: his ability to challenge people to be 'awake and aware' and to always see that centre from somewhere else. His great hope was that an awakened Christian community, fully engaged with the hard questions of war, peace and racism and using the tools of contemplation and non-violent resistance, could awaken a sleepwalking secular society caught in a nightmare of its own making.

So what can we learn from Merton and what might he be saying and doing today? He would certainly be surprised that many of the issues and problems he tackled in his writings – the arms trade, the nuclear issue, racism and consumerism - are still with us and shocked that we had made such little progress in dealing with them. He would want us to be radical again by reclaiming our Christian roots and analyzing society and its problems in the context of prayerful reflection. He would also want us to revisit the Church's teaching on peace and war and, in particular, the just war theory and its irrelevance in an age of drones and scientific military technology.

Finally, he would urge us to saturate our prayer life with the cries and sufferings of the victims of violence and warfare. On these and other issues, Merton's voice echoes as urgently for us today as it did in his lifetime. Our concerns today, sadly, are still the same and the need for radical questioning and forensic analysis, arguably, more urgent than ever before.

He may once have thought of himself as a guilty bystander, but

Merton today would be no bystander. Instead, he would be in the thick of things, criticizing, protesting, listening, praying, and maybe even breaking the law! As he once wrote: 'We have more to do than sing hymns while the ship goes down.'<sup>11</sup>

### Notes

1. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love – Letters on Religious Experiences and Social Concerns* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, New York, 1985), p.140. Letter dated 23 August 1961.
2. Thomas Merton, 'Toward a Theology of Resistance' in *Faith and Violence* (Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, Indiana, 1968), p.9.
3. Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom – Letters in Times of Crisis* (Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, New York, 1994), pp.88-94.
4. Thomas Merton, 'The Root of War is Fear', published in *The Catholic Worker*, October 1961. The extract is one of three extra paragraphs he added at the beginning of his essay of the same name originally included in *Seeds of Contemplation*.
5. Thomas Merton, 'The Black Revolution: Letters to a White Liberal' in *Seeds of Destruction* (Macmillan, New York, 1967), pp. 13-56. It is also included in *Passion for Peace*.
6. 'Toward a Theology of Resistance', p.3.
7. 'Author's Note', *Seeds of Destruction*, p.7.
8. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Burns & Oates, London, 1968), p. 142.
9. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life - The Journals of Thomas Merton* vol. 5 (HarperSanFrancisco, San Francisco, 1997), p.15.
10. *Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 67. Entry for 25 January 1964.
11. Introduction by Thomas Merton to *No More Strangers* by Philip Berrigan (Divine Word Publications, Techny, Illinois, 1965), p.xviii.

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