

Conjectures and Contributions of Guilty Bystanders

Bonnie Thurston

Thomas Merton embarked on full-time solitary life in 1965 when the Abbot's Council of Our Lady of Gethsemani Abbey in Kentucky gave him permission to live as a hermit in a building on the monastery property. He took up residence there in August, 1965. Shortly thereafter, in 1966, Merton published a collection of observations entitled *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, material taken largely from his journals beginning in 1956.¹ The title of the collection implies several important things.

First, it reveals that the contents of the book are 'conjectures', in common parlance, 'tentative observations' as opposed to 'universal truths' or 'firm assertions'. The Latin roots of the word are suggestive: *com*, 'with' and *jacere*, 'to throw'. (I am reminded of the Greek root of 'parable': *para*, 'beside' and *ballein*, 'to throw'.) The Latin word originated in augury, the interpretation of omens, the throwing together (perhaps of entrails?) that predicted future events or the meaning of current ones. In *Conjectures*, Merton throws ideas and experiences together, reads the signs of the times, and offers his tentative conclusions. Second, in this endeavor, he is a 'bystander', a spectator, not 'in the action', but watching from the sidelines. Third, and related, this makes him guilty, responsible in some way for situations over which, in fact, he had little control. That he is on the margins suggests complicity in things, if not nefarious, at least suspicious, not praiseworthy.

Merton's 'bystanding', his marginality, is essentially what feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether disparaged him for in their correspondence which lasted from January 29 to December 31, 1967.² Ruether suggested that if Merton were as concerned about the current situations as he professed to be in *Conjectures*, and in other publications, he should leave his monastic seclusion and backwater and join her on the front lines of protest and social action.

Although a Roman Catholic, Reuther's views echoed those of many Protestant believers who don't 'get' monastic life, and especially that of hermits. Those in active, Christian life, especially those who work from high ideals and for great, good causes, may be tempted to think hermits, also popularly thought to be 'misfits' or psychologically inept, are at best 'shirkers' and at worst consciously avoiding the hard work of living in and improving society, fallen though they know it to be.

Merton was 'in training' for the eremitical life for more than twenty years. By 1967 he was wise enough to know that to return to the maelstrom of modern life would be to lose the authority that marginality afforded him. Having lived monastic life in community — community in its many forms is the best preparation for solitude — and then as a hermit 'on the sidelines' made it possible for him to see what those 'in the game' couldn't see because they *were* in the game.

He wrote to Reuther on February 14, 1967: 'I am a tramp and not much else. But this kind of tramp is what I am supposed to be. ... Outside I would be much more able to depend on talk. ... I assure you that ... it is not complacency, because there is ample material for not being complacent.'³ Bystanders, the marginal who have consciously 'opted out', or have responded to a divine call to do so, are perhaps not responding to a requirement for their own psychological and spiritual welfare, but are necessary for the health of the community or society they have left.

Merton's clearest apology for the eremitical life is the introductory essay for his collection of the sayings of the fourth century desert Christians, *Wisdom of the Desert*.⁴ It is one of his most focused, penetrating, and important essays. In it he describes the desert Christians as those 'who believed that to let oneself drift along, passively accepting the tenets and values of what they knew as society, was purely and simply a disaster,' that they were those who 'did not believe in letting themselves be passively guided and ruled by a decadent state.'⁵ Their decision was not to flee to the desert for themselves alone. They did so insisting 'on the primacy of love over everything else in the spiritual life.'⁶ The desert Christians had, indeed, 'come to the desert to be themselves.' But 'once they got a foothold ... they had not only the power but even the obligation to pull the whole world to safety after them.'⁷ They saw *from* the 'desert' what could not be seen *in* the 'city'.

From the stands, not on the field in the scrum, one can see the whole game and its progression more clearly. Merton's clarity about not only the state of monastic life and the need for its renewal, but about the Cold

War, the nuclear threat, the very hot war in Viet Nam and Indo-China, and civil rights, especially the racial inequality in the United States, were not only because he read widely and thought deeply about those matters and knew them intimately from correspondence with those who were on the front lines, but because he *wasn't* there with them. He had the (yes) luxury, as it were, of being on the margins, and thus the dispassion and clarity that distance gives the wise.⁸

For Merton, and other 'fringe' people, marginality bestowed not only the gifts of clarity of thought and vision, but of hospitality, which, with charity, Merton noted, were of top priority for the desert Christians. Theirs was not only the hospitality of shelter and sustenance in the geographical desert, but hospitality of the heart, a sore necessity in any environment. They went to the desert to be 'emptied out', and the result was space both for God's indwelling and the terrors and troubles of the world and those embroiled in it.

Hospitality of heart is an important aspect of active love. Merton wrote in *Wisdom of the Desert*: 'Love takes one's neighbor as one's self, and loves him with ... immense humility and discretion and reserve and reverence.'⁹ The monk, the solitary, the marginal person who has chosen solitude from religious conviction, can be hosts who invite the stranger in, whose very selves offer sustenance and healing because an hospitable person can be a conduit of God's love.¹⁰

The desert Christians of the fourth century, and perhaps all Christian solitaries and 'guilty bystanders', have 'no contribution to offer but a discrete and detached silence.'¹¹ But from their solitude and silence, can arise a *quies* (what Orthodox Christianity calls *hesychia*) which fosters intense focus on and absorption in Jesus Christ. This helps to balance evil energies and powers operative in the unseen world. From it much good can come in the visible one. That this good may not be immediately apparent, does not diminish its usefulness or reality. With the *caveat* that 'liberate' is not for everyone a synonym for 'leave', I give Merton the last word:

We must liberate ourselves, in our own way, from involvement in a world that is plunging to disaster. But our world is different from theirs. Our involvement in it is more complete. Our danger is far more desperate. Our time, perhaps, is shorter than we think.¹²

Notes

1. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (London: Burns & Oates, 1968).
2. It was published as *At Home in the World*, edited by Mary Tardiff, OP (New York: Orbis Books, 1995).
3. *At Home in the World*, p. 24 This particular letter is included Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, William H. Shannon, ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985), p. 502.
4. Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert* (New York: New Directions, 1960).
5. *Wisdom of the Desert*, pp. 3,5.
6. *Wisdom of the Desert*, p. 17.
7. *Wisdom of the Desert*, p. 23.
8. See Thomas Merton: *Witness to Freedom, Letters in Times of Crisis*, William H. Shannon, ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994).
9. *Wisdom of the Desert*, p. 18.
10. I expand on this idea in my essay 'Thomas Merton on the Gifts of a Guilty Bystander' in Gary Hall and Detlev Cuntz, eds., *Guard the Human Image* (Munsterschwarzach: Vier-Turme Verlag, 2019).
11. *Wisdom of the Desert*, p. 14.

Bonnie Thurston resigned a Chair and Professorship in New Testament to live quietly in her home state of West Virginia. Author or editor of 24 theological books and seven collections of poetry, she contributes to scholarly and popular periodicals. Her doctoral dissertation was one of the first on Thomas Merton, and she was a founder of the International Thomas Merton Society. In spite of being a solitary guilty bystander for over 30 years, Bonnie is an avid reader, cook, gardener, walker, and classical music lover.