

# Thomas Merton and Racism: 'Letters to a White Liberal' Reconsidered

by  
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**T**homas Merton the social critic unashamedly engaged a wide spectrum of peace and justice issues. His propensity to reflect upon such concerns from a spiritual vantage all too easily escapes many readers who preempt Merton's social criticism for narrow political purposes. In the process, they overlook a deeper religious ethic grounding his critique of the culture. The purpose in revisiting Merton's "Letters to a White Liberal" is to re-orient us to what is arguably his most enduring contribution in social criticism, a spiritual diagnosis and therapy for the persistent and worsening forms of racism that continue to plague the United States. I offer three elements in this assessment: (1) the context in which Merton writes these letters; (2) the underlying religious ethic and the contemplative stance of Merton's critique; and (3) the direction that Merton develops in his subsequent writing on racism.

In retrospect, to revisit Merton's reflections on racism proves more important than ever because of events during the past twelve months. This past autumn, Louis Farrakhan summoned African-American men to Washington, D.C. for the highly rhetorical and controversial Million Man March. Only weeks earlier, the O.J. Simpson trial in California ended with those haunting portraits of the moment of the verdict, captured immediately on CNN television and frozen in the media photographs: startled white onlookers staring in disbelief at Simpson's acquittal in the death of a white woman and a white man; and African-Americans celebrating that "The Juice is loose!" Within weeks of these two events, speculation crested as a distinguished African-American, retired General Colin Powell, flirted with a presidential campaign. Meanwhile, in the academic world, theories of genetic inferiority were being recycled by social scientists.

When the Oklahoma City bombing and Montana "Freeman" incidents are added to this cultural landscape, Americans are paralyzed over the reality of armed and fanatical neo-Nazi militias who announce a culture war to reverse decades of national legislation combatting racism and social programs that guarantee human dignity. Thomas Merton would be among the first to remind us that our progress, however incremental and concrete, has failed to do justice to the poor living in our violent ghettos, the poor who are disproportionately people of color. In their neighborhoods, crime and drug traffic fester. He would question why we are numb to the fact that one in three young African-American males between the ages of 19 and 35 are either in prison, dead, or on parole.

It was the early summer of 1963 when Thomas Merton wrote his "Letters to a White Liberal." Their publication in late 1964 (as the introductory essay of *Seeds of Destruction*) led Merton to remark that the events of 1964 "have, if anything, substantiated everything these 'Letters' attempted to say." He had observed the passage of The Civil Rights bill, following the longest debate and filibuster in Congress' history. The marches in Birmingham, Alabama (as well as the September 1963 bombing of children at the Birmingham church) and the Washington March of 1963 had already proved major catalysts as the monk turned his attention to America's urgent need to re-examine its soul about the sin — both personal and social — of racism. In November of 1963, President John F. Kennedy's assassination in the deep South of Dallas, Texas reminded Merton that,

the murder grew out of the soil of hatred and violence that then existed and still exists in the South.

*[W]here minds are full of hatred and where imaginations dwell on cruelty, torment, punishment, revenge and death, then inevitably there will be violence and death.*

Seeds of Destruction<sup>1</sup>

The obvious parallel between Merton's "Letters to a White Liberal" and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" immediately strikes readers. But an even more important parallel is shared by both Merton and King: the apostle Paul wrote his stirring "captivity epistles" from prison, setting a reflective and contemplative paradigm for Christian social ethicists. Now, Merton wrote from another penitentiary, a monastery, and also from a cell, the monk's cubicle where his contemplative experience gave rise to the realization that monks are not absolved from responsibility for "the economic, political, and social structures of the contemporary world" but "deeply implicated." In his July, 1964 "Author's Note" to *Seeds of Destruction*, he chides the monastic legacy of acts of "complicity" that "have officially and publicly given support to totalitarian movements" (xiii).

An even earlier influence offers background revealing the context of these Merton letters. In his restricted journals, Thomas Merton records that in late March of 1962 he completed reading John Howard Griffin's book, *Black Like Me*. He admits to being "moved and disturbed." His journal entry echoes an earlier, March 9 quotation transcribed from Richard Wright: "There is no negro problem in the U.S., there is only a white problem." Merton goes on to admit, "The trouble is pathological."<sup>2</sup> It remains intriguing, in the wake of the publication of five volumes of Merton's selected letters, that the anonymous / fictional (and collective) persona he describes simply as "A White Liberal," proves to be one of his most important correspondents. For this unique "correspondent" evoked from Merton his most systematic reflections on Christian spirituality and the cultural roots of racism. In the

span of less than seventy pages, four letters (three very lengthy and the fourth a terse, half-page "coda" about Muhammed) gauge Merton's assessment of racism in the early 1960s.

Already in his "Author's Note" to *Seeds of Destruction*, Merton calls attention to the monastic charism to resist all "illusion." He nuances his definition of the contemplative as a Christian who does not reject history or deny time; instead, he envisions the monk's political responsibility as a moral obligation "to dissent" by totally rejecting the world's "standards of judgment which imply attachment to a history of delusion, egoism and sin" (xv). Merton stakes out a conscientious position in the crises of history, giving foremost attention to American racism.

To have a vow of poverty seems to me illusory if I do not in some way identify myself with the cause of people who are denied their rights and forced, for the most part, to live in abject misery. To have a vow of obedience seems to me to be absurd if it does not imply a deep concern for the most fundamental of all expressions of God's will: the love of His truth and of our neighbor (xvi).

Because of the constraints of time [in this forum], I limit myself to four passages in these letters where Merton's Cistercian contemplative spirituality yields a religious ethic to begin healing the wounds of racism. It mirrors his genius for the "true self" versus "false self" spirituality that circulates throughout his writing. Perhaps here as nowhere else, he concentrates and focuses it upon a specific social concern.<sup>3</sup> In this analysis of four passages from the letters, I will examine how Merton-the-contemplative's religious ethic uniquely interprets the crisis and recommends an antidote for the transformation of history.

Merton's first letter questions the American commitment to "freedom" because it is not concerned with the transcendental freedom of persons, but with profits (23). In the familiar sapiential method of his monastic tradition, he distinguishes between relations between persons and reducing persons to objects valued in terms of marketability.

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.

Until quite recently there was no place for him in our calculations, unless perhaps we were landlords — unless we had real estate — in Harlem. That of course, was another matter, because the Negro was, after all, quite profitable for us. (25)

Merton has introduced these letters by insisting that the acceptance of persons of colour into equal status with white culture means "that the society is going to be radically changed" (8). He underscores this realization by reminding his "correspondent" that white southerners recognize the demands of such radical social transformation, whereas this very realization "is what the white Liberal has failed to understand." In his second letter we find a second passage where Merton chides the white Liberal for "a well-meaning liberal policy of compromises and concessions" (32) to placate African-Americans; and he questions the patronizing attitude behind this stance of the white Liberal's "good will and . . . ideals . . . fine hopes and . . . generous, but vague, love of mankind in the abstract" (33). He remains skeptical about the white Liberal's participation in the March on Washington — "the private needs of your liberal conscience" he describes it — and reports that "the Negro feels that the white Liberal's principal contribution was to make the whole issue ambiguous and remove its revolutionary sting. He [the Negro] feels that you once again obscured the whole issue, which is that American society has to change before the race problem can be solved" (34-35).

A third passage, near the conclusion of the second letter, returns to Merton's contemplative insight into the moral disorder of racism. He has named the white Liberal's fault as a "volatile idealism" that will, in the end, find the white Liberal turning on the Negro and protecting his own self-interest (33). Merton poses the question:

... 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* (38, italics Merton's).

The familiar Merton vocabulary of "dream" and illusion, self-deception, and the locus of social disorder in the "false self" — all these orient us to the religious ethic that is rooted in Merton's contemplative experience. In his third letter, the same dynamic becomes the object of Merton's attention to non-violent protest. He identifies its "deepest and most spiritual dimensions" in awakening white conscience to injustice and sin "so that he [the white person] will be able to see that the Negro problem is really a *White* problem: that the cancer of injustice and hate which is eating white society and is only partly manifested in racial segregation with all its consequences, is *rooted in the heart of the white man himself*" (45-46, italics Merton's). Merton insists that only such a spiritual perception of the real problem can begin to dissolve the wider envelope of "the purblind, guilt ridden, self-deceiving, self-tormenting and self-destructive psyche of the white man" (46).

A fourth and final passage from the letters climaxes Merton's critique of the white Liberal, again from the vantage of a religious ethic. He faults the commonplace axiom that the white is superior to the Negro and exposes the false benevolence behind the presupposition that "*the Negro wants to become a white man*" (58, italics Merton's).

Merton finds a supreme irony in the insight that black persons understand white persons better than we understand ourselves (58-59). He speaks of a *kairos* moment (in syllables presaging Liberation Theology) through the Negro's offer of spiritual liberation to the white oppressors. This truth is rooted in a fundamental mutuality for Merton: "The white man needs the Negro and needs to know that he needs him" (61).

In simple terms, I would say that the message is this: white society has sinned in many ways. It has betrayed Christ by its injustices to races it considered "inferior" and to countries which it colonized. In particular it has sinned against Christ in its lamentable injustices and cruelties to the Negro. The time has come when both White and Negro have been granted, by God, a unique and momentous opportunity to repair this injustice and to reestablish the violated moral and social order in a new plane (66-67).

It is no coincidence that Merton would return to the mystery of Christ to locate the center of his religious ethic (cf. 13, 17, 22, 27, 44, 66). For it is the "redemptive love" of the Negro, says Merton, which expiates the sin of white society. "The Negro is ready to suffer, if necessary to die, if this will make the white man understand his sin, repent of it, and atone for it" (67). In the event that his white Liberal "correspondent" does not yet understand, the Kentucky monk reminds all his readers that the Negro does not have political and social "answers"; rather, Merton finds it necessary to believe seriously the Negro's "spiritual insight into our common crisis" (69). Merton the contemplative reveres this sapiential kinship. And nothing less than a prayerful conversion, a letting-go of illusion and accepting the reality of mutuality, he insists, can adequately respond to this *kairos* moment.

### III

"Letters to a White Liberal" offers a paradigmatic religious ethic that grounds Merton's voice of social concern throughout the 1960s. In this third section, I will follow the development of his writings on racism through three subsequent essays in which he applies the contemplative's religious ethic to a more expansive scene: (1) Flannery O'Connor's fiction; (2) Malcolm X's autobiography; and (3) Central America's native Indians.

In the wake of Flannery O'Connor's death on August 3, 1964, Merton wrote a poignant and powerful prose elegy which is included in his 1966 collection of contemplative essays, *Raids on the Unspeakable*. He celebrates her "dry-eyed irony that could keep looking the South in the face without bleeding or even sobbing".

O'Connor and Merton proved to be kindred spirits. He proposes that the key word to her stories is "respect," adding that "she never give up examining its ambiguities and decay" (37)<sup>4</sup>. Then, with a contemplative's eye, he gravitates to the cultural fact that while "respect" is continually advertised, "we have lost the most elementary respect even for ourselves." His highest compliment to Flannery O'Connor is that "she saw this and saw, better than others, what this implied."

She wrote in and out of the anatomy of a word that became genteel, then self-conscious, then obsessive, finally dying of contempt, but kept calling itself "respect". Contempt for the child, for the stranger, for the woman, for the Negro, for the animal, for the farmer, for the country, for the preacher, for the city, for the world, for reality itself. Contempt, contempt, so that in the end the gestures of respect they kept making to themselves and to each other and to God became desperately obscene. (38).

Readers unfamiliar with O'Connor's fiction or essays easily overlook the importance of Merton's debt to this Georgia Catholic artist.<sup>5</sup> While O'Connor's work has been scrutinized for evidence that she was a "closet racist", her correspondence with a New York liberal friend Maryat Lee (also a native of Georgia) parallels in many ways Merton's "Letters to a White Liberal"<sup>6</sup> Even though O'Connor dismissed the celebrated attempt of John Howard Griffin, Merton's friend, to foster racial understanding by dyeing his skin; and even though she refused Maryat Lee's invitation to meet James Baldwin (whose work Merton admired) on one of the black novelist's trips south; she and Merton reveal a deeper distrust of white liberals turning a rightful demand for racial justice into a wrongful demand for moral self-congratulation. For both the monk and this southern Catholic short story writer, it was moral and religious conversion, and not merely law and bureaucracy, which would reverse the tide of racism. From the opening page of "Letters to a White Liberal," Merton's suspicion of the "fair promises and a certain abstract good will" (6) resonates with O'Connor's cultural conservatism. Merton cautions that the 1964 Civil Rights Bill did not "mark[s] the final victory in a patient and courageous struggle of moderate leaders, dedicated to non-violence and to scrupulous respect for social order and ethical principles," "but only the beginning of a new and more critical phase in the conflict"(4). It was at this very juncture that Merton found White Liberals sorely lacking in the requisite spiritual grounding.

Merton was turning to poetry with his unflinching eye for stark imagery and metaphor to alert us to a failure in which he included not only the racists but also White Liberals. His poem entitled "Picture of a Black Child with a White Doll" hauntingly portrays Carole Denise McNair, one of the four children killed in the September 1963 bombing of the Birmingham, Alabama church:

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)

I suggest that the poem's phrases "our sadness" and "our hell" are aimed not only at the racist bombing saboteurs, but also – as are Merton's letters – at the White Liberals.

In the summer of 1967, Merton published an essay entitled "The Meaning of Malcolm X" in the journal *Continuum*. It still surprises many to discover that Merton had read Malcolm X's autobiography and written a cogent and penetrating assessment of the former Black Muslim's spiritual journey. He contrasts the Black Muslim phase of Malcolm's development (with its own racist and exclusionary passion) with the authentic spiritual breakthrough.

When he was once again on his own he quickly discovered a whole new dimension of things. He began to get a much deeper, more mature, more sophisticated and more nuanced understanding of the revolutionary situation. He also, at the same time, experienced an unusual deepening of his religious experience of Islam.<sup>7</sup>

Malcolm X's religious transformation and the accompanying social ethic resonate strongly with Merton. He points to the "completely new person . . . a whole person rather than . . . a character of great energy driven by the symbiotic obsessions of his ghetto milieu" after his pilgrimage to Mecca. Malcolm's subsequent visits to the new African nations, Merton notes, helped him to situate "the Negro revolution in America" within the larger, global revolution. Merton names this the "struggle for liberation" between the peoples of colour in the Third World (the majority) and "the affluent technological society" that oppresses economically and politically (187). In a companion essay, "The Hot Summer of Sixty-Seven," he reiterates his own diagnosis:

The problem as I see it is no longer merely political or economic or legal or what have you (it was never merely that). It is a spiritual and psychological problem of a society which has developed too fast and too far for the psychic capacities of its members, who can no longer cope with their inner hostilities and destructiveness . . . We are living in a society which for all its unquestionable advantages and all its fantastic ingenuity just does not seem to be able to provide people with lives that are fully human and fully real. (174).



Immediately following his reading and writing on Malcolm X, Merton was turning his attention to the project of his lengthy antipoem, *The Geography of Lograire*. It launched him into anthropological studies of early cultures and into the saga of colonialist domination. In his slender posthumously published volume *Ishi Means Man*, Merton again develops his spiritual reflections on racism. He opens a meditation on "Ishi" with the remark: "Genocide is a new word."<sup>8</sup> However, he insists that while technology has changed the ways of destruction, "The destruction of races is not new – just easier." In a searing conclusion, he points to the U.S. war in Viet Nam as "an extension of our old western frontier, complete with enemies of another 'inferior' race" (32). In another essay from *Ishi Means Man* entitled "The Cross Fighters" and subtitled "Notes on a Race War," Merton explores the Maya Indians and their 2000 years of war-less history in Guatemala and Yucatan. His conclusion is an apt extension of what Thomas Merton began in "Letters to a White Liberal." He recommends such reflection as a way to "tone down . . . our aggressive, self-complacent superiority" and to puncture our spiritually disastrous myth which claims . . .

that all other civilizations, and particularly those of 'coloured' races, were always quaintly inferior, mere curious forms of barbarism. We are far too convinced of many other myths about peace and war, about time and history, about the inherent purpose of civilization, of science, of technology and of social life itself, and these illusions do us no good (70).

There is a direct artery that runs from Merton's "Letters to a White Liberal" to his ultimate global concern for justice and peace. To revisit these unique letters is to appreciate anew the profoundly spiritual grounding for the religious ethic to which Merton's Christian contemplative identity invites us. For when we surrender our racist illusions, we regard and treat every person as Christ.<sup>9</sup>

### Notes and References

(Ed.Note: Figures in brackets within the text of this paper refer to pages in the books cited.)

1. *Seeds of Destruction* New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, (1994) 3-4, 7; emphasis Merton's.
2. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984) p.625, n. 285, quoting from Merton's restricted journals.
3. In *Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton's Christ* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993) I trace the impact of this true self versus "false self" spiritual dynamic in Merton's canon, with particular emphasis upon his poetry.
4. *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966) p.37.
5. See my essay, "O'Connor and Merton: Icons of the True Self in a 'Christ-Haunted' World," *The Flannery O'Connor Bulletin* 23 (1994-95) Pp.119-36.
6. See Ralph C Wood, "Where is the Voice Coming From: Flannery O'Connor on Race," *The Flannery O'Connor Bulletin* 22 (1993-94) Pp.90-118.

7. *Faith and Violence* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968) Pp.186-187.
8. *Ishi Means Man* (Greensboro, North Carolina: Uni corn Press, 1966)p. 25.
9. "Letters to a White Liberal," *Seeds of Destruction*, Pp.13-14.

## Thomas Merton and James Joyce

by  
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Riverrun, the first, probably the most famous, and assuredly the most inclusive word of *Finnegans Wake* would bear us "past Eve and Adam's, from swerve of shore to bend of bay," bringing us not just "back to Howth Castle and Environs," and now even to Thomas Merton. The river, as it were, run far enough, is confluent with the *Waters of Siloe*, that is to say, with the monk, Merton. This is not to homogenise – secularise Merton or monasticise Joyce. Let us be content to sound the depths of the river, see what we find, and possibly sit in wonderment at the peculiarity and unity of the human condition.

The foundational wonder is that as the aspirant Merton approached the Catholic faith he also approached the apostate James Joyce, an apostasy manifested to all the world in *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. We might almost say that that master of irony, James Joyce, was, wittingly or not, Merton's spiritual godfather. We shall suggest that Merton and Joyce, not only as it were, "spoke the same language": They shared inner space as well as a common geography. In our case it may well be the want of geography of the exile. As I think the climactic chapter of *The Cloud of Unknowing* puts it: "When you are 'nowhere' physically you are 'everywhere' spiritually." Let us see.

Merton's fascination with Joyce would seem to have something of the rhythm of a river. He relates in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, or, if you will, *The Portrait of the Monk as a Young Man*, that in 1938 his "reading became more and more Catholic." He goes on: "I became absorbed in the poetry of Hopkins and in his notebooks." But within a few lines he opens with what many, possibly Merton himself, would consider a *non sequitur*. Let us quote it at length:

And here is a strange thing. I had by now read James Joyce's *Ulysses* twice or three times. Six years before . . . I had tried to read *Portrait of the Artist* and had bogged down in the part about his spiritual crisis . . . I finally dropped it in the middle of the 'Mission'. Strange to say, sometime during this summer – I think it was before the first time I went to Corpus Christi – I re-read *Portrait of the Artist* and was fascinated precisely by that part of the book, by the 'Mission', by the priest's sermon