

# Burn His Books:

American Catholic Opposition  
to Thomas Merton in 1968

James G. R. Cronin

## Introduction

In spring 1968, Kentuckians regarded Thomas Merton as a divisive figure because of his support for Joseph T. Mulloy's selective conscientious objection.<sup>1</sup> Mulloy, a Roman Catholic and a local Kentuckian, opposed being drafted into the United States military during the Vietnam War.<sup>2</sup> Merton was aware of Catholic antagonism. As he laconically commented: 'More attacks in *The Record*. A devout Catholic is burning my books. I must be godless, as I wish to save lives rather than kill Commies for Christ.'<sup>3</sup> At the height of the Vietnam War in 1968, selective conscientious objection brought into sharp focus the conflict of loyalties between a person's freedom of conscience and their patriotic loyalty to the nation at war.<sup>4</sup>

This essay focuses on conflicting Roman Catholic responses to Thomas Merton's controversial support for Joseph Mulloy, and the bitter media debate that ensued within the Catholic community in Kentucky, conducted through the letter pages of *The Record*, the newspaper of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Louisville, from February to May 1968. Vietnam produced probably the most intense domestic conflict in the United States since the Civil War, but this would have been inconceivable outside the context of the superpower conflict of the Cold War. Merton, writing from the reflective remove of his rural hermitage, communicated the necessity for Catholics to examine their motivations, both as patriotic Americans and as faithful Catholics, by tempering their inflammatory rhetoric that ideologically set the God-fearing United States against godless communism.<sup>5</sup> Conscientious objectors like Mulloy had always been a rare breed in the United States of America. Catholic responses to Merton's pastoral support for Mulloy was paradigmatic of the contested

nature of United States Roman Catholic identity-politics that debated what it meant to be both a faithful Catholic and a patriotic citizen. American Catholics' fervent support for the Catholic Vietnamese in the 1950s had helped to create the nation's foreign policy nightmare of the 1960s.<sup>6</sup> Yet, for Catholics, as for all Americans, the war that tore the United States apart out-lasted the ideology and beliefs surrounding communism that led to the country's original involvement and Catholics' initial support. The war ended with the most powerful episode of self-doubt, of a nation questioning its role in the world, that the United States had so far experienced.

## American Catholics and the Vietnam War

In 1968, anti-Vietnam protests reached a tipping-point that called into question the legitimacy of United States military intervention in South-East Asia. The launch of the Tet Offensive on 30<sup>th</sup> January 1968 by North Vietnamese and communist Viet Cong forces against United States and South Vietnamese troops sent shock waves across the home front and sparked the most intense period of anti-war protests to date. American Catholics did not possess a creditable record either on civil rights or on dissent against Vietnam.<sup>7</sup> Catholics in the main believed that protest against the United States of America's mission abroad was, in reality, an assault on the nation itself.<sup>8</sup>

The nature of Catholic protest shifted as a consequence of the Vietnam War from consciousness-raising to direct action. By 1968 the military draft had become a lightning rod for what it meant to be a loyal American and faithful Catholic at the height of the Vietnam War.<sup>9</sup> Catholic journalists described draft card burning as a type of 'liturgical ceremony', a telling analogy which demonstrated that they understood the connection between the ritualistic and sacrificial nature of draft card destruction and the Roman Catholic liturgy itself, which commemorates Christ's Last Supper and crucifixion.<sup>10</sup> The Catholic consensus held that anti-war activists were draft dodgers who were un-American, whereas activists interpreted dissent as legitimate protest against a war that was undermining American values of freedom and democracy.<sup>11</sup> The Berrigan brothers, the most notable members of the Catholic Left, were numbered among the 'Catonsville Nine' who burnt draft cards in May 1968. Both Fr. Robert Cunnane and Jim Forest, formerly of the Catholic Worker and co-founder of the Catholic Peace Fellowship, were amongst the 'Milwaukee Fourteen' who burnt draft cards in September. Five of the participants in the 'Peacemakers Retreat', hosted by Merton in 1964, were imprisoned for protests in 1968 against the draft for Vietnam.<sup>12</sup> The liberal Catholic

press understood that Catholics did not engage in prophetic witness out of pure defiance against the government; they burned their draft cards and went to prison because their redemptive faith in the suffering Christ obligated them to act in solidarity with human beings.<sup>13</sup>

### **Patriotism in Kentucky**

Kentuckians were fiercely patriotic. In their minds, it was the nation, not the government that was calling on citizens to serve in Vietnam. To resist the draft was to refuse to defend the nation and was un-American.<sup>14</sup> Patriotism and poverty were closely aligned with many of the poorest Americans being the most patriotic and willing to serve in the military. Eastern Kentucky had 20 of the nation's 30 poorest counties; coal mining, one of the few sources of prosperity the region had known, had begun its long decline. Many people lived in conditions not very different from those of their ancestors in the nineteenth century. Conflict in Vietnam made anti-poverty funding harder to obtain. 1968 was also an election year. Robert F. Kennedy's campaign focused national attention on Appalachian poverty in order to develop new anti-poverty proposals and to gain the political support of poor mountain residents. Kennedy toured Eastern Kentucky on 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> February 1968, landing at Lexington's Bluegrass Airport and travelling over two hundred miles in those two days. On 16<sup>th</sup> March, Kennedy entered the presidential race. It was in eastern Kentucky and the Mississippi Delta, the fields of California, and on the Indian reservations where he re-established his political identity.<sup>15</sup>

Joseph Mulloy had worked with the Appalachian Volunteers, a community network engaged in development projects in central Appalachia. The movement dismissed him because of the publicity his selective conscientious objection attracted, self-preservation of the movement being a fundamental reason for this. In 1968 the movement was under investigation for communist infiltration by the Kentucky Un-American Activities Committee (KUAC).<sup>16</sup> The Eastern Kentucky strip mine operators assumed that the Appalachian Volunteers movement was responsible for instigating opposition to strip mining. To them, this signified that the community network was moving from fostering self-help in tackling poverty to encouraging sedition by attacking economic interests, the Appalachian natural resources being considered important in a capitalist economy.<sup>17</sup> For activists, strip mining was destroying poorer communities and the environment, whereas for capitalists, activism threatened their economic interests. Mine operators used the pretense of anti-communism to break popular opposition. The Appalachian Volunteers could only complain against KUAC's 'red-baiting witch hunting campaign' that endangered civil liberties.<sup>18</sup>

### **Kentuckians confront Thomas Merton**

Joseph T. Mulloy appealed to the draft board in Louisville and presented Thomas Merton's letter in support of his case.<sup>19</sup> On 22<sup>nd</sup> February 1968, *The Record* published as its front-page a letter from Thomas Merton, dated 19<sup>th</sup> February 1968, supporting Joseph T. Mulloy's application for his deferral of the military draft. Merton's published letter stated the following:

As a spiritual advisor I have been consulted by Joseph Mulloy who is seeking to follow his conscience in opposition to war. I believe he has every right to do so and also believe that his rights are being unjustly denied him. Consequently, doing my simple duty as a priest, I have given him encouragement and support in his fight for his rights. I would like to make clear that such support is a religious matter and is not to be construed as an illegal act, nor is it political. It is essential for the preservation of American democratic values that the rights of conscience be represented even, indeed especially, in matters involving violence and war.<sup>20</sup>

Merton believed that loyalty to the United States of America neither conflicted with nor contradicted faithfulness to Roman Catholicism and the primacy of conscience. However, this was precisely the issue that divided Kentuckian Catholics in the debate that unfolded.

Strident opposition against Thomas Merton appeared in *The Record* from 29<sup>th</sup> February to 7<sup>th</sup> March 1968. The issue of selective conscientious objection to the military draft divided Catholic opinion regarding what constituted loyalty to the nation and faithfulness to religion. John Hennessy of Louisville considered Merton's support of a draft resister as 'shocking beyond belief' when the fight in Vietnam was against the threat of 'Godless communism'. Sam L. Draper of Louisville felt it 'odd' that Merton would spring from hibernation in an enclosed monastery to counsel a draft resister.

Draper wrote: 'Surely he knows that the fight in Asia is against Godless Communism. [Merton's] past writings plead for the world to understand that he has abandoned society only to become a saint. According to Mr. Merton's abbot, he sees no one, living a strict life of seclusion. How did he manage to frequently counsel Mr. Mulloy?'<sup>21</sup> Julia Cotter, from Shelbyville, described Merton's support of a 'traitor' to the United States, as 'pretty sickening'.<sup>22</sup> By contrast, W. J. Lyons in Louisville supported Merton's legitimacy to counsel Joseph Mulloy as the duty of a

Catholic priest. Ronald Knott, a young Catholic seminarian, studying for the priesthood, supported Merton's pastoral role and argued that Catholics needed to question the war's legitimacy.<sup>23</sup>

The war in Vietnam, initiated by the government to contain communism, was betraying American values of freedom and democracy. During the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), Jesuit theologian John Courtney Murray had worked to establish freedom of conscience, but that it was the responsibility of individual Catholics to work this out on a case-by-case basis.<sup>24</sup> In 1967, Murray affirmed the moral validity of selective conscientious objection, his preoccupation resting on the quality of debate that ought to result from the conscientious objector's obligation to defend his position in the public forum. Amid the sharpening polarities brought on by the Vietnam War, Murray had his doubts whether such a public debate could be effected.<sup>25</sup>

On the 14<sup>th</sup> March 1968, Thomas Merton replied to his critics through the medium of *The Record*. He proposed his faithfulness to Roman Catholic teaching as the ground of his pastoral support for Joseph Mulloy.<sup>26</sup> He was motivated by the moderating voice of the Holy See that had distinguished itself from United States militarism by playing a pastoral role in international relations during the pontificates of John XXIII and Paul VI.<sup>27</sup> From the margins of Catholicism, he reiterated his decade-long doubts in United States militarism, doubts which were now filtering into mainstream opinion due to the saturation of nightly television newscasts from Vietnam into American homes. To illustrate, Merton gave the example of a Vietnamese Benedictine monastic community that had recently been destroyed, not by communists, but by the collateral damage from bombing by United States forces. Merton wrote:

The other day in Hue, Vietnam, a monastery of Vietnamese Primitive Benedictines was destroyed, some of the monks were killed, some have 'disappeared', one is in Laos. This is a Catholic community with which I had been in close contact. Their loss is something I feel deeply. But the monastery was not destroyed by Communists. It was blasted by American bombs. Now I am not blaming anyone for this. Obviously this was not 'intended', but the point is that this happens over and over again. It is not just an isolated incident, it is characteristic of the entire war: what does it all add up to? Simply to the fact that we are 'saving the Vietnamese from Communism' by destroying them. It is getting more and more clear to more and

more people that there is something radically wrong with the war. It has become, for very many, a most serious problem of conscience. No amount of bluster or derision can alter the fact. For that reason I am opposed to a war which involves a needless waste of American and Vietnamese lives, which is not likely to attain any useful purpose, which is definitely not helping America or democracy in any way whatever and which is, in fact, a scandal to the entire world. I would like to clarify just one point: I have not advised anyone to disobey the draft law.<sup>28</sup>

At this time Merton was engaged in drafting 'War and the Crisis of Language' in which he addressed the rationale of a United States Major's reason on why Ben Tre was levelled during the Tet Offensive: 'It became necessary to destroy the town in order to save it.'<sup>29</sup> These words represented the absurd futility of United States militarism in Vietnam.

To mainstream Catholics, Thomas Merton's advocacy for freedom to dissent was interpreted as defeatism. Catholic readers of *The Record* held to the consensus that the war in Vietnam was an extension of the need for the United States to contain communism at home and abroad. On the whole the Catholic laity viewed priests, as community leaders, as duty-bound to unconditionally support, rather than to question, governmental authority during wartime. Readers of *The Record* considered that Merton, as a celebrated Catholic writer, was duty-bound, as a loyal United States citizen and faithful Catholic, to defend the nation against threats to democracy as signified by Mulloy's unwillingness to fight in Vietnam. Robert H. Jutt, writing in *The Record*, stated that he would burn Merton's books in protest:

I sometimes wonder just what would become of Thomas Merton and certain 'other' priests, if all young men in America took their advice and the Communists took over this wonderful country of ours. I am 65 years old and consequently do not have a draft card, but I assure you that I would rather die than burn it if I had one. However, there are some items that I do have that I am burning, among them is 'Seven Storey Mountain' and all the other books that I have that were written by this publicity seeking 'devout' priest.<sup>30</sup>

Merton, in his letter dated 28<sup>th</sup> March 1968 to James Baker, a graduate student at Florida State University who was reading for a doctorate on Merton's writings, wryly observed:

Ran into some trouble with a certain set of conservative Catholics in Louisville, recently, for supporting a conscientious objector who refused draft induction. There was some correspondence about it in the Record, the diocesan paper, but I don't have that either. One good man said he was about to burn my books. That is one way of disposing of them.<sup>31</sup>

The symbolic destruction by fire of Merton's books was a ritualistic form of censorship. It is important to remember that Jutt's generation perceived the war in Vietnam within memory of the Second World War that was fought as a just war against totalitarianism. Joseph L. Williamson also took issue with Merton, arguing that he proposed no workable solution except that the United States withdrew, which to Williamson represented an act of defeatism in the face of an inhumane communist system.<sup>32</sup>

Despite Thomas Merton's support for Joseph Mulloy's freedom of conscience as compatible with being a loyal citizen and faithful Catholic, the draft board refused to re-open Mulloy's case. In violation of the Military Selective Service Act of 1967, Mulloy was convicted of failing to submit to induction into the Armed Forces, given a fine of \$10,000 and a five-year prison sentence.<sup>33</sup> Mulloy was incarcerated on the weekend that Martin Luther King was shot dead on 4<sup>th</sup> April 1968. Meanwhile, a group of concerned Catholic Kentuckians took matters into their own hands and wrote a letter to the Kentucky Un-American Activities Committee, who, in turn, recommended to the Federal Bureau of Investigation that it should investigate un-American activity within the Roman Catholic Church in Kentucky, naming Merton as the primary suspect.<sup>34</sup> There is no evidence that state authorities pursued this complaint. The vindictiveness of vigilantes uncomfortably echoed the red-baiting attacks on civil rights during the McCarthy era of the 1950s.

It was in the pastoral statements and pastoral letters of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) that the right of selective conscientious objection found explicit support. The purpose of such documents was to interpret Church teaching so as to provide pastoral guidance to American Catholics and those who ministered to them. USCCB statements and letters did not constitute official Church teaching, although they could be assumed to be not inconsistent with it. Beginning with the pastoral letter *Human Life in Our Day*, in November 1968 the USCCB supported the right to selectively object to wars and recommended that the United States government made accommodation

to those who did so. In upholding the right to selective objection, the bishops were being true to the Just War tradition, which required the assessment of the justice of each particular war. Yet in avoiding the thornier questions of social theory raised by selective objections, they reflected the tension of trying to mediate divergent positions within the Catholic community whilst also avoiding the possibility of a radical confrontation with the government.<sup>35</sup>

The teachings of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) and the policies of Popes John XXIII and Paul VI moved Roman Catholicism to a more conciliatory stance towards communism. This combination of circumstances undercut the willingness of American Catholics to back their government to win a 'Lost Crusade' in Vietnam. Under the leadership of Paul VI, the Vatican continued efforts to improve ties with communist governments in Europe, and the Pope repeatedly called for a negotiated settlement to the Vietnam conflict. Within the United States, growing numbers of Americans pushed for a rapid end to the war and told pollsters that they supported legislation that set a deadline for the withdrawal of United States troops from Vietnam.

### Conclusion

The Catholic Church was much more united concerning Vietnam at the end of the war than it was nearer the middle of it. Though the Christians who protested the war in Vietnam, and those who did not were both confident that God absolutely blessed their viewpoint, through the experience each learned something about the ambiguity of politics. The letters controversy in *The Record* had been a rhetorical battleground that had exposed these contested Catholic views of patriotism, which in every respect, reflected national self-doubts. In December, when the American press reported Merton's sudden death in Asia, his obituary was front page of the *New York Times*,<sup>36</sup> but only page three in *The Record*.<sup>37</sup> Readers were reminded by the editors how Merton had divided local opinion during the spring of 1968.

### Notes

1. Selective conscientious objection is an individual's conscientious objection to particular wars, a form of relative rather than absolute pacifism. It is sometimes called discretionary military service.
2. 'Thomas Merton Backs Appeal of Conscientious Objector Here', *The Record*, (22<sup>nd</sup> February 1968), p. 1.
3. Journal entry, 15<sup>th</sup> March 1968 in Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain, The Journals of Thomas Merton*, vol. 7, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1998), p. 67.

4. Andrew Preston, *Sword of the Spirit, Shield of Faith: Religion in American War and Diplomacy* (New York: Knopf, 2012), pp. 376-377.
5. This essay is based on research undertaken at the Thomas Merton Center and W. L. Lyons Brown Library at Bellarmine University, Louisville, Kentucky in 2015 during the centenary of Merton's birth. I wish to thank Mark C. Meade, Assistant Director, Thomas Merton Center, for alerting me to an oral history of the Mulloy case at the Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral History, University of Kentucky.
6. Patrick Allitt, *Catholic Intellectuals and Conservative Politics in America, 1950-1985* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 31.
7. David O' Brien, *Public Catholicism* (New York: Macmillan, 1989), pp. 233-241.
8. For a discussion of Catholic Anti-communism see Richard Gid Powers, 'American Catholics and Catholic Americans: The Rise and Fall of Catholic Anticommunism', *U.S. Catholic Historian*, (Fall, 2004) 22:4, pp. 17-35.
9. Penelope Adams Moon, 'Peace on Earth: Peace in Vietnam: The Catholic Peace Fellowship and Antiwar Witness, 1964-1976', *Journal of Social History*, (Summer, 2003) 36:4, pp. 1033-1057.
10. 'Burning Draft Cards', *Commonweal*, (19<sup>th</sup> November 1965), pp. 203-205.
11. Patricia McNeal, *Harder than War: Catholic Peacemaking in Twentieth-Century America*. (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1992).
12. See Gordon Oyer, *Pursuing the Spiritual Roots of Protest: Merton, Berrigan, Yoder, and Muste at the Gethsemani Abbey Peacemakers Retreat*. (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014).
13. 'Peace on Earth: Peace in Vietnam', note 9, p. 1046.
14. Bruce Jackson, *Disorderly Conduct*. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992), p. 37.
15. Edward R. Schmitt, 'The Appalachian Thread in the Antipoverty Politics of Robert F. Kennedy', *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society*, Appalachian Kentucky and the War on Poverty, (Summer 2009) 107:3, pp. 371-400.
16. Chad Montrie, *To Save the Land and People: A History of Opposition to Surface Coal Mining in Appalachia*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), pp. 94-95.
17. *Disorderly Conduct*, note 14, p. 38.
18. Thomas Kiffmeyer, *Reformers to Radicals: The Appalachian Volunteers and the War on Poverty*. (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2008), p. 196.
19. *Reformers to Radicals*, note 18, p. 37.
20. 'Thomas Merton Backs Appeal of Conscientious Objector Here', p. 1.
21. 'On Fr. Merton', *The Record* (29<sup>th</sup> February 1968), p. 5
22. 'Thinking' Needed', *The Record*, (7<sup>th</sup> March 1968), p. 5
23. 'Thinking' Needed', note 22, p.5; Ronald Knott, 'personal communication', 25 January 2018.

24. *Dignitatis Humanae: Declaration on Religious Liberty* (7<sup>th</sup> December 1965), Austin Flannery (ed.), *Vatican Council II: Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations*. (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1996), pp. 551-568.
25. John Courtney Murray, *Selective Conscientious Objection*. Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor. Pamphlet of an address at Western Maryland College, 4<sup>th</sup> June 1967. Republished as 'War and Conscience', in *A Conflict of Loyalties: The Case of Conscientious Objection*, ed. James Finn (New York: Pegasus, 1968), pp. 19-30.
26. 'Viet War, Views On Change Prompt Big Write-In', *The Record*, (14<sup>th</sup> March 1968), p. 5. Merton's original letter is published as 'To the Editor of The Record', 10<sup>th</sup> March 1968, Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: The Letters of Thomas Merton in Times of Crisis*, ed. William H. Shannon, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994), pp. 117-118.
27. *Sword of the Spirit, Shield of Faith*, note 4, pp. 529-530.
28. 'Viet War, Views On Change Prompt Big Write-In', note 26, p. 5.
29. 'War and the Crisis of Language', in Thomas Merton, *Passion for Peace. The Social Essays*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1995), p. 305. The original quotation was published in *The New York Times*, 'Major Describes Moves' (8<sup>th</sup> February 1968), p. 14.
30. 'Would burn books', *The Record*, (14<sup>th</sup> March 1968), p. 5.
31. Letter to James Baker, 28<sup>th</sup> March 1968 in *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1985), p. 68.
32. 'On Vietnam', *The Record*, (4<sup>th</sup> April 1968), p. 5.
33. *Disorderly Conduct*, note 13, pp. 37-38.
34. Letter to the FBI from the Kentucky State Un-American Committee, Frankfurt, Kentucky, 12<sup>th</sup> May 1968, Thomas Merton Center, Bellarmine University, Louisville, Kentucky, USA.
35. National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Human Life in Our Day: A Collective Pastoral Letter of the American Hierarchy*. (Washington: United States Catholic Conference, 1968). Ward Thomas, 'Unjust War and the Catholic Soldier', *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, (September, 2007), 35:3, pp. 509-525.
36. Israel Shenker, 'Thomas Merton Is Dead at 53; Monk Wrote of Search for God', *The New York Times* (11<sup>th</sup> December 1968), pp. 1, 42.
37. 'Well Known Trappist Author Thomas Merton Dies At 53', *The Record*, (12<sup>th</sup> December 1968), p. 3.

**James Cronin** is a humanities scholar at University College Cork, Ireland. James is an international advisor for the International Thomas Merton Society. He will contribute to 'The Spiritual Roots of Protest & Merton's Enduring Legacy', a study day led by Jim Forest hosted by The Episcopal Cathedral in Edinburgh on Saturday 8<sup>th</sup> December 2018.