

# Crisis and Mystery:

Thomas Merton and the Vietnam War

## Fiona Gardner

### Introduction

In mid-October 1968 as Merton flew out to Tokyo, Hong Kong and Bangkok he noted on the same plane that 'a soldier heading for Vietnam studies his Bible. But in the airport he was chuckling at a joke in the Reader's Digest. God protect him!'

Both men stopped at Tokyo and then Hong Kong before passing over South Vietnam, 'where there were three big, silent, distant fires'. Finally the plane came down over what Merton describes as 'the vast, dim lights of Bangkok', and both men got out and went their separate ways.<sup>1</sup>

By the start of 1968 Vietnam had become the longest war then waged by the US, and, by the end of 1968, the American troop numbers had reached 535,100. That same year there was the highest number of American casualties, 16,899, with many times that number of Vietnamese dead, wounded and displaced. Responding to the murder of Martin Luther King in April, Merton prophetically recorded in his journal that 'it finally confirmed all the apprehension – the feeling that 1968 is a beast of a year.'<sup>2</sup> By the end of the year, two months after he set off for the east, Merton too was dead.

Ernesto Cardenal's poem, 'Coplas on the Death of Merton', invites his friend Merton to enjoy the absurdities in all the circumstances around his death by accidental electrocution. One of these was the removal of his body by the American army to their hospital in Bangkok, and then its transportation back to Travis Air Force Base near San Francisco in the bay of a Strategic Air Command bomber coming back from Vietnam with the bodies of dead American soldiers.

The first stanza reads:

Our lives are rivers  
 that go to empty into the death  
 that is life  
 Your rather funny death Merton  
 (or absurd like a koan?)  
 your General-Electric-brand death  
 and the corpse back to the U.S.A. in an Army plane  
     with that sense of humour so much your own  
     you must have laughed  
 you Merton now corpseless dying of laughter  
 I did too<sup>3</sup>

The suggestion in this paper is that the manner of Merton's death and the transportation of his body, whilst potentially absurd and laced with irony can also be appreciated both symbolically and as a synchronistic event. The psychologist Carl Jung introduced the concept of synchronicity which holds that events are 'meaningful coincidences' if they occur with no causal relationship yet seem to be meaningfully related. So I shall explore the mystery of this meaningful coincidence and the proposition that the crisis of the Vietnam War was, whether he liked it or not, Thomas Merton's crisis too.

### The Christ of the Burnt Men

Merton's body reached Gethsemani for a funeral mass and burial service on December 17<sup>th</sup>. At this service the words from the conclusion of *The Seven Storey Mountain* were read, ending with the final phrase: 'that you may become the brother of God and learn to know the Christ of the burnt men.'<sup>4</sup>

Merton understood the 'burning' that *he* anticipated and wrote about in his autobiography to be in part a stripping and falling away of the false ways of the world and the self, by turning increasingly, intently and insistently to Christ through contemplation. The spiritual 'burning' that he writes about is a creative purification and that, through this burning, reconnection with the world could take place at a much deeper level though the experience would be characterised by anguish and poverty.

Merton's poem 'In Silence' picks up this meaning and what it means to be present, alive and connected to everything through contemplative prayer. The poem, published in 1957 as the US was beginning to be drawn into the Vietnam conflict, ends:

The whole  
 World is secretly on fire. The stones  
 Burn, even the stones  
 They burn me. How can a man be still or  
 Listen to all things burning? How can he dare  
 To sit with them when  
 all their silence  
 Is on fire?<sup>5</sup>

For those caught up in the conflict, not only was Christ of the burnt men, but also of the burnt women, the burnt children, the burnt animals, the burnt crops and forests, the burnt homes and the burnt earth, 'all things burning'.

But there is always and to everything, as Carl Jung understood, a shadow side, and in this context it is the wholly destructive, contaminating burning caused by *disconnection* from God and one another and from the natural world that is found in all war.

As Merton writings show, he was all too aware that the official purpose behind the American involvement in Vietnam, with God on their side, was 'to prevent South Vietnam from being overrun by Communism from the North'.<sup>6</sup> Their machinery of the war was based on fire power: search and destroy missions including the bombing and burning of villages, scorching the earth through the use of the toxic chemical herbicide Agent Orange, and the dropping of napalm first used in flamethrowers and later as bombs. This highly inflammable jelly, as Merton quoted, 'clings to anything it touches and burns with such heat that all oxygen in the area is exhausted within moments. ... The victims are frequently children.'<sup>7</sup>

Throughout the 1960s Merton wrote about the war and the policies of the American government, noting significant developments and alongside this his criticism of the escalation. He called the war 'an overwhelming atrocity', and in his essay 'Taking Sides on Vietnam' wrote that: 'The exorbitant US war effort in Vietnam cannot be explained or justified by the reasons that are officially given.'<sup>8</sup> In July 1964 he saw the possibility of 'a long, stupid, costly, disastrous and pointless war [that would] bring no good whatever to anyone'. A month later he wrote despairingly: 'It seems inevitable that the politicians and generals will have the war they want! Sheer waste, nonsense, and criminal stupidity! What can one do about it?'<sup>9</sup>

In late 1964, in response to the guns sounding at Fort Knox 35 miles

from Gethsemani, symbolic of the many ready to go to war, Merton noted: 'the obsessions of Vietnam, the madness of patriots all make this land seem possessed by a demonic illusion, driven to ruinous adventures by technological hubris.'<sup>10</sup> Two years later he wrote of 'men with incredible technical skill and no sense of human realities in Asia — lost in abstractions, sentimentalities, myths, delusions',<sup>11</sup> an insight shared by the journalist Michael Herr covering Vietnam who reported on 'the empty technology that characterised Vietnam'.<sup>12</sup>

As the war progressed Merton wrote of his dismay at the escalation, commenting in June 1967 on the idiocy of 'the ever worse situation in Vietnam, where the war gradually becomes more and more serious. ... the sense of real growing crisis.'<sup>13</sup>

Merton placed his colours firmly:

I'm on the side of the people who are being burned, cut to pieces, tortured, held as hostages, gassed, ruined, destroyed. They are the victims on both sides. To take sides with massive power is to take sides against the innocent. The side I take is then the side of the people who are sick of war and want peace in order to rebuild their country. US aggression must stop. ... I, therefore, join with those who deplore it.<sup>14</sup>

In the wider opposition to the war other burnings took place — monks and peace protestors burnt themselves, and young men burnt their draft cards. Merton was highly disturbed by the self-immolation of a pacifist Quaker followed by that of Roger LaPorte from the Catholic Worker in November 1965: 'What is happening? Is everybody nuts?' he wrote, and shaken by such self-inflicted violence Merton removed himself as a sponsor of the Catholic Peace Fellowship.<sup>15</sup> Merton, wholly sympathetic to anti-war protestors and conscientious objection, nonetheless questioned whether even the burning of draft cards was genuine non-violence and was unsure where he stood. As he appreciated, 'there is a certain incompatibility between my solitary life and active involvement in a movement.'<sup>16</sup>

Roger Lipsey describes his stance as having 'a somewhat fixed note of indignation', pointing out that 'he was not in the fray, had no frontline experience.'<sup>17</sup> However his writings and support were influential and provocative, and inspired many striving for peace, not least the Vietnamese Buddhist monk, 'my brother' Thich Nhat Hanh.<sup>18</sup>

As the war deepened Merton noted: 'Everybody is happy as long as someone *else* is getting killed. ... What a world full of bastards!'

Commenting on the huge financial cost of the war, he recorded that: 'Each Vietcong killed costs a million dollars (not to mention men we lose!!) We really must be interested in killing people expensively.'<sup>19</sup>

The war produced its own warped logic. One US officer commented after the burning and levelling of a small town near Saigon: 'We had to destroy the village, in order to save it' — a phrase that could stand as a metaphor for the US experience in Vietnam.<sup>20</sup> Another officer, trying to win hearts and minds after ordering the bombing of villages, then provided food and aid for any survivors, his message accompanied by a grin: 'First I annihilate them, then I rehabilitate them.'<sup>21</sup>

### The Christian response and the effects of war on the soul

Where Merton did gain front line experience was in countering the support of the Church for what Merton called 'a criminally stupid military adventure in Vietnam'.<sup>22</sup> Not that this was a new experience for him — he had already cut his teeth over his struggles against the Church's censorship of his writings on nuclear war earlier in the decade. In one essay he marvelled that 'a Catholic Bishop in the United States was soothing President Johnson with the assurance the war in Vietnam is "a sad and heavy obligation imposed by the mandate of love"', and how Billy Graham, not to be outdone, had declared that the war in Vietnam was a 'spiritual war between good and evil'. Commenting on this, Merton added that it is 'a plausible statement, certainly, but not in the way in which he meant it'.<sup>23</sup>

In August 1967 Dom Jean Leclercq visited the East, including Vietnam and Indonesia, and passed his notes on the trip to Merton who commented: 'Utterly frank and uncompromising observations on the corruption of the Church, of monasticism etc. ... Sense that the Vietcong will win, and the results will be brutal.' Leclercq's notes included a quote from a young Redemptorist priest stating that 'the Catholic religious are regarded by everybody as a class of bourgeois of the towns' — to which Merton has added: 'Hence the vow of poverty is no longer a sign of anything.'<sup>24</sup>

In July 1968, a few months before leaving for Asia, Merton wrote, 'It is not easy to talk of prayer in a world where a President claims he prays for light in his decisions and then decides on genocidal attacks upon a small nation. And where a Catholic Bishop praises this as a "work of love"'.<sup>25</sup> A few days later Merton described an outing with friends to a local bar where he met a priest from Louisville: 'We got on to Vietnam and the priest — who had an operation on his throat and talked in a hoarse undertone — growled "they ought to drop the bomb", as if a

criminal negligence were being perpetrated.'<sup>26</sup>

Both Merton and political journalists noted that the religious justification from the Church went hand in hand with the military. In Merton's letter to a Franciscan priest in the US army he wrote: 'Certainly I can understand that as a chaplain you are bound to be for the war and to accept the government's view of the war at its face value.' But he invited the chaplain as a priest to consider the morality of the war, to 'take a look at Saigon: the place is a warehouse, a black market, a mess. Is that what we are fighting for?'<sup>27</sup> Meanwhile Merton's books were being burnt by 'some Conservative Catholics in Louisville' because of his opposition to the war, 'declaring me an atheist because I am opposed to the Vietnam War.'<sup>28</sup>

One Vietnam journalist wrote about the religious/military justification: 'Year after year, season after season, wet and dry, using up options faster than rounds on a machine gun belt, we called it right and righteous, viable and even almost won, and it still went on the way it went on.'<sup>29</sup>

Merton, meanwhile, at a loss 'apart from symbolic and futile gestures',<sup>30</sup> prayed at Mass for the Buddhist, Vo Tanh Minh, fasting in Brooklyn in protest against the fighting in Vietnam,<sup>31</sup> and felt under obligation to preserve in his hermitage 'the stillness, the silence, the poverty, the virginal point of pure nothingness'.<sup>32</sup> As he wrote in his journal:

As night descends on a nation intent upon ruin, upon destruction, blind, deaf to protest, crafty, powerful, unintelligent. It is necessary to be alone, to be not part of this, to be in the exile of silence, to be in a manner of speaking a political prisoner.<sup>33</sup>

How similar this is to the experience of an American pilot flying in a helicopter and feeling alone in the Vietnam darkness:

The nights were very beautiful. Nights were when you had the least to fear and feared the most ... how lovely .50-calibre tracers could be, coming at you as you flew at night in a helicopter, how slow and graceful, arching up easily, a dream, so remote from anything that could harm you. It could make you feel a total serenity, an elevation that put you above death, but that never lasted very long.<sup>34</sup>

Meanwhile everyone in Vietnam was praying – whatever their beliefs. This is what some described:

Prayers in the Delta, prayers in the Highlands, prayers in the Marine bunkers of the 'frontier' facing the DMZ, and for every prayer there was a counter-prayer – it was hard to see who had the edge.

Padres would fire one up to sweet muscular Jesus, blessing ammo dumps and 105s [fighter bombers] and officers' clubs.

Deep in the valley you could hear small Buddhist chimes ringing for peace, *hoa bien*; smell incense in the middle of the thickest Asian street funk. See groups of ARVN [Army of the Republic of Vietnam] with their families waiting for transport huddled round a burning prayer strip.

Once I heard a chaplain from the 9<sup>th</sup> Division starting up, 'Oh Gawd, help us to learn to live with Thee in a more dynamic way in these perilous times, that we may better serve Thee in the struggle against Thine enemies.'<sup>35</sup>

Perhaps this soldier spoke for them all:

Then and there, everyone was just trying to get through it, existential crunch, no atheists in foxholes like you wouldn't believe. Even bitter refracted faith was better than none at all, like the black Marine I'd heard about during heavy shelling at Con Thien who said, 'Don't worry baby, God'll think of something.'<sup>36</sup>

The soldier on Merton's plane would have been given a copy of the Soldier's Prayer, the Standard version printed on a plastic-coated card by the Defence Department; but as one vet wrote, there was also the Standard Revised, impossible to convey because it got translated outside of language into 'chaos – screams, begging, promises, threats, sobs, repetitions of holy names until their throats were cracked and dry'.<sup>37</sup>

Being in the war had a huge effect on everyone both in and out of combat: some people were able to retain their humanity, but if they did so, struggled to maintain it; others seemed to revel in killing whilst a significant number went insane or turned to drink and drugs to cope. One reporter described soldiers with a left pocket full of Dexedrine, the

'upper' officially administered by the army to get them into battle, and a right pocket full of 'downers' to get them through it.

One helicopter pilot wrote in his memoir:

The result of our daily grind was fatigue and irritability. ... I was getting plenty of practice. I got very good at low-level and formation flying. I learned how to function, even though I was scared shitless, by doing it over and over again. I had become efficient, numb, or stupid. I learned that everyone adapts.<sup>38</sup>

The war was never only about external action, it also had resonance with what Merton knew as 'an inner violence which simply ignores the human reality of those we claim to be helping'. These words are from his essay 'Vietnam—an Overwhelming Atrocity', in which he wrote about the canonisation of violence by pseudoscience with the belief that the stronger earns the right to exist by violently exterminating others, Merton strongly disputing the conclusion that if we are instinctively aggressive we have to beat up and destroy members of our own kind.<sup>39</sup>

The script for the film *Platoon*, considered by many to be one of the best works of any kind about the war, was written by Oliver Stone, himself a Vietnam veteran. At the end of the film the main character Taylor comments:

I think now, looking back, we did not fight the enemy, we fought ourselves. And the enemy was in us. The war is over for me now, but it will always be there — the rest of my days, fighting for ... possession of my soul.<sup>40</sup>

Vietnam was a death space, but for some, being highly alert and present to the danger, it could lead, as one wrote, to an epiphany:

To reaching in at the point of calm and springing all the joy and all the dread ever known, ever known by everyone who ever lived, unutterable in its speeding brilliance, touching all the edges and then passing, as though it had all been controlled from outside, by a god or by the moon. And every time you were so weary afterwards so empty of everything but being alive that you couldn't recall any of it, except to know that it was like something else you had felt once before.<sup>41</sup>

But living at this level of stress and fear led many to PTSD – post traumatic stress disorder. One ironic comment was that the problem seemed to be that if your body came back then your mind came back too, some veterans writing of deep despair and depression, mental breakdown and the breaking up of relationships and families.

### Conclusion: Vietnam, Vietnam, Vietnam, we've all been there <sup>42</sup>

In Merton's September 1968 circular letter to friends he wrote: 'In any case, anything I do on this trip will be absolutely non-political. I have no intention of going anywhere near Vietnam.'<sup>43</sup> My suggestion is that everyone who knew about the war including Merton was very much involved and very much affected by it, whether for or against or pretending indifference. There were no bystanders – guilty or not. People took sides and the political was personal in the same way that the personal always was, and still is, political.

But, as the symbolism of his body's return to Gethsemani in the war plane suggests, and as Merton knew personally through contemplative prayer and through his own front line experience, whatever the differences of opinion, we are all in it together.

If the manner of his death is a koan as well as a symbol, we read later in Cardenal's poem:

Not an absurdity:  
but a mystery  
a door opened upon the universe...  
The opened door  
that nobody can ever close again <sup>44</sup>

From a koan a deeper, more intuitive insight into the nature of reality arises; and I think the synchronicity of Merton's journey home offers us that: for the soldier going East on the plane with Merton was surely an intimation of the dead soldiers with whom Merton's body would later return to the West. He and Merton were already one, part of the crisis and part of the mystery, flying out to Vietnam, and coming back (one way or another) held in the belly of the plane, and travelling like all of us, as Cardenal phrased it earlier in his poem, '*All the way to the mysteries*'. Merton had been stripped back and burnt through contemplation and from the electric fan; the soldiers stripped back through fear and pain and burnt by violence and horror.

Earlier in the decade Merton had written:

All life tends to grow like this, in mystery inscaped with paradox and contradiction, yet centered, in its very heart, on the divine mercy and the realization of the 'new life' that is in us who believe, by the gift of the Holy Spirit.<sup>45</sup>

This gift, this new life, is mirrored in the closing lines of Cardenal's poem:

All the kisses given or not given.  
That's why the swans sing said Socrates  
upon your chest the fan still  
turning  
We love or are only when we die.  
The great final act the gift of one's whole being.  
O.K.<sup>46</sup>

#### Notes

1. Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, Journals vol. 7, 1967-1968, ed. Patrick Hart (New York: Harper Collins, 1998), pp. 209-10.
2. *The Other Side of the Mountain*, p.78.
3. Ernesto Cardenal, 'Coplas on the Death of Merton' in *Apocalypse and other poems* (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1977), pp. 45-58.
4. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1948), p. 506.
5. Thomas Merton, 'In Silence' in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions Books, 1977), pp. 280-1.
6. Thomas Merton, 'Taking Sides on Vietnam' in *Faith and Violence* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), pp.109.
7. Thomas Merton quoting from the report 'Medical Problems of South Vietnam' in 'Vietnam – an Overwhelming Atrocity' in *Faith and Violence*, p. 88.
8. 'Taking Sides on Vietnam', pp.109-110. Merton's essay 'Vietnam – an Overwhelming Atrocity' is included in *Faith and Violence*, pp. 87-95.
9. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life*, Journals vol. 5, 1963-1965, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), pp. 124, 133.
10. *Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 177.
11. Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love*, Journals vol. 6, 1966-1967, ed. Christine M. Bochen (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), p. 41.
12. Michael Herr, *Dispatches* (London: Picador, 1977), p. 172.
13. *Learning to Love*, p. 243.
14. 'Taking Sides on Vietnam', p. 110.
15. *Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 313.
16. *Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 317.

17. Roger Lipsey, *Make Peace Before the Sun Goes Down* (Boston & London: Shambhala Publications Inc, 2015), p. 178.
18. 'Thich Nhat Hanh is my Brother' in *Faith and Violence*, pp.106-108.
19. *Learning to Love*, pp. 142, 155.
20. <https://www.studentsforliberty.org/2014/11/10/destroying-the-village-in-order-to-save-it/> (Accessed 23/09/2018).
21. Donald Kirk, 'How the Tet Offensive Broke America' in *The New York Times - Vietnam '67 Newsletter*, March 2, 2018.
22. *Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 228.
23. 'Vietnam – an overwhelming atrocity', p. 91.
24. *Learning to Love*, p. 277.
25. *The Other Side of the Mountain*, pp. 138-9.
26. *The Other Side of the Mountain*, pp. 142-3.
27. Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis*, ed. William, H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994), p. 119.
28. Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: The Letters of Thomas Merton to Writers*, ed. Christine M Bochen (San Diego, New York and London: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1993), p. 161 (from letter to Ernesto Cardenal).
29. *Dispatches*, p. 46.
30. *Learning to Love*, pp. 224-5.
31. *Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 251.
32. *Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 240. This passage is part of the section of this journal (pp. 237-242) titled 'Day of a Stranger'.
33. *Dancing in the Water of Life*, p. 242.
34. *Dispatches*, p. 109.
35. *Dispatches*, p. 43.
36. *Dispatches*, pp.52-3.
37. *Dispatches*, p. 55.
38. Robert Mason, *Chickenhawk* (London: Corgi, 1983), pp. 109-10.
39. 'Vietnam – an overwhelming atrocity', p. 92.
40. *Platoon*, written and directed by Oliver Stone, 120 mins, 1986.
41. *Dispatches*, p. 112.
42. *Dispatches*, p. 278.
43. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal* (London: Sheldon Press, 1973), p. 296.
44. *Apocalypse and other poems*, p. 49.
45. Thomas Merton, *A Thomas Merton Reader (revised edition)*, ed. Thomas P McDonnell (New York: Doubleday, 1989), p. 17. The passage is taken from Merton's own preface to the original edition published in 1962.
46. *Apocalypse and other poems*, p. 58

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