

# Beyond Bystanding: Thomas Merton's Guidance in the Age of Trump and Brexit

Daniel P. Horan, OFM

## Introduction

During the last lecture Thomas Merton delivered on the morning of his death he referred to a conversation he had with students he met in California at the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions at a stop on his way to Asia. Merton recounts a curious informal exchange he had with a French revolutionary student leader who, in response to Merton's self-identification as a Trappist Monk, stated: 'We are monks also.' While this is admittedly an odd, or at the very least unexpected response, it led Merton to reflect on what the significance of such a claim might mean—for the student and for the Trappist. Merton explains: 'The monk is essentially someone who takes up a critical attitude toward the world and its structures, just as these students identify themselves essentially as people who have taken up a critical attitude toward the contemporary world and its structures.'<sup>1</sup> On this point the professed member of the monastic community and the revolutionary student share an overlapping identity, a unified *esprit de corps*. There remains something provocative and truthful about the seemingly flippant comparison. Merton notes:

The student seemed to be alluding to the fact that if one is to call himself in some way or other a monk, he must have in some way or other reached a kind of critical conclusion about the validity of certain claims made by secular society and its structures with regard to the end of man's existence. In other words, the monk is somebody who says, in one way or another, that the claims of the world are fraudulent.<sup>2</sup>

We live in a time in which many cultural, political, and social claims are indeed fraudulent. In response, we may also, like the French student or the American Trappist, identify ourselves as a kind of monk in the world, as people who have ourselves taken up such a critical attitude toward the contemporary world and its structures. Among the most common refrains in Merton's later writings is the call to avoid becoming or remaining a bystander to the injustices and fraudulent claims of our world. While embracing something of a peripheral life as a consecrated religious at the margins of society, Merton rejects the stereotypical interpretation of the monastic vocation as *fuga mundi* in an unqualified, naïve sense. He articulates the call to engage with the world, if not necessarily embracing all of its values, in the preface to *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*.

The contemplative life is unfortunately too often thought of in terms purely of 'enclosure', and monks are conceived of as hothouse plants, nursed along in a carefully protected and spiritually overheated life of prayer. But let us remember that the contemplative life is first of all *life*, and life implies openness, growth, development. To restrict the contemplative monk to one set of narrow horizons and esoteric concerns would be in fact to condemn him to spiritual and intellectual sterility.<sup>3</sup>

The aim of this essay is to highlight a selection of themes in Merton's writings, in particular those of prayer, social criticism and community, that may provide us with guidance in this dangerous and disturbing moment in history. In so doing, I hope that we might receive from our brother Thomas Merton wisdom that leads us beyond bystanding, to becoming something of a monk in the world ourselves.

## The Foundation of Prayer

It may appear a cliché or to be unoriginal to talk about prayer as a key theme in the guidance Merton presents to us in these difficult times but the foundation of prayer is essential, for without it, it can become too easy to delude oneself into thinking that social, cultural, or political issues—particularly those that are antithetical to the Gospel message of peace and justice—are comfortably aligned to one's own faith. Merton names this as precisely one of the problems that plagues the American history of structural racism and concurrent inaction. In his essay,

'Religion and Race in the United States', he writes:

Many Christians, who have confused 'Americanism' with 'Christianity' are in fact contributing to the painful contradictions and even injustices of the racial crisis. For the one thing that has been made most evident by the long and bitter struggle of the South, and now of the North, to prevent civil rights legislation from being passed or enforced or made effective, is that the legislators and the police themselves, along with some ministers and indeed all those whom one can call 'the establishment', seem to be the first to defy the law or set it aside when their own interests are threatened. In other words, we are living in a society that is not exactly moral, a society which misuses Christian clichés to justify its lawlessness and immorality.<sup>4</sup>

This passage highlights the ways in which Christians can all too easily acquiesce to unjust structures and systems, domesticating the Gospel to justify their own interests, because of their ignorance or willful disregard of the key tenets of their faith

Just as Merton argues that we cannot discover our True Self apart from the pursuit of God in contemplative prayer, he makes it clear that we must have a foundation of prayer in order to discover what God's intention for the world truly is.<sup>5</sup> Such is what he observes in his *Contemplation in a World of Action*, when he reminds us that:

The way to find the real 'world' is not merely to measure and observe what is outside us, but to discover our own inner ground. For that is where the world is, first of all: in my deepest self. ... This 'ground', this 'world' where I am mysteriously present at once to my own self and to the freedoms of all other men, is not a visible and determined structure with fixed laws and demands. It is a living and self-creating mystery of which I am myself a part.<sup>6</sup>

True freedom, true grounding, true direction is found for Merton only in prayer, as he reiterates in a letter to Dom Francis Decroix in 1967: 'Prayer is a real source of personal freedom in the midst of a world in which men are dominated by massive organizations and rigid institutions which seek only to exploit them for money and power.'<sup>7</sup>

In an age of frenetic action, Merton's reminder to pause and pray is well advised. In the United States we see protests and activism in response to persistent gun violence, in the face of structural racism, xenophobia, and in the disdain for immigrants. In the United Kingdom, there is also a strong undercurrent of distrust and fear of the other, which beyond the Brexit vote is manifest in the rise in hate speech and extremist groups. In response, there are those people—young and old—that have taken to the streets, to the Internet, and to social media to call for change. But, curiously, there is seldom any form of religious reference or appeal. For Christians the overlapping interests of the Gospel message and the call for social transformation are certainly strong, but without a life of prayer to ground one in the tradition and discernment about God's will for the human family and all creation, our efforts will likely fall short or ring hollow.

### Social Criticism<sup>8</sup>

It is not enough to pray, for contemplation is not an end in itself. As James Thomas Baker notes, 'To Merton's way of thinking contemplation not only helps prepare one for social action but actually gives birth to social action by teaching the contemplative that he and his fellow [men and women] are one. The discovery of this contemplative ethic during the course of his monastic career led Merton to get involved in world affairs as a social commentator.'<sup>9</sup> Merton's own progression from contemplative to social critic was highlighted by Pope Francis in his address to the joint session of Congress in September 2015 when he described Merton as not only 'a man of prayer', but also 'a thinker who challenged the certitudes of his time and opened new horizons for souls and for the Church'.<sup>10</sup> One of the ways that Merton 'challenged the certitudes of his time' was by being a public intellectual and a social critic. Merton's commitment to recognizing the 'signs of the times' and then interpreting them 'in light of the Gospel' (*Gaudium et Spes*, 4) governed his dialogue with society, offering something of a view from the margins, a unique vantage point occasioned by Merton's distinctive location as a kind of resident alien in the American context. A voracious reader and letter writer, Merton was attuned to the ethos of his age, which, particularly in the 1950s and 1960s, was consumed by matters of violence and racism.

Merton wrote at great length about the Vietnam conflict, nuclear weapons, and other instances of corporate and individual violence. In *Contemplation in a World of Action*, Merton reflected on the way that his birth at a particular point in history shaped his experience and his

outlook on war and violence:

That I should be born in 1915, that I should be the contemporary of Auschwitz, Hiroshima, Vietnam, and the Watts riots, are things about which I was not first consulted. Yet they are also events in which, whether I like it or not, I am deeply and personally involved. The 'world' is not just a physical space traversed by jet planes and full of people running in all directions. It is a complex of responsibilities and options made out of the loves, the hates, the fears, the joys, the hopes, the greed, the cruelty, the kindness, the faith, the trust, the suspicion of all. In the last analysis, if there is war because nobody trusts anybody, this is in part because I myself am defensive, suspicious, untrusting, and intent on making other people conform themselves to my particular brand of death wish.<sup>11</sup>

Here Merton lays out his motivation for engagement with broader society, particularly regarding the theme of war and violence. Rooted in his Christian conviction that authentic Gospel life demanded a radical nonviolent attitude toward conflict, Merton's dialogue with social actors, and about the circumstances of his time, often took on a notably critical hue. As Baker explains, 'When Thomas Merton emerged from his monastic hideaway in the early 1950s and looked again upon the America which he had adopted, he saw a land filled with violence, a society whose personality and nature were molded by its violent past and whose ability to change its violent present might cause it to be destroyed.'<sup>12</sup> But Merton, though he was largely an essayist, never let his dialogue with society on the topic of war and violence devolve into mere monologue. He made great strides to understand the contexts, histories, and internal logics of decision makers and situations. The openness he demonstrated in his dialogical approach to prayer and culture likewise was reflected in his engagement with society.

In the end, Merton occupied a position that advocated nonviolence as the only valid normative Christian response in the face of conflict. He refrained from appropriating the moniker 'pacifist', largely for fear that it was too often mistaken for 'passivity' in the face of conflict. As a Christian in the modern world, Merton was convinced that a nonviolent stance was anything but passive; it was a radical response that required imagination and creativity, true dialogue and compromise. Unfortunately, Merton

recognized that in an age of an overpowering 'military industrial complex' the United States's default solution to domestic and international problems was increasingly military in nature.

Merton's dialogue with society concerning war and violence also included a critical conversation within his own Christian theological tradition. Merton was, in principle, an adherent to the ancient 'Just War' theory, which states that given a number of specific criteria it is conceivable that a violent response to a military aggressor could be justified. I say Merton was 'in principle' support of 'Just War' because he stated himself that, *in practice*, such a justifiable war could not be conducted in the nuclear age.<sup>13</sup> The conversation in which Merton engaged was one that maintained a fierce loyalty to the Christian intellectual and moral tradition, but was also one that did not shy away from challenging questions and propositions. Indeed, as Pope Francis mentioned, Merton was not at all afraid to challenge the preconceptions or certitudes of his time, both within the church and outside it, and in this spirit offer us guidance in standing up against presuppositions that are inherently violent.

### Racism and Civil Rights

Merton was also deeply concerned with the reality of racism and the struggle for civil rights underway in the 1960s, which he recognized as tied to the larger and overarching ill of American society—violence. James Baker explains this connection well when he writes that 'Merton believed that the most obvious and continuing sign of America's violence was the racism which had led to her greatest social crisis of the 1960s.'<sup>14</sup> Merton was deeply attuned to the social dynamics of institutional and structural evils that perpetuate racial injustice, prejudice, and discrimination. Long before the twenty-first-century technological revolution of smart phones and social media that have brought wider and more immediate attention to the systemic injustices of racism in the United States, Merton understood that what was widely characterized by politicians and white-controlled media as isolated instances of violence in communities of predominantly black persons was in fact symptomatic of a far more insidious reality of institutional racism masked as 'law and order'. In his essay 'Toward a Theology of Resistance' Merton writes:

It must be remembered that the crime that breaks out of the ghetto is only the fruit of a greater and more pervasive 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 social structure which is outwardly ordered and respectable, and inwardly ridden by psychopathic obsessions and delusions.<sup>15</sup>

Merton's dialogue with society on the topic of racism and civil rights began in the 1960s with an optimistic look to Martin Luther King, Jr., and the hope that Christian nonviolence would prevail. However, by the mid-1960s, and then with King's assassination in 1968, Merton became disillusioned with the prospect that nonviolent action would work. He never goes so far as to endorse violent action, but he does express a sort of solidarity and empathy with those black women and men who might consider violent force as a means to overcoming racial injustice.<sup>16</sup>

What is most striking about Merton's perspective on the national conversation about civil rights is his consistent and clear conviction that the problem of racism is not a black problem but *a white problem*. In his classic, if at the time of its publication controversial, essay, 'Letters to a White Liberal', Merton offers a lengthy engagement with the 'signs of the times' in the context of the struggle for American civil rights. His general thesis is that, although the U.S. Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, there remains little beyond the written legislation to enact the desired intention of the law. Racism in the United States is so deeply imbedded in the culture and collective imaginary that it will take much more than words on paper to change the status quo. In fact, Merton argues that the white Christian communities in the North (i.e., 'white liberals'), which seem ostensibly supportive of civil rights for black women and men, are in fact complicit in the subjugation of black persons and the perpetuation of structural racism because they do not wish to surrender the society with which they are familiar, nor do they want to acknowledge and then give up the unearned privileges afforded them because of the colour of their skin.

Merton's dialogue with his society on the subject of racism challenges his interlocutors, especially those who identify as Christian and white, to acknowledge their complicity in the continuation of racial injustice. In a powerful essay titled, 'The Hot Summer of Sixty-Seven', Merton explains:

Few of us have actively and consciously *chosen* to oppress or mistreat the Negro. But nevertheless we have all more or less acquiesced in and consented to a state of affairs in which the

Negro is treated unjustly, and in which his unjust treatment is directly or indirectly to the advantage of people like ourselves, people with whom we agree and collaborate, people with whom we are in fact identified. So that even if in theory the white man may believe himself to be well disposed toward the Negro—and never gets into a bind in which he proves himself to be otherwise—we all collectively contribute to a situation in which the Negro has to live and act as our inferior.<sup>17</sup>

The dialogue with society in this case starts with a humility on Merton's part, acknowledging his own social location and his own identification—'we', 'us', and 'ourselves'—with those with whom he is engaging. Unless serious, conscious, deliberate efforts are deployed to recognize and then surrender white privilege, to listen to those oppressed by racism, and then do something to change the status quo, then nothing will change. And the fault rests with the predominantly white, racist society, which does not exist apart from all the wilfully ignorant individuals that compose it.

Merton's social criticism always began with his owning his own place within it. Although many were openly hostile and dismissive of Merton's social criticism in his lifetime, the passage of time has only further clarified his prophetic insight and prescience. In terms of relevance for us, especially those of us who occupy places of privilege on account of our race, gender, ability, or class, Merton's wisdom and his model reveal how we must acknowledge those dynamics working to perpetuate an unjust system, and then work to end such injustices.

### Becoming a Community

Merton came to realize that his baptismal call was not to meditative isolation, but rather a mandate to embrace the World according to the *kenotic* pattern Christ laid out for us in His Incarnation, life, death, and resurrection. For many this realization by Merton is known through his description of the episode at the corner of Fourth and Walnut in which Merton exclaims:

I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness,

of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness.<sup>18</sup>

This sentiment ripples through his correspondence, journals, and writings throughout the late 1950s and 1960s, which bear a consistent witness in the face of a world bent on maintaining separateness, isolation, and self-preservation at all costs.

Both in the United States with its slogans of 'America First' or 'Make America Great Again', and in the United Kingdom with its Brexit slogans of 'Take back control' and 'Believe in Britain', with the increased isolationist desire for control and the rise in crimes against 'the other', we are in need of continued guidance of how to live a Christian life in the midst of cultures of separation, discrimination, fear, and violence. So much of Merton's writings and work on inter-religious dialogue and interfaith friendship, correspondence with believers and unbelievers alike, dialogue with various cultures and societies, and commitment to Christian nonviolence offer us potential points of engagement and reflection.

In his prose poem 'A Letter to Pablo Antonio Cuadra Concerning Giants', Merton levels a strong critique of those who occupy locations of global power but refuse to embrace the solidarity to which humanity is beckoned by its Creator:

Let me be quite succinct: the greatest sin of the European-Russian-American complex which we call 'the West' (and this sin has spread its own way to China), is not only greed and cruelty, not only moral dishonesty and infidelity to truth, but above all *its unmitigated arrogance towards the rest of the human race*. Western civilization is now in full decline into barbarism (a barbarism that springs *from within itself*) because it has been guilty of a twofold disloyalty: to God and to Man.

Such people are unable to hear the voice of God in 'the voice of the stranger', never realizing that 'the stranger has something very valuable, something irreplaceable to give him: something that can never be bought with money, never estimated by publicists, never exploited by political agitators: the spiritual understanding of a friend who belongs to a different culture.'<sup>19</sup>

As we have already seen, Merton's own spiritual maturation led to his

identification with the rest of humanity. Seeking a life of solidarity in which he might live in a way other than as part of a 'society of isolated individuals', Merton recognized that Christians are called to build communities of persons and not collections of individuals.<sup>20</sup> Concerning the world of isolated individuals, Merton explains in *New Seeds of Contemplation* that, 'they do not know that reality is to be sought not in division but in unity, for we are "members one of another". The man who lives in division is not a person but only an "individual."<sup>21</sup>

This sense of community, of solidarity, appears as a recurring theme throughout Merton's later work. For Merton, solidarity is seen as openness to both God and to humanity, perhaps one of the greatest lessons we can gather from Merton's life. Merton's response of solidarity was not typical of his times, particularly in his understanding and promotion of interfaith dialogue. In a thought-provoking essay Allan McMillan suggests seven lessons learned by Merton during his interreligious encounters, the fourth such lesson being that of solidarity:

One cannot understand the depth of feelings and faith experiences of another person unless one has experienced and wrestled with them in his or her own life. This compassion, this willingness to 'suffer with' *the other* opens us to the appreciation of the greatness of how other people respond to the Divine call.<sup>22</sup>

This position of solidarity is the keystone to forming a community that extends beyond a collection of bystanding individuals, especially in a world and among states of such drastic inequality. At a time in the Catholic Church's theological and social development that put Merton's openness to relationship and community with all people under suspicion, his decision to embrace a position of solidarity risked the rejection of some, so that he could be open to all. Merton knew his own identity was inescapably intertwined with the rest of humanity. He says in *New Seeds of Contemplation* that, 'I must look for my identity, somehow, not only in God but in other men. I will never be able to find myself if I isolate myself from the rest of mankind as if I were a different kind of being.'<sup>23</sup>

### Conclusion

Moving forward prophetically and courageously in the work of peace, justice, and reconciliation so needed today, we would do well to return to Merton as a wisdom figure and guide. His model and instruction to

ground ourselves in prayer, to 'challenge the certitudes of our time', and to prioritize solidarity and community over the individual offers us inspiration and guidance in the age of Trump and Brexit.

### Notes

1. Naomi Burton, Patrick Hart, and James Laughlin, eds., *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1973), p. 329.
2. *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*, p. 329
3. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Image Books, 1989), p. xv.
4. Thomas Merton, 'Religion and Race in the United States', in *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), p. 132.
5. See, for example, the chapters 'Pray for your own discovery' and 'Things in their identity' in *New Seeds of Contemplation*.
6. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (New York: Doubleday, 1971), p. 170.
7. Thomas Merton, Letter to Dom Francis Decroix (August 22, 1967), 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. 159.
8. Portions of this section first appeared in Daniel P. Horan, 'What it Means to Be a Person of Dialogue', in *What I am Living For: Lessons from the Life and Writings of Thomas Merton*, ed. Jon M. Sweeney (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 2018), pp. 71-88.
9. James Thomas Baker, *Thomas Merton: Social Critic* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1971), p. 48.
10. Pope Francis, 'Visit to the Joint Session of the United States Congress', (24 September 2015) available online at: [https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/september/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150924\\_usa-us-congress.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/september/documents/papa-francesco_20150924_usa-us-congress.html)
11. Thomas Merton, 'Is the world a problem?' in *Contemplation in a World of Action* (New York: Doubleday, 1971), p. 161.
12. Baker, *Thomas Merton: Social Critic*, p. 98.
13. See, for example, Thomas Merton, *The Nonviolent Alternative*, ed. Gordon Zahn (New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1971); Gordon Zahn, 'Thomas Merton: Reluctant Pacifist', in *Thomas Merton: Prophet in the Belly of a Paradox*, ed. Gerald Twomey (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), pp. 55-79; and Daniel P. Horan, 'Becoming Instruments of Peace: How Francis and Merton Challenge us to Live Today', in *The Franciscan Heart of Thomas Merton* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 2014), pp. 199-218.
14. Baker, *Thomas Merton: Social Critic*, p. 99.

15. Thomas Merton, 'Toward a Theology of Resistance', in *Faith and Violence* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), p. 3.
16. For example, see Thomas Merton, 'From Non-Violence to Black Power', in *Faith and Violence*, pp. 121-129.
17. Thomas Merton, 'The Hot Summer of Sixty-Seven', in *Faith and Violence*, p. 180.
18. Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 156.
19. Thomas Merton, 'A Letter to Pablo Antonio Cuadra Concerning Giants', in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), pp. 380, 384, 387.
20. William H. Shannon, *Thomas Merton: An Introduction* (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2005), p. 95.
21. Thomas Merton, 'Union and Division' in *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1962), pp. 47-48.
22. McMillan, 'Seven Lessons for Inter-faith Dialogue and Thomas Merton', *The Merton Annual* 15 (2002), p. 198. Emphasis added.
23. 'Union and Division' in *New Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 51.

**Daniel P. Horan, OFM** is a Franciscan friar, Assistant Professor of Systematic Theology and Spirituality at The Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, USA, and the author of twelve books including the award-winning *The Franciscan Heart of Thomas Merton: A New Look at the Spiritual Influence on his Life, Thought, and Writing* (2014). His latest books are titled, *Reading, Praying, Living Pope Francis's Rejoice and Be Glad* (2019) and *All God's Creatures: A Theology of Creation* (2018). He is also co-editor of the academic journal *New Theology Review* and co-host of *The Francis Effect Podcast*. He previously served on the Board of Directors of the International Thomas Merton Society (2011-2017) and is currently editing the correspondence between Thomas Merton and Naomi Burton Stone for publication.

### Have you considered writing an article for The Merton Journal?

As well as academic papers the editors welcome the submission of shorter pieces, book reviews and original poetry for publication. Perhaps you have a favourite of his books? A particular quotation has a special resonance with your life? You have attended a talk about Merton that you found especially moving? To contact the editors for further details or to submit an article, email:

[journal@thomasmertonsociety.org.uk](mailto:journal@thomasmertonsociety.org.uk)