

Donald Grayston

THOMAS MERTON AND FAMILY VIOLENCE

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Two of the greatest names in the modern history of the struggle for alternatives to violence in human relations are those of Leo Tolstoy (Russian novelist and philosopher, died 1910) and Mohandas Gandhi, called the *Mahatma* or "Great Soul" (Indian spiritual/political leader, died 1948). Recently I have had the opportunity to read a biography of each: Henri Troyat's *TOLSTOY* and Erik Erikson's *GANDHI'S TRUTH*. Both are thoroughly researched, objective, well-nuanced and authoritative. At the same time both give evidence of their author's strong critical reactions to their subjects. In terms of this article, perhaps their most striking feature is that both Tolstoy and Gandhi treated their wives and children abominably.

This article will not be long enough for me to go into detail about how and why this was so. Suffice it to say that each of these undeniably great men suffered to his life's end from a kind of suppressed egotism, together with a lack of resolution in regard to his own sexuality. When they were combined with the adulation of the multitudes, these factors prevented both of them from reaching the deeper levels of wholeness. Thus in spite of their historic contributions to the theory and practice of social revolution, their families were victims of their self-absorption, their lack of compassion, their unhealthy tendency to dominance, and what the divorce courts of a later time would call mental cruelty.

I cite this curious parallel as a way of entering into our subject, not to drive my readers to despair, but in order to exemplify the difficulty of the subject, and to make it clear that there are no easy answers even from such great theorists to the problem, presently so pervasive among us, of violence in the family.

From another writer, however, American monk and poet Thomas Merton (died 1968), humbler in the pantheon of nonviolence than either of the others, I wish to take some intuitions with which we can work as we approach the subject of the violence among us as members of families. In his thought, I will suggest, we will find a consistency lacking in his greater, an explicit integrating of the roots of microviolent and macroviolent behaviour. In making no essential distinction between family violence and the ultimate violence of nuclear holocaust, he shows them to us as basically different points on the one human continuum of division and hate.

Merton's own family experience was not unmarked by violence of a number of kinds. His mother, for example, pushed him into a precocious intellectual development in response to "progressive" educational ideas of her period.

She answered an advertisement...and received from Baltimore a set of books and some charts and even a small desk and blackboard. The idea was that the smart, modern child was to be turned loose amid this apparatus, and allowed to develop spontaneously into a midget university before reaching the age of ten. (The Seven Storey Mountain/New York: Harcourt Brace, 1948, p. 10)

And as she was dying, in 1921, when Merton was six, she refused to let him come to see her in the hospital. Just before her death, she wrote him a note of farewell, which his father delivered to him.

I don't think she had ever written to me before--there had never been any occasion for it. Then I understood...My mother was informing me, by mail, that she was about to die, and would never see me again. (SSM, p. 14).

There is in this incident such a terrible violation of the acceptance among members of a family of the reality of death, of the legitimacy of tears, and of the need and naturalness of mutual support in time of crisis. That there was no intimacy at this most intimate time, no embracing, no sharing of words of love, signals for students of Merton's life the critical moment in his alienation from the feminine which was not to be resolved until just before his death. It was then, however, in the relationships he formed with theologian Rosemary Ruether and with the particular nurse in Louisville who meant so much to him, that he moved decisively towards a rapprochement with women and with his own past. (On this see Monica Furlong, *Merton: A Biography*/London: Collins, 1980/pp. 14-15, 297-306, 314.)

Another incident in Merton's autobiography directs us to the reality in his life of sibling rivalry, with its attendant vulnerability to violence, in this instance physical as well as spiritual. Merton and some friends had built a club-house in the woods, and had prohibited their younger siblings from coming near it.

When I think now of that part of my childhood, the picture I get of my brother John Paul is this: standing in a field...is this little perplexed five-year-old kid in short pants and a kind of leather jacket, standing quite still, with his arms hanging down at his sides, and gazing in our direction...We shout at him to get out of there, to beat it, and go home and wing a couple more rocks in that direction, and he does not go away...The law written in his nature says that he must be with his elder brother, and do what he is doing: and he cannot understand why this law of love is being so wildly and unjustly violated in his case. (SSM. p. 23).

Here too, however, there came healing, though not for many years. After John Paul joined the RCAF at the beginning of World War II, Merton was reconciled with him, and had the happiness of preparing him for baptism. His poem, "Sweet brother, if I do not sleep," written after John Paul's death in the war, is one of the most poignant he ever wrote (SSM, p. 404). (I remember reading the passage above, and the poem, on a lonely Sunday afternoon in Toronto, missing my family in B.C., and finding myself unexpectedly in tears for the long-dead five-year-old stubbornly trying to live out the law of his nature.)

These incidents, by showing Merton to be one who, like ourselves, came out of a less than perfect familial matrix, may serve as background for some of his thoughts, later expressed, on violence. To turn first to his great work of spirituality, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1962), and to the chapter entitled "The Root of War is Fear" (pp. 112-22), we find him identifying as the root of all human conflict that pervasive fear which results from the breakdown of human trust. This trust, or faith-relationship in which God and the human race were intended to live, has broken down, he states, on the cosmic level. In the ancient and powerful account of marital recrimination and sibling murder which we find in Genesis 3-4, we read stories through which our spiritual ancestors explained the violence which they saw around them. It is the account of the primal breakdown of trust; and with the shattering of the cosmic unity came fear of self and others, hatred of self and others.

But, says Merton, we suppress this fear and hatred and project it onto the others, thereby making of scapegoating a critical dynamic of our social and familial interaction.



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Thus we never see the one truth that would help us begin to solve our ethical and political problems: that we are *all* more or less wrong, that we are *all* at fault, *all* limited and obstructed by our mixed motives, our self-righteousness and our tendency to aggressivity and hypocrisy. (NSC., pp. 115-16).

St. Paul, of course, had expressed the same thought two millennia earlier: "All have turned aside, tainted all alike; there is not one good man left, not a single one" (Romans 3:12). As human beings, goes the New Testament insight, we are members of a race at once tainted and glorious, at once capable of monstrous evil and marvelous achievement, at once craving tenderness and intimate communication and simultaneously capable of fleeing this intimacy through the banality of living out our lives with our feet up on the coffee table in front of the television set.

We begin to come to terms with this confusion as by struggling with our disparate tendencies we move towards self-acceptance.

We must try to accept ourselves, whether individually or collectively, not simply (emphasis mine--the text says "not only" but this violates the sense of the passage) as perfectly good or perfectly bad, but in our mysterious, unaccountable mixture of good and evil. We have to stand by the modicum of good that is in us without exaggerating it... But at the same time we have to recognize that we have willfully or otherwise trespassed on the rights of others. We must be able to admit this not only as the result of self-examination, but when it is pointed out unexpectedly, and perhaps not too gently, by somebody else (NSC, p. 117).

After self-acceptance, then comes self-examination — the introspective, ascetical practice of generations of Christians, now lost for many of us in the fast-lane experience of modern (especially urban) living. But if we were to take up the practice again, how might we start?

One of the best places to start, according to Merton (and who could disagree?), is with that charter of rights, standards and vision for the Christian community which we call the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-12). Here Jesus sets forth criteria which, in Merton's view, could make harmony possible "in small social units like the family" as well as "in the wider area of the state and in the whole community of nations" (NSC, p.117). In "Blessed are the Meek: The Christian Roots of Nonviolence", first published in 1967, and later included in Gordon Zahn's fine collection, *Thomas Merton on Peace* (New York: McCall, 1971), he zeroes in on the second beatitude (Matthew 5:4) as the key to the whole, the biblical root-statement of a spirituality of nonviolence.

He is at pains to point out that this beatitude does not mean "blessed are they who are endowed with a tranquil natural temperament, who are not easily moved to anger, who are always quiet and obedient, who do not naturally resist" (Tmp, p. 210). Rather, blessed are those, of whatever temperament, who have regained in their own lives the primal trust broken by Adam and Eve and restored to the human race in Christ. These are the eschatologically meek, the apocalyptically gentle, the radical trusters of God.

In other words they seek justice in the power of truth and of God, not by the power of man. Note that Christian meekness...refrains from self-assertion and from violent aggression because it sees all things in the light of the great judgment.

Hence it does not struggle and fight merely for this or that ephemeral gain. It struggles for the truth and the right which alone stand in that day when all is to be tried by fire (1 Corinthians 3:10-15) (TMP, p. 210).

When you are locked in a power-struggle with your ten-year-old daughter, it may be difficult to remember to struggle for truth which will stand in the last great day! But perspective is important, and perseverance is essential!

And the consistency of Merton's approach is one of its great strengths. He is trying to offer us a way of approaching violence which is as valid in the parent-child power struggle as it is in our opposition to the Cruise missile. Thus he draws out of the second beatitude some conditions for its application to the way of nonviolence:

- * the need to free ourselves from the unjust use of power (forbidding our child to have a friend overnight out of sheer grouchiness);
- * the need to struggle for the truth of a situation, rather than for personal victory (reducing a child or partner to silence when he or she obviously has more to say);
- * the need to avoid facile self-righteousness (moving in on one's spouse in his/her moment of weakness and conveniently ignoring one's parallel faults);
- * the need to seek a realism which is not obsessed with immediate results (they will eventually learn how to use knife and fork!);
- * the conviction that the manner in which any conflict for truth is waged will itself manifest or obscure the truth (I may be right, but I don't have to rub it in);
- * the conviction that I can learn from my "adversary" (probably something about myself which I have usually projected away from myself);
- * the habit of living in a hope derived from a knowledge that God's love and grace continue to possess the power to bring forth new and radically beautiful possibilities of human behaviour (the way that her/his willingness to listen to me can bring me to the end of my anger).

Finally, Merton stresses that any approach to nonviolence, in the family as beyond, must in the spirit of Jesus in the Beatitudes be unmistakably person-oriented.

"("Blessed are those who..."). For such an approach is not set on determining anyone or anything and does not insistently demand that persons and events correspond to our own abstract ideal. All it seeks is the openness of free exchange in which reason and love have freedom of action. In such a situation the future will take care of itself. This is the truly Christian outlook (TMP, p. 217).

These then, are the norms with Merton offers to us in our journey away from the sin-generated and culturally-aggravated violence which mars the lives of our families, nations and power-blocs, towards the ability to live in the nonviolent strength of the soul-force which was and is in Jesus Christ. We call this strength, in fact, by a personal name: Holy Spirit. He/she (in Japanese, "Spirit" is feminine, as is one of his/her Greek names, *Sophia*, "wisdom") it is to whom we turn for help in becoming self-accepting and in practicing authentic self-examination. He/she it is who helps us to become people of the Beatitudes, those who are poor in spirit, are meek, mourn for the death of human possibility, hunger and thirst for what is just, show mercy seek purity of heart, work in a *hands-on* way for peace (the French is clearer - "*Heureux les artisans de paix*"), and willingly suffer persecution (in our families as in our society) for the cause of truth.



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