

## PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

# Merton on the Eve of the Third Millennium

by Patrick F. O'Connell

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### Editor's Note

Spring Hill College in Mobile, Alabama, hosted the Fifth General Meeting of the International Thomas Merton Society on 12–15 June 1997. It will be no surprise to our readers that a very warm welcome was received by the nearly four hundred participants and contributors to the various sessions. As in past years, the Presidential Address appears in this issue of *The Merton Seasonal*, given at the banquet by Patrick F. O'Connell, whose term of office expired during the meeting (a somewhat longer version of this paper is scheduled to appear in *Grail: An Ecumenical Journal* [Ottawa]). The new president, Thomas Del Prete, of Worcester, Massachusetts, took over the reins during the Town Hall Meeting on Saturday afternoon.

The theme of the 1997 conference, "From the Springs of Compassion: Solitude, Solidarity, and Social Transformation," was appropriate for a number of reasons. Many of the papers presented one or other aspects of this three-fold theme. One of the papers from the conference, Walt Chura's presentation, "The Seeds of Thomas Merton: On Staying Put and Changing Your Life," was actually sent to the Editor of *The Merton Seasonal* prior to the conference, so we are pleased to publish it with the Presidential Address from the Spring Hill Conference.

The next biennial meeting is scheduled for June 1999 at the University of St. Jerome's College in Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, with Michael W. Higgins, Dean and Vice President, as Site Coordinator. We look forward to seeing you there for a cool conference in Canada.



PATRICK F. O'CONNELL

Those of you who have looked at the program carefully enough to notice the title of this talk may well have decided that I'm being a bit premature. Wouldn't "Merton on the Eve of the Third Millennium" be more appropriate for the presidential address at the 1999 General Meeting?

In response, I have three excuses to offer. The first is: "Hey, I thought it up, I'm going to use it." Two years from now, in fact two days from now, there will be a new ITMS president, so I have to take advantage of the opportunity, even if it still is only 1997. Tom Del Prete will have to come up with his own title for 1999, though if he wants to use "Merton on the *Real* Eve of the Third Millennium" I'll have no objection.

My second excuse is: “Blame a Monk.” The monk in question is not Father Louis, nor is it Brother Patrick, or Brother Paul, or Father Basil, or any living monk; it is Dionysius Exiguus, who died back in the sixth century. As some of you probably know, Dionysius was the learned monastic who was given the task of changing the dating system, which had been keyed to the founding of Rome, to start with the birth of Christ. “Exiguus” means “short”, which is ironically appropriate since when he calculated the total number of years since the Nativity he missed a few; this is why, for instance, we have King Herod dying in 4 BC yet still around trying to kill the baby Jesus five or six years later. So in strict chronological fact the two thousandth anniversary of the birth of Christ has undoubtedly come and gone, so that the new millennium has really started already—my title could just as well be considered too late as too early.

I suspect some of you out there may not find my first two excuses very persuasive, so I’ll try one more, which is that many writers, some scholarly, some popular, some eccentric (to put it charitably), have already begun looking ahead to what’s in store for us in the next century, the new millennium, so I’m just following a trend. One of the more interesting and influential of these explorers of the future is the distinguished Harvard political scientist Samuel P. Huntington, who has recently written an important book entitled *The Clash of Civilization and the Remaking of World Order*<sup>1</sup>, in which he predicts the social, cultural, and political arrangements in the twenty-first century. The good news of his analysis is that he foresees a renewed emphasis on and commitment to religion in the years ahead; the bad news is that he thinks this resurgence of religion will be a divisive rather than a unifying force. In this case, we can at least begin to judge the book by its cover, which features three identical photos of a globe against a darkening sky, on which are superimposed a cross, the star and crescent of Islam, and the Taoist yin/yang circle. In Huntington’s view, these symbolize the major groupings of civilizations that, as his title suggests, are fated to clash in the coming century.

On one level, Huntington’s book is a valuable warning against an arrogant and short-sighted presumption of the inevitable triumph of “western values,” which are too easily reduced to the vision of a globe girdled in the air by a belt of Ted Turner’s satellites, and on the ground by a network of Walmarts and McDonalds. Huntington is aware that for millions of people this “free market” is the equivalent of cultural extinction and will be fiercely resisted. To attempt to build a “new world order” on a homogenized, universalized consumer society is to invite rebellion and resultant chaos. But his alternative, to accept separate cultural spheres of influence, based principally on religious allegiance, seems to invite an atmosphere of mutual suspicion and heightened intolerance. It suggests that for the foreseeable future a vision of global unity, of the human family, must be subordinated to a recognition of the plurality of separate and to a considerable extent mutually exclusive civilizations.

Reading Huntington’s diagnosis and his proposed solution, I found myself asking the question of Ebenezer Scrooge to the Ghost of Christmas Future: “Are these the shadows of the things that Will be, or are they the shadows of things that May be, only?”<sup>2</sup> Is a world of divisions, of cultural and religious exclusiveness and antagonism, inevitable, or is there hope for a different scenario, a world that will combine respect for diversity with a recognition and fostering of underlying unity.

To a world marked by potential and actual polarization, the figure of Thomas Merton stands as a sign of contradiction and a sign of reconciliation. If Huntington is right and religious affiliations become a major determinant of the fault lines between civilizations, Merton’s personal interest in and

involvement with other religious traditions can be recognized not just as a private, or a spiritual, or a monastic concern but as having significant social and political implications, offering a model of cross-cultural interaction very different from the alienation, fragmentation, and friction that Huntington foresees. Merton represents an alternative future, and his example calls us to work to make that future a reality. It may well be that for the rest of the world in the new millennium to flourish, two of the most passionate and intense commitments of Merton's later life, to peacemaking and nonviolence and to interreligious dialogue, must be integrated and made a priority by persons and communities of faith throughout the world. For Merton, any authentic "remaking of world order" requires not merely minimizing "the clash of civilizations" but maximizing experience and commitment to cultural interdependence.

The vision of global unity Merton articulates is a compelling one, but the challenges of actualizing it in a world of ever more fragmented ethnic and cultural enclaves is daunting. What resources do Merton's life and words provide to meet these challenges? They can be helpfully grouped, I believe, under the headings of our conference theme: solitude, solidarity, social transformation.

Solitude is an essential foundation for the encounter of differing religious traditions in at least three important ways. First of all, solitude entails detachment, relativizing claims of race, class, nation. Solitude exposes the inadequacies of "the superficial, false social self, the image made up of the prejudices, the whimsy, the posturing, the pharisaic self-concern and the pseudo dedication which are the heritage of the individual in a limited and imperfect group."<sup>3</sup>

The cleansing fires of solitude must purify even religious identity, in so far as that is perceived and experienced primarily as a sociological category, a source of group cohesion. At the same time, solitude makes possible a more profound realization of the inner meaning of one's own spiritual tradition. Solitude for the Christian is an existential encounter with the One whom Merton calls "this Solitary God"; it shares the divine solitude by participating in the central mysteries of redemption, "through the Passion and Resurrection of Christ—through the solitude of Gethsemani and of Calvary, and the mystery of Easter, and the solitude of the Ascension: all of which precede the great communion of Pentecost."<sup>4</sup> This deepening of one's own religious convictions, the second component of solitude, is not a hindrance to genuine relationships with those of other faiths but the necessary basis for any meaningful interchange.

Merton is drawn to explore other religious traditions not in spite of but because of his faith in Christ and his Gospel, which reveals a God of infinite love. Solitude offers an experiential awareness of universality, for there one encounters as one's own center the Center of all reality. The depth of solitude is thus complemented by its breadth, enabling one to recognize affinities with other traditions: "The more I am able to affirm others, to say 'yes' to them in myself, by discovering them in myself and myself in them, the more real I am. I am fully real if my own heart says *yes to everyone*.... If I affirm myself as a Catholic merely by denying all that is Muslim, Jewish, Protestant, Hindu, Buddhist, etc., in the end I will find that there is not much left for me to affirm as Catholic: and certainly no breath of Spirit with which to affirm it."<sup>5</sup>

In statements such as this we recognize that solitude has passed over into solidarity. Here too we can focus on three key elements. The first of these is respect, "a respect for persons based on respect for *being* instead of doing."<sup>6</sup> Solidarity is not merely a goal to be sought but a fact to be recognized,

rooted in the shared identity of every person as, in Christian terms, created in the image and likeness of God. The fundamental respect for others that is the basis for solidarity is built on an affirmation of the dignity intrinsic to any human being, whatever his or her beliefs. It rejects contemporary Western society's obsessive focus on achievements and productivity as criteria for acceptability, according to which "men are valued not for what they are but for what they *do* or what they *have*."<sup>7</sup>

Thus, solidarity develops through an experiential realization of what is already true. Such growth is both the initiative for and the consequence of dialogue, the second element of solidarity. Interreligious and intercultural exchange is, of course, the heart of Merton's contemplative alternative to the clash of civilizations, or to a soulless global "culture" dedicated to efficiency, pragmatism, and profits. While he had no grandiose expectations of "visible results of earth-shaking importance," Merton stated that he was nevertheless "convinced that communication in depth...is now not only possible and desirable, but most important for the destinies of the Twentieth-Century Man."<sup>8</sup> While acknowledging the very real and substantial differences among religions on the level of concepts and doctrines, Merton maintained that the "great similarities and analogies in the realm of religious experience...a very real quality of existential likeness,"<sup>9</sup> could provide mutual support and mutual insight across confessional boundaries, and thereby shape a global awareness oriented to wisdom rather than to technique and control.

Dialogue not only creates insights; it creates relationships. Authentic dialogue, according to Merton, offers the possibility of transcending communication to reach the deeper dimension of communion, an experience of "original unity" that "is beyond words...beyond speech...beyond concept."<sup>10</sup> This existential identification with another, even someone of a different culture or faith, is the most profound level of solidarity. It can be observed in Merton's correspondence with his Muslim friend Abdul Aziz,<sup>11</sup> or in his account of his visit with the aged Zen master D. T. Suzuki.<sup>12</sup> It is perhaps articulated most memorably in his statement on behalf of Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Buddhist monk exiled from his war-torn country: "I have said Nhat Hanh is my brother, and it is true.... I have far more in common with Nhat Hanh than I have with many Americans, and I do not hesitate to say it. It is vitally important that such bonds be admitted. They are the bonds of a new solidarity and a new brotherhood which is beginning to be evident on all the five continents and which cuts across all political, religious and cultural lines to unite young men and women in every country in something that is more concrete than an ideal and more alive than a program."<sup>13</sup>

Such solidarity as this is the true seed of social transformation, based not on a political program, though politics are certainly not to be excluded as a means, but on a spiritual insight: transformation of society through transformation of consciousness. But the process of growth and the bearing of fruit cannot be calculated according to a human timetable. There is no guarantee that even widespread interreligious and transcultural contact will secure global justice and peace. It is quite possible that Huntington's prognosis of cross-cultural tensions and clashes may prove to be accurate, and that the century to come may be as marred by conflict as the century now drawing to a close. But even, or especially, given such a future, fidelity to a different vision and a different practice is essential. Such faith-based commitment to social transformation of a multi-cultural world entails a three-fold witness.

First is the witness of resistance, a refusal to accept the divisions and antagonisms dictated by

shapers of policy and makers of public opinion. In Merton's view, such a stance is not only social and political but fundamentally religious, "a sign of contradiction" to the secular world's tendency "to recreate a god in its own image, a god who justifies its own slogans"; it is allegiance to the God of all humanity, whose "mysterious transcendency...places Him infinitely beyond the reach of catchwords, advertisements and politics."<sup>14</sup> Merton points to Gandhi as the great twentieth-century exemplar of this witness to resistance, by his "unmasking of political falsehood, awakening all men to...the need for renewal and unity on a world scale."<sup>15</sup>

For Merton, as for Gandhi, the need to say "no" to artificial divisions and the hatreds they spawn is matched by the need to say "yes" to all that creates and strengthens bonds of acceptance and understanding. The witness of resistance is complemented by the witness of reconciliation, which is grounded in the willingness to forgive and to seek forgiveness. The witness of reconciliation refuses to allow the future to be determined by the past, held hostage by the desire for, or the fear of, retribution. Even at the height of the Vietnam War, Merton could express in his Preface to the Vietnamese translation of *No Man Is an Island* his hope that the cycle of violence could be broken: "There must be a new force, the power of love, the power of understanding and human compassion, the strength of selflessness and cooperation, and the creative dynamism of *the will to live and to build, and the will to forgive. The will for reconciliation.*"<sup>16</sup>

Yet this hope for social transformation does not depend on the gratification of short-term success. It is a hope with an eschatological character to it, a hope that believes with Martin Luther King that "the arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice." The secret center of any authentically spiritual effort to transform the world is the mysterious witness of restoration, a conviction that present divisions are less real, less true, less permanent than the "original unity"<sup>17</sup> which is God's will for the human family, and a commitment to model that unity and thereby transmit it to the next generation in confidence of its ultimate full realization. This is the witness, at once specifically Hindu and universally applicable, that Merton found in Gandhi: "Simply to follow conscience without regard for the consequences to himself, in the belief that this was demanded...by God and that the results would be the work of God. Perhaps indeed for a long time these results would remain hidden as God's secret. But in the end the truth would manifest itself."<sup>18</sup> The same trust and the same testimony are at the heart of the Christian belief in the reign of God, at once future and present, which "demands to be typified and prepared by such forms of heroic social witness that make Christian mercy plain and evident in the world." By heeding the proclamation of Jesus that the reign of God is indeed at hand (Mark 1:15), the true witness can experience and make available to others, even in the midst of clashing civilizations, "the eschatological climate of the new creation."<sup>19</sup>

Having reflected on the key components of interreligious understanding, we are now able to recognize, I believe, the essential quality that unites them. That quality is compassion, which is not an additional element or stage but the source and the dynamism and the goal of the entire process, the secret spring from which solitude and solidarity and social transformation emerge, the hidden current that flows through them all, the mysterious end to which they are directed. For Merton, solitude is inseparable from compassion; he writes to the Japanese, "He who is truly alone finds in himself the heart of compassion with which to love not only this man or that, but all men."<sup>20</sup> Solidarity is inseparable from compassion; he writes to the Vietnamese, "Compassion teaches me that when my brother dies, I too die. Compassion teaches me that my brother and I are one."<sup>21</sup> Social transformation is

inseparable from compassion; he writes to the Koreans, "The Christian, in deep compassion, must seek to help his fellow man to escape from the terrible effects of greed and hatred. He must therefore be concerned with social justice and with peace on earth."<sup>22</sup>

Compassion is the common stream from which all religious traditions drink in their "deep, unutterable thirst for the rivers of Paradise."<sup>23</sup> It is the quality by which we realize that the God of Islam, who "is invoked as the 'Compassionate and the Merciful,'"<sup>24</sup> is the same God as the Lord of Israel, whose "compassion...is for every living thing" (Sirach 18:13), and who is also the "compassionate and the merciful" God of Jesus Christ (James 5:11). It was compassion, a recognition of the suffering common to all in sickness, old age, and death, that drove Siddhartha Gautama from the security and pleasures of his palace to search for liberation, and it was compassion that compelled the enlightened Buddha to share his experience of the "Middle Way" to salvation. And of course it is compassion that brings Jesus of Nazareth to the crowds on the banks of the Jordan, and then leads him into the desert, the same desert that Merton called "the wilderness of compassion...the desert that shall truly flourish like the lily.... It is in the desert of compassion that the thirsty land turns into springs of water, that the poor possess all things."<sup>25</sup> It is compassion that inspires Jesus to preach and to teach and to heal those who come to him: "He had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd" (Mark 6:34). Finally it was compassion that brought Jesus to the cross, to take upon himself the suffering and sin and oppression of all humanity, to share our death and invite us, by dying to ourselves, to share his victory over suffering and death as well.

Thomas Merton recognized compassion as the meaning of his own solitary vocation: "I disappear from the world as an object of interest in order to be everywhere in it by hiddenness and compassion."<sup>26</sup> It was the motivation for a renewed concern for the world and its problems: "I have learned, I believe, to look back into that world with greater compassion, seeing those in it not as alien to myself, not as peculiar and deluded strangers, but as identified with myself."<sup>27</sup> And compassion was the goal of his final journey, the last stage of his life's quest. In the opening entry of his *Asian Journal*, he writes, "May I not come back without having...found...the great compassion, mahakaruna,"<sup>28</sup> a prayer that was answered at the culmination of his pilgrimage, before the statues at Polonnaruwa: "The rock, all matter, all life, is charged with dharmakaya.... Everything is emptiness and everything is compassion."<sup>29</sup> While this epiphany reveals, in Buddhist terms, "the unity of sunyata and karuna,"<sup>30</sup> it is a perfect expression as well of the central Christian belief that *kenosis*, the self-emptying God in Christ, is the ultimate expression of divine compassion and the perfect model for human compassion. It is Merton's witness to the truth that civilizations do not inevitably clash, a foretaste of that ultimate "remaking of world order" on the basis, to quote his final words in Bangkok, of "that full and transcendent liberty which is beyond mere cultural differences and mere externals."<sup>31</sup>

We too are invited this weekend to drink from the springs of compassion. As we do so, I would encourage each of us to reflect on ways in which we as a society, beginning our second decade and moving toward the millennium, might realize our stated goal "to promote recognition of Thomas Merton as...a catalyst for interreligious dialogue" and might allow him to serve as that catalyst for ourselves. Just in case, however, you haven't been convinced even by my third excuse, and still insist that I'm being premature, I suppose you can have until 1999 to think about it.

## Notes

1. New York: Simon, 1996.
2. Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol* (1843), in *The Christmas Books*, 2 vols. (Baltimore: Penguin, 1971) 1:24.
3. Thomas Merton, *Disputed Questions* (New York: Farrar, 1960) 206.
4. *Disputed Questions* 204–5.
5. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City: Image, 1968) 144.
6. *Conjectures* 310.
7. *Conjectures* 308.
8. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal* (New York: New Directions, 1973) 313.
9. *Asian Journal* 312.
10. *Asian Journal* 308.
11. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love* (New York: Farrar, 1988) 43–67.
12. Thomas Merton, *Vow of Conversation* (New York: Farrar, 1988) 54–57.
13. Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence* (Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 1968) 108.
14. *Disputed Questions* 204.
15. Thomas Merton, *Gandhi on Non-Violence* (New York: New Directions, 1965) 10.
16. Thomas Merton, *Honorable Reader* (New York: Crossroad, 1989) 125.
17. *Asian Journal* 308.
18. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, 1964) 225.
19. Thomas Merton, *Love and Living* (New York: Farrar, 1979) 219.
20. *Honorable Reader* 118.
21. *Honorable Reader* 123.
22. *Honorable Reader* 99–100.
23. Thomas Merton, “The Inner Experience (II),” *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 18.2 (1980): 130.
24. *Hidden Ground* 48.
25. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, 1953) 334.
26. *Honorable Reader* 65.
27. *Honorable Reader* 63.
28. *Asian Journal* 4.
29. *Asian Journal* 235.
30. *Asian Journal* 143.
31. *Asian Journal* 343.