

Thomas Merton, Leslie Dewart, George Grant and the 1963 Federal Election in Canada

By **Ron Dart**

The recent publication of Thomas Merton's *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*¹ and *Cold War Letters*² have made it most clear and obvious that Merton's interest in the larger social, economic, military and political questions of war and peace, justice and injustice reached an intense pitch during 1961-1962. The interest in such issues was there before 1961-1962 and continued afterwards, but there is no doubt there was a white-heat intensity in these years. *Passion For Peace: The Social Essays*³ tracked and traced Merton's passion for peace from 1961 through 1968, but the focus in this collection of essays by Merton tended to be on the years 1961-1962. Leslie Dewart was more than aware of Merton's growing interest in larger justice/peace issues in the early 1960s, hence he initiated a correspondence, as a Canadian, with Merton. *Cold War Letters* has only one letter in it from Merton to Dewart (CWL 178-81), but there was much more to the correspondence between Merton and Dewart than can be found in *Cold War Letters*.⁴

Leslie Dewart was probably the first Canadian to enter into a lengthy correspondence with Thomas Merton. It is quite accurate, I think, to see Dewart as the initial and main conduit, in the early 1960s, of Merton's thought and life within the Canadian context. There are other important Canadians, such as Michael Higgins, Donald Grayston and Ross Labrie, who have pondered further and deeper Merton's thought and life, but Dewart was there at the beginning, and he, more than any other Canadian, engaged Merton on a variety of issues in the 1960s before Merton's death in 1968. Dewart was teaching at St. Michael's College in Toronto at the time he began his correspondence with Thomas Merton. Vatican II was in its most intense phase, and many Roman Catholics were pondering just what a new openness and interpretation of the tradition, when completed, might look like for the Church and the world. There is no doubt that the Roman Catholic peace tradition embodied by those like Dorothy Day and *The Catholic Worker* had an impact on Dewart and Merton, and some of the political ponderings of Vatican II and the final conclusions of the Council. It is this more radical, protest and anarchist tradition that had an impact on Dewart and Merton at the time, although Dewart tended to reflect on the organizational and party side of politics more than Merton.

The correspondence between Dewart and Merton began in 1962 and ended in 1968. It was Dewart who initiated the correspondence, but Merton was more than keen to enter the fray with all the creativity and support he could muster. There is no doubt that both men had a concern with the way many Roman Catholics had been co-opted by a hawkish political position in the Cold War years, and both men attempted to articulate a more irenic and dovish response to the USA-USSR horn-butting. Leslie Dewart was also working on a book on Cuba, and what the Church could learn from Castro and the Cuban experiment on a larger and more international scale. It seemed, for a time,



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that Merton might contribute to the book. *Christianity and Revolution: The Lesson of Cuba*⁵ clearly spelled out where Dewart stood on the Cuban revolution and how the Church should heed some of the insights of Castro. Cuba, being so close to the USA, became a test case for many in the Church and world on how the Church could and might respond to a less capitalist approach to interpreting the faith journey in a political way. Needless to say, such a position did not warm Dewart (and by implication, Merton) to many of the liberal centrist and republican right in Canada or the USA. Merton, of course, did not have Dewart's in-depth historical understanding of the Cuban context, but, as ever, he was eager to learn. Central and Latin America were about to become the focus for many in the 1960s, hence Merton's interest in the many writers, poets and political activists like Ernesto Cardenal in the Latin south. Dewart was specifically interested in Cuba, but in many ways Cuba was a poetic metaphor for Merton and Dewart for the relationship of the North to the South and the South to *El Norte*.

Christianity and Revolution: The Lesson of Cuba was divided into four parts: 1) The Origin and Causes of Cuba's Communism; 2) The Revolution and the Church; 3) The Christian Crises and the Challenge of History; 4) The Political and Religious Context of the World Crises. *Christianity and Revolution* moves in a conscious and deliberate way from the crises of State and Church in Cuba to the much larger questions of the meaning and direction of history for both the world and the Church. The book is, in fact, a fine work of both politics in history and the unfolding of political history. The role of theology is held high, and the large questions, rightly so, remain on front stage. Merton could not help but be drawn into the thesis that Dewart was proposing and much of their early correspondence hinges on both the heady ideas Dewart was articulating and Merton's response to the ideas and book project. Most of Dewart's thinking on Cuba both as a literal fact and as a metaphor for larger philosophic, political and theological thinking was being done as Merton was beginning to focus his contemplative vocation in the direction of a more activist and social-critic role.

Merton was in the thick of his political passion when he entered into correspondence with Dewart. He had, indeed, written much on the topic. Merton's letter to Dewart in *Cold War Letters* makes clear what he had been thinking about and writing. In the letter to Dewart, written in September, 1962, Merton writes: "We are running off some more [mimeographed] copies of 'Peace in the PCE' and I will send a couple. I don't think I ever sent you the *Cold War Letters*. There will be a new enlarged edition of that, too, and I will try to remember to send them to you" (*CWL* 180). Merton's contrast between the hopes of Vatican II and the Pentagon could not be more clear: "That Council! Such hopes and such fears! But the Holy Spirit really is in command there, though He may not be at the Pentagon" (*CWL* 181). The years 1961-1962 were intense and focused years for both Merton and Dewart, and the correspondence between them walks the curious reader into many of the hot-button issues of the era. Dewart's book on Cuba was in its formative stages and Merton was pondering how to think about larger issues of war and peace. There is more to the correspondence than Merton, Dewart and Cuba, though.

The bulk of the correspondence between Merton and Dewart takes place from 1962 through 1964, and after 1964 the letters tend to thin out. The letters written in 1962-1963 take place at a time when a Federal election was about to be held and was held in Canada. Canada took a very different attitude to Castro and Cuba than the USA. The antagonism was not as strong in the True North as it was in the USA. The correspondence between Merton and Dewart, in places, ponders the political implications of the election of 1963. President Kennedy was in power in the USA at the time, and he favored Lester Pearson (the Liberal candidate). In fact, Kennedy walked the extra mile in the 1963 election to ensure Pearson defeated John Diefenbaker (the conservative Prime Minister at the time). Kennedy had a particular distaste and dislike for Diefenbaker for the simple reason that Diefenbaker would not follow Kennedy's lead on a variety of foreign policy issues. In fact, Diefenbaker dared to

question and doubt many of Kennedy's interpretations of Castro, China and the Cold War. It was this simmering and very real animosity between Kennedy (the liberal and Democrat) and Diefenbaker (the Conservative and Canadian nationalist) that made for an interesting 1963 election. Kennedy insisted that Canadians arm their Bomarc missiles with warheads. Pearson, following Kennedy, agreed to do so. Diefenbaker stood for a defiant and firm "No" on the warheads.

The larger context in which the Merton-Dewart correspondence of 1962-1963 took place, then, was the Canadian Federal election of April 1963. The campaign months, before the election took place, in late 1962 and the winter-early spring of 1963, were fraught with war and peace issues. Should Canada back the USA on Cuba, China and Cold War issues or oppose Kennedy? The point to be noted is this: Kennedy and Pearson were much more on the hawkish side than was Diefenbaker within the Canadian context. Diefenbaker, as the leader of the Progressive Conservative party in Canada (and his Foreign Minister Howard Green), had a greater passion for peace in the election than Pearson. In fact, the position of Diefenbaker-Green within Canada was much closer to the thinking of Dewart and Merton than the shared stance of Kennedy-Pearson. Many of the more radical and anarchist Roman Catholics at the time were as suspicious of the Democrat, Kennedy as they were of the American Republican way of Goldwater. The Tory nationalist way in Canada offered a read of the peace tradition that had much affinity, in 1962-1963, with Dewart-Merton.

There is no doubt that both Merton and Dewart were on the dovish side in the Cold War, and, to some degree, leaned towards the political left. Some on the liberal left desired to move towards the democratic socialist left. This is where Castro and Cuba moved beyond the tamer social democratic liberal left in the politics of the time. The "Red Tory" tradition in Canada has some affinities with the socialist left, and Diefenbaker-Green stood within such a line and lineage. There is no doubt in the early correspondence between Dewart and Merton that Dewart had a rather naïve, optimistic and utopian notion of the new Catholic era in the emerging Vatican II years, but Merton was not as convinced. Dewart also mentions in a letter to Merton (March 29, 1963) that Canada is going through a period of crisis in regards to the Canadian response to the USA. The dilemma for many Roman Catholics in the early 1960s in the USA was whether to side with the Republicans or Democrats. Kennedy, as a Roman Catholic, seemed to be a better bet than the more hawkish Republican tradition that Goldwater embodied. There was, of course, the more radical and anarchist Roman Catholic tradition of Dorothy Day, the Berrigan brothers and *The Catholic Worker*. Merton and Dewart had much affinity with this more anarchist approach to politics, war and peace, justice and injustice, although Dewart's work on Castro and Cuba places him much more in a solid political party platform and path. It is in this sense that Dewart has a deeper understanding of the political process of statist and structural change than Merton. Merton never thought through the means of political change via political parties in the same depth Dewart did, although both had a passion for the ideals of peace and justice.

There is no doubt, though, that both Dewart and Merton were concerned with the way most bent the knee to the White House and the Pentagon in the Cold War. The *Cold War Letters, Peace in the Post-Christian Era, Passion for Peace, Christianity and Revolution: The Lesson of Cuba* and the correspondence between Dewart and Merton make their positions abundantly clear. Dewart's letter to Merton of March 29, 1963 makes it most obvious where he stands and why. Dewart is searching and sending out probes for a new way to go forward. The work of Gunnar Myrdal is held high as a model, and Myrdal's magazine, *Coexistence*, is offered as a sign with much hope. Dewart's letter to Merton of April 23, 1963 ponders the sources of opposition to Merton from within the Church, and also asks Merton to contribute to his book on Cuba. Merton was in a difficult position at the time, and he and Dewart reflected on a variety of ways Merton might contribute without his contribution being too ob-

vious. Merton's attitude towards assisting Dewart is similar to his approach to his *Cold War Letters*. Merton knows he will be silenced if he is too obvious in his peace position, he is silenced and yet he longs to support those, at least in word, who are more public in their peace position.

It is Merton's letter to Dewart of April 27, 1963 (*WF* 283-86) that is most interesting and brings us to the core of part II of this essay. The Federal election of 1963 was now over. Pearson had defeated Diefenbaker, and the Canadian-American, Pearson-Kennedy alliance was firm and solid. Diefenbaker and Green, the doves and nationalists, were sent packing. The more hawkish Kennedy and Pearson were in power. Dewart and Merton were concerned with peacemaking, and both wrote much about ways to pave the path as makers of peace. It is most interesting to note, therefore, in Merton's letter to Dewart, that he favors Pearson in opposition to Diefenbaker: "I am certainly happy that Pearson got in." He says in the same letter, "I assumed Diefenbaker is the one we don't want. Good for Canada" (*WF* 284). Such comments do raise some interesting questions. Since Merton was leaning in a dovish direction, why would he nod the head to a more hawkish Prime Minister rather than a dovish one? There is no doubt that there was plenty of information about in 1962-1963 about the differences between Pearson and Diefenbaker. Was this a case of Merton just knowing little about Canada, or not knowing how to apply his interest in peacemaking to the Canadian context? There is probably much truth in such explanations. Merton, in his letter to Dewart of May 10, 1963 (*WF* 286-88), continued to reflect upon the problems he was having with *Peace in the Post-Christian Era* and on Dewart's emerging book on Castro and Cuba. The point to be noted here is this: there is not really any serious or substantive discussion by either Dewart or Merton on how, in Canada, peacemaking might be done. Both are quite willing and eager to discuss the theory and history of peacemaking, and both were keen on discussing Cuba, the USA and larger international issues, but when the translation from theory to hard political praxis takes place within the Canadian context, neither seems to understand what to do. Pearson (who was willing to bring warheads into Canada) is held high, and Diefenbaker is dismissed.

George Grant (1918-1988) has been called Canada's greatest political philosopher. Grant reviewed Dewart's *Christianity and Revolution: The Lesson of Cuba*.⁶ Grant, like Merton, had a certain affinity with many of Dewart's concerns, and he also shared with Merton a certain suspicion of Dewart's naïve and optimistic Hegelian read of history. Such an ideological and optimistic notion of the liberal unfolding of history convinced neither Grant nor Merton. George Grant was in the thick of the 1963 federal election. He saw through, with incisive and brilliant clarity, the images, poses and posturing of Kennedy and Pearson. Grant knew, with almost prophetic clarity, that if Pearson was elected, Canada would genuflect to the empire to the south. Pearson was Kennedy's man, and he would diplomatically do as he was told if and when elected. The correspondence between Grant and Derek Bedson⁷ make his position clear. Grant had pleaded with Tommy Douglas (the leader of the New Democratic Party) not to vote with Pearson to bring down the Diefenbaker government. Grant knew that if the NDP-Liberals formed an alliance to defeat the Progressive Conservatives, American militarism would come to dominate in Canada.

Grant was rooted and grounded in the Canadian political experience in a way Leslie Dewart and Thomas Merton were not. Grant understood what it meant to give the nod to Pearson rather than Diefenbaker. In fact, Grant's classic book, *Lament for a Nation: The Defeat of Canadian Nationalism*,⁸ awoke a generation of Canadian political theorists and activists. All of them were drawn to Grant's indigenous Canadian Red Tory nationalism that Diefenbaker and Green embodied. Neither Dewart nor Merton seemed to know about such a tradition. This seems rather odd given the fact Dewart was living at the heart and center of much of these issues at the time. It also seems strange that Merton

would have turned to Pearson rather than Diefenbaker given Pearson's stance on warheads and Diefenbaker's opposition to such warheads in the 1963 Federal election.

History is often a tale told of missed meetings. Merton met Dewart through similar interests, and Merton learned a few things about Canada through his correspondence with Dewart. If Merton had corresponded with George Grant, he might have had a better read on the 1963 election in Canada, and in this deeper and better read, his passion for peace might have found a firmer political path to walk. It is probably significant to note, by way of conclusion, that Douglas Roche, the leading Canadian ambassador on disarmament, and a Roman Catholic conservative MP from 1972-1984, was profoundly influenced in his turn to federal politics by the more dovish political stance of Thomas Merton, Diefenbaker and Green.⁹ It is in the living example of Douglas Roche that we can see the peacemaking tradition in Canada of Merton, Diefenbaker, Green and Grant being worked out in ongoing detail. This is the older Red Toryism of Canada that Merton and Dewart could have learned much from in their peacemaking endeavors.

1. Thomas Merton, *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*, ed. Patricia A. Burton (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004).
2. Thomas Merton, *Cold War Letters*, ed. William H. Shannon and Christine M. Bochen (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006); subsequent references will be cited as "CWL" parenthetically in the text.
3. Thomas Merton, *Passion for Peace: The Social Essays*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Crossroad, 1995).
4. See Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994) 282-99; subsequent references will be cited as "WF" parenthetically in the text. Dewart's letters to Merton are housed at the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY.
5. Leslie Dewart, *Christianity and Revolution: The Lesson of Cuba* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1963).
6. *Canadian Forum* (March 1964) 282-83.
7. George Grant, *Selected Letters*, ed. William Christian (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996) 210-16, 219-20.
8. George Grant, *Lament for a Nation: The Defeat of Canadian Nationalism* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1965).
9. Roche was the keynote speaker at the conference "Finding Hope in a Time of Despair" sponsored by the Thomas Merton Society of Canada at Seneca College in Toronto on April 27, 2007.