Raids on the Impossible:
The Poetics of Nonviolence in Merton, Caputo and Hauerwas

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Introduction

Christianity, when taken most seriously, is impossible. It advocates love for the unlovable, forgiveness for the unforgivable, healing for the broken and brokenhearted, and nonviolence in the face of adversity within the context of a very violent and unstable world. It is impossible by the standards of so-called "common sense" and the logic of the world. It is impossible according to the strictures of popular wisdom that rely on systems of retribution masked as authentic justice; economic inequality couched in the often unacknowledged cycles of racism and discrimination; and selfishness that is encouraged under the guise of capitalistic virtues. To live in the footprints of Jesus Christ, to embrace the *vita evangelica*, which is the primary vocation of all Christians, is indeed impossible. That is, unless it isn't – unless the metrics we use to evaluate the possibility of our religious convictions are the wrong ones and the correct measurements can only be made in accordance with the Gospel.

Rooted in the proclamation of the Kingdom of God, Thomas Merton wrote that nonviolence "is the one political philosophy today which appeals directly to the Gospel."[1] This conviction, the ongoing commitment to the inseparability of nonviolence from the Christian life, is found throughout Merton's writings. Such is the case in his collection of essays, *Raids on the Unspeakable*,[2] particularly in the essays "The Time of the End Is the Time of No Room," "Letter to an Innocent Bystander," and "A Devout Meditation in Memory of Adolf Eichmann." The ways in which Merton poetically crafts his reflections on the place of nonviolence in Christian life in relationship to the violence of the world anticipates the work of two of the most famous contemporary theologians decades later: John D. Caputo and Stanley Hauerwas.

Caputo's postmodern engagement of the Gospel with Deconstructionist continental philosophy breaks open a renewed sense of the event that is the *kerygmatic* Kingdom of God. The Gospel proclamation of the Kingdom defies the logical discourse of violence and binary distinction, expressing the event of God's reign in a theopoetics, the realization of the possibility of the impossible in the forms of love and forgiveness. Hauerwas's presentation of a Christian ethics of character, which is foundationally narrative, also draws on the *kergyma* of

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the Kingdom to identify the centrality of nonviolence in the Christian vocation. Hauerwas's work, combined with the grammar of Kingdom poetics in Caputo's writing, offers us a path toward a theological praxis of nonviolence. These two contemporary theologians allow us to read Merton with a renewed sense of his relevance for today. Perennially prophetic, Merton's own proclamation of the Kingdom as constitutive of Gospel living and expressed in the creative poetics of his *Raids on the Unspeakable* and other later texts, provides us with yet another comprehensive elucidation of what it means to bear the name "Christian" in a world of violence. Indeed, what these three thinkers, read together, offer us are raids on the impossible, a re-centering of nonviolence in the discourse of Christian discipleship.

The structure of this article is fourfold. I will begin with a brief introduction to John D. Caputo's understanding of the Kingdom of God as an "event of the (im)possible" expressed in terms we might call *theopoetics* that inherently deconstructs the binary logic of the world and offers us a glimpse at the Christian alternative to violence. Second, I will draw on the work of Stanley Hauerwas to identify the centrality of nonviolence in the Christian narrative, the story to which all Christians belong. Third, I will show how Merton's later writing, particularly some of his essays in *Raids on the Unspeakable*, presents us with contemporary resources for engaging with and proclaiming forth the poetic nonviolence of Christian discipleship. A short conclusion will draw together these insights.

On the (Im)possibility of the Kingdom of God [3]

In his acclaimed book, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event*, John Caputo is entirely forthcoming about his approach to Christian theology. He writes, "I will make clear that the discourse of the Kingdom rightly understood is governed, not by a 'logic of omnipotence,' which has to do with entities, but by what I will call a *poetics of the impossible*, which has to do with events."[4] Caputo's transparent starting point is the correlation of what the Christian Scriptures present as the proclamation that "nothing is impossible for God" (Luke 1:37) with Derrida's concept of "the *impossible*" – a linkage, as Caputo puts it, between the Gospel and Deconstruction. And, as Caputo makes clear in his popular book *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?* the prophetic spirit of Jesus is made intelligible in the proclamation of the Kingdom of God. He suggests that we are able to experience that event, to recognize what is already always there, through Deconstruction; and that "Deconstruction is good news, because it delivers the shock of the other to the form of the same, the shock of the good (the 'ought') to the forces of being ('what is')."[5]

Caputo explains further what he means by Deconstruction and its relevance to Christian theology when he writes:

> Deconstruction is organized around the idea that things contain a kind of uncontainable truth, that they contain what they cannot contain. Nobody has to come along and "deconstruct" things. Things are auto-deconstructed by the tendencies of their own inner truth. In a deconstruction, the "other" is the one who tells the truth on the "same"; the other is the truth of the same, the truth that has been repressed and suppressed, omitted and marginalized, or sometimes just plain murdered, like Jesus himself, which is why Johannes Baptist Metz speaks of the "dangerous" memory of the suffering of Jesus and why I describe deconstruction as hermeneutics of the kingdom of God. (Caputo, *Deconstruct* 29)

Accessing the event of truth, in as much as one is able to "access" and not only experience an event, calls for a different hermeneutic, one that is tuned to the key of the kingdom and not of the world – a way of seeing through the eyes of Jesus and not simply repeating the *status quo*. For repetition is indeed a function of the Kingdom, a repetition of the impossible made possible in the total gift of forgiveness. For as Keith Putt explains, "the kingdom of God is a new creation and, therefore, demands new minds and new hearts; it actually established a new type of economy, a mad economy of excess and extravagance, an economy that does not covet balanced books or safe returns on existential investments."[6]

What Caputo recognizes, what he takes as deadly serious, is what the Gospel proclaims about the newness of what is happening in the Incarnation of the Word. The good news is more than a repeated trope of some platitude of kindness and the Golden Rule. It is instead precisely what the Angel Gabriel is remembered to have conveyed to Mary – *nothing* is *impossible* for God (Luke 1:37). Even more than Mary, we today find ourselves in a constant state of disbelief. We are, as St. Paul points out to the Corinthians, like the Jews and Gentiles (that is, *everybody*) who actually find the content of the faith foolish and a stumbling block. It doesn't make sense – at least not by the standards with which we ordinarily judge our everyday lives. Hence, we have the ostensible impossibility of Christianity.

Caputo and others readily admit that there is a certain logic to violence in our world. This discursive fact invites further consideration, namely that the logical grammar that sustains myriad forms of violence in our world is antithetical to the *kerygmatic* proclamation of the Kingdom of God. Caputo asserts that the wisdom of Deconstruction heuristically identifies the contradiction inherent in so-called worldly wisdom as it seeks to maintain power amid claims of authentic Christian discipleship. Such a nexus – the "wisdom" of the world and a distorted reading of Christian discipleship – enables the context out of which secular liturgies of nationalism and violence (from Constantine's Rome to George W. Bush's America) can be formed, simultaneously (re)scripting the Christian narrative while rendering this novel form of discipleship unrecognizable to the Gospel proclamation of the Kingdom. So tainted have certain articulations of the Christian tradition become that the language of its expression no longer offers a resource for accessing the "good news," as it were. One way to describe this phenomenon, this worldly "wisdom" of which St. Paul speaks that is at one and the same time wedded to an obsession with maintaining power, is to talk about the logical grammar of the possible. This worldly discourse is concerned with and bent on the sensible, the logical, the economic exchange of just value and reciprocity. It is a language focused on "fairness" as conceived in finite, human terms and therefore creates a space where it is not only permissible but logical to seek and endorse systems of retribution and vengeance, economies of debt and control, and liturgies and politics of violence.

To the contrary, Caputo holds that this method of language, this worldly grammar of logic, is not what rightly expresses the Kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus of Nazareth. St. Paul says as much when he confesses the ostensible foolishness and stumbling block the Christian *kerygma* presents to the world. Caputo rejects the logical grammar of the possible as incapable of expressing the Kingdom of the Gospel. Jesus does not speak in logical terms, in language of the possible, but instead proclaims a poetic and eschatological theology that denotes the in-breaking of God's reign. Nevertheless, Jesus is quick to point out that his Kingdom is "not of the world" (John 18:36),

offering Caputo and us yet another deconstructive clue. The *Kingdom*, as it were, does not conform to the logic of the world, but is structured (or unstructured or *deconstructed*) according to a "divine logic," which is described least badly as a *poetics*.[7] Caputo explains that by "poetics" he means "a constellation of strategies, arguments, tropes, paradigms, and metaphors, a style and a tone, as well as a grammar and a vocabulary, all of which, collectively . . . is aimed at making a point" (Caputo, "Poetics" 470). This point is, as Caputo creatively describes it, a "rule of the unruly, the possibility of the impossible" (Caputo, "Poetics" 471).

The Kingdom is marked by several things that appear illogical and counterintuitive in a world marred by the logic of violence, and because of this, we can understand the Kingdom to be an announcement of God's preference for reversals, for preferring sinners over the righteous, for identifying the stranger as the neighbor, for showing that the insiders are actually out and the like. The language of the Kingdom must be poetic, cannot be logical, because "the horizon of the world is set by the calculable, the sensible, the *possible*, the reasonable, the sound investment." Caputo goes on, "in the world, we are made to pay for everything. The world is nobody's fool" (Caputo, "Poetics" 472). Yet, it is precisely foolishness that Jesus proclaims and St. Paul confirms. The logical language of the world, the grammar that justifies the perpetuation of violence and vengeance, that inaugurates secular liturgies of nationalism, has no room, no patience and no time for such poetic discourse and such absurd visions of reality.

Nonviolence Is the Christian Way: There Can Be No Other

As with the previous section on the contribution of John Caputo, an extensive presentation of all the relevant work of Stanley Hauerwas on this theme far exceeds the limitations and scope of this paper. What I wish to do now is present an (inadequately) brief overview of some of the ways Hauerwas's work helps us to read Merton on the theme of Christian nonviolence in our contemporary setting.

Whereas Caputo's approach is philosophically and methodologically oriented, concerned as he is with language and hermeneutics, Hauerwas's approach is more centered on ethical praxis.[8] His method is one of character or virtue ethics as the operative lens through which a Christian believer is to interpret life circumstances and judge just actions.[9] The emphasis is an important if subtle shift from the traditional Christian approach of asking questions similar to "what *ought* I do?" to asking the question "what sort of person do I *strive* to be?" This latter question presupposes a set of virtues or character that is cultivated by appropriating a narrative that guides, defines and relates to the whole person and his or her particular journey. It is not a matter of compartmentalization, the sequestering of *this* or *that* action or decision, but rather situates morality within the broader context of Christian living. One of Hauerwas's assertions is that among the constitutive dimensions of Christian life stands nonviolence. So antithetical is violence to the Christian narrative, Hauerwas asserts, that a Christian cannot be anything else but a practitioner and advocate for nonviolence.

In his book, *War and the American Difference: Theological Reflections on Violence and National Identity*,[10] Hauerwas succinctly expresses his position on the non-negotiability or the inherently integral dimension of nonviolence in Christian life. He writes: "My claim [is] that Christians are called to live nonviolently, not because we think nonviolence is a strategy to rid the world of war, but rather because as faithful followers of Christ in a world of war we cannot imagine not living nonviolently" (Hauerwas, *War* xii). At the heart of this conviction stands the

tension expressed in the work of Caputo; namely, that the world in which we live does not adhere to the nonviolent priority that Christians must ultimately appropriate. The story at the core of what it means to be a Christian is one, not of passivity (Hauerwas makes it abundantly clear that nonviolence is not passive in the colloquial sense, but instead a way of living in the world nonviolently[11]), but of rejecting the lure of violence and the appropriation of secular liturgies and narratives that reinforce such dispositions. One of Hauerwas's more radical claims, one that falls on the side of worldly illogic, is that:

> Christians do not renounce war because it is often so horrible, but because war, in spite of its horror, or perhaps because it is so horrible, can be so morally compelling. That is why the church does not have an alternative to war. The church *is* the alternative to war. When Christians no longer see the reality of the church as an alternative to the world's reality, we abandon the world to war. (Hauerwas, *War* 34)

Which narratives tell the stories of our lives? Hauerwas makes the point, strongly for sure, that the Gospel narrative is the story that should describe the lives of anyone who bears the name "Christian." What sort of person do you strive to be? If "a disciple of Christ" is the answer, then nonviolence is the only way to live in this world of war. The problem, it would seem, is narrative amnesia – we have forgotten our own story, our own identity. Hauerwas's point is simply to reiterate the truth that so many in our world – particular those in the United States and Europe – have forgotten: we are living a lie. The lie is the outward claim that we are disciples of Christ, when in fact the inward disposition is formed by the narratives of worldly logic of retribution and violence.

Thomas Merton's Raid on the Impossible

In a way that has come to be identified as classically "later Merton," the collection of essays, *Raids on the Unspeakable*, provides a creative and entertaining engagement with serious concerns of both a spiritual and social nature. The titular concept, "the Unspeakable," itself denotes a certain impossibility as that which cannot be named precisely because it is privative. It is the absence, or as Merton puts it in his introduction, "It is the void that contradicts everything that is spoken even before the words are said" (*RU* 4), that creates the condition for the possibility of Christian eschatological hope, for the Unspeakable marks the location (although not a geo-physical one) of the end of worldly hope. Merton summarizes this as "the void we encounter, you and I, underlying the announced programs, the good intentions, the unexampled and universal aspirations for the best of all possible worlds" (*RU* 4). I suggest that another way to consider the meaning of "the Unspeakable" is as the foundation and the summation of the logic of the world. Conversely, an alternative way to title Merton's collection of essays might be "Raids on the *Impossible*."

The concept of the impossible and the role it plays in the Christian theological tradition as elucidated by Caputo above help to orient our reading of Merton's writing on nonviolence in an age especially plagued by the "unspeakable," particularly as it is made manifest in our contemporary bellicose world. Furthermore, the absolute centrality of the commitment to nonviolent living in the Christian narrative as identified and propagated by Hauerwas helps us to see how Merton recognized a similar ethical prioritization in his own Christian outlook.

Concerning the impossibility of Christian nonviolence in the thought of Merton, we can look to his essay, "The Time of the End Is the Time of No Room" (*RU* 65-75), in which his introductory note situates the "logic of the world," as introduced above, over and against the "logic of God." This is expressed in terms of two competing eschatologies: that of the world and that of Divine Revelation. Merton writes:

> Biblical eschatology must not be confused with the vague and anxious eschatology of human foreboding. We live in an age of two superimposed eschatologies: that of secular anxieties and hopes, and that of revealed fulfillment. Sometimes the first is merely mistaken for the second, sometimes it results from complete denial and despair of the second. In point of fact the pathological *fear of a violent end* . . . when sufficiently aroused, actually becomes a thinly disguised *hope for the violent end*. (*RU* 65)

The essay's starting point is the "beginning" of the end, which is the Incarnation of the Word for Whom there is "no room in the inn." The birth narrative of the Gospel of Luke becomes an allegory for the eschatological times in which we live – the times of "no room." The world is in fact "the Inn" in which there is no room to be found for the Word-made-flesh. This is not a matter of space, but instead a conflict of commitments and a confusion of hopes.

Acknowledging the seeming impossibility of God's entrance into Creation as one among us, Merton explains that "all ordinary things are transfigured" (*RU* 66). Yet, this world is "a world of suspicion, hatred and distrust" (*RU* 66) that cannot recognize the Prince of Peace nor hear the tidings of *great joy* proclaimed. Merton continues, "The time of the end is the time of the Crowd: and the eschatological message is spoken in a world where, precisely because of the vast indefinite roar of armies on the move and the restlessness of turbulent mobs, the message can be heard only with difficulty" (*RU* 67). The good news of the *kerygma* finds no room in the time of crowdedness and chaos, in a world that is marked by the lust for power over against the desire or innate longing for peace. It is, in some sense, sin that clouds those most primordial aspirations for community and peace, but there is some hope if we are only open to the possibility. And for all these reasons, Christ can only be found "with others for whom there is no room. His place is with those who do not belong, who are rejected by power because they are regarded as weak, those who are discredited, who are denied the status of persons, tortured, exterminated" (*RU* 72-73).

Christ is found among the marginalized because from that location (of *no location*) there is a theological surplus for eschatological imagination. Those who are part and parcel of the worldly system of power and violence cannot imagine any other way and their fear of death is the very condition for its possibility. But those for whom there is no room are able to imagine the hitherto unimaginable and glimpse the light that has dawned upon a world otherwise unable to recognize it.

Merton's poetic articulation of the centrality of nonviolence and peacemaking as a constitutive dimension of the Christian narrative takes yet another impossible turn in his essay, "A Devout Meditation in Memory of Adolf Eichmann" (*RU* 45-49). This reflection focuses on the so-called distinction made between the "sane" and "insane," starting with the fact that a criminal psychologist determined Adolf Eichmann to be "sane." In this piece, anticipating the core tenets of Hauerwas's

ethics in a key resembling the grammar of Caputo's philosophical explication, Merton warns against the popular tendency for Christians to acquiesce and appropriate some other narrative (nationalism, consumerism, xenophobia and so on) under the guise of Christianity. He writes:

> The worst error is to imagine that a Christian must try to be "sane" like everybody else, that we *belong* in our kind of *society*. That we must be "realistic" about it. We must develop a *sane* Christianity: and there have been plenty of sane Christians in the past. Torture is nothing new, is it? We ought to be able to rationalize a little brainwashing, and genocide, and find a place for nuclear war, or at least for napalm bombs, in our moral theology. Certainly some of us are doing our best along those lines already. There are hopes! Even Christians can shake off their sentimental prejudices about charity, and become sane like Eichmann. They can even cling to a certain set of Christian formulas, and fit them into a Totalist Ideology. Let them talk about justice, charity, love, and the rest. These words have not stopped some sane men from acting very sanely and cleverly in the past. (*RU* 47-48)

What begins with a very contemporary reflection on the trial and execution of a Nazi war criminal, serves as a parallel survey of St. Paul's exhortation in his First Letter to the Corinthians: God's wisdom is not of this world and those who seek it in the ostensible "logic" of one's social, cultural, political or economic context are missing the point. Merton concludes his reflection with this admonition for the contemporary human person: "If he were a little less sane, a little more doubtful, a little more aware of his absurdities and contradictions, perhaps there might be a possibility of his survival" (*RU* 49).

As with the other two essays from *Raids on the Unspeakable* just considered, Merton's "Letter to an Innocent Bystander" (*RU* 53-62) bears a certain apocalyptically poetic feel. It is the most admonishing of the three essays being considered, and the challenge presented in the text is one that should lead the reader to pause in order to consider his or her complicity in the systemic structures of violence and injustice in our world. The main point of the essay is to shed light on the possibility that the seeming innocence that is maintained by those Merton characterizes as "bystanders" might not, in fact, be so innocent. It is the classic consideration of one's "sins of omission." But there is a sense of hopefulness that emerges amid the necessary critique of the abstaining. Merton explains:

> There is a certain innocence in a kind of despair: but only if in despair we find salvation. I mean, despair of this world and what is in it. Despair of men and of their plans, in order to hope for the impossible answer that lies beyond our earthly contradictions, and yet can burst into our world and solve them if only there are some who hope in spite of despair. (*RU* 60-61)

In a clever way, Merton again highlights the hidden contradiction in the pairing of the plans, answers and logic of "this world and what is in it" with the "impossible answer that lies beyond our earthly contradictions." The latter, "impossible" answer is the wisdom of God that enters our experience as Sophia, the Wisdom of God, revealed most completely in Christ.

Conclusion

Despite the trappings of darkness and the specter of apocalyptic context that is found throughout *Raids on the Unspeakable*, Merton's text offers a constructive sense of hope that is – like its real counterpart in the world – difficult to easily recognize. It is a hope that is rooted, not in the logic of the world, but in the seemingly illogical wisdom of God. It is a challenge that calls believers to question the collective "wisdom" of society and the seemingly "easy" prescripts of Christian living. It is a call that Merton offers his age and ours to reconsider the place of violence in our lives – individually and collectively – and how that reality of systemic sin is made manifest by our actions and inactions. The writing of Thomas Merton continues to speak to us in an age of chaos and world crisis. It is my hope that contemporary thinkers like John Caputo and Stanley Hauerwas, among others, might help us to continually read Merton's work anew and aid us in our living Christian lives as prophets of hope and nonviolence in our world.[12]

1. Thomas Merton, "Non-Violence and the Christian Conscience," in *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968) 30.
2. Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966); subsequent references will be cited as "*RU*" parenthetically in the text.
3. Portions of this section come from a previously published essay: see Daniel Horan, "The Grammar of the Kingdom in a World of Violence: The (Im)possible Poetics of John D. Caputo," in *Violence, Transformation, and the Sacred: "They Will Be Called Children of God"*, ed. Margaret R. Pfeil and Tobias L. Winwright (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2012) 71-84.
4. John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006) 102.
5. John D. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct: The Good News of Post-Modernism for the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007) 26-27; subsequent references will be cited as "Caputo, *Deconstruct*" parenthetically in the text.
6. B. Keith Putt, "Violent Imitation or Compassionate Repetition? Girard and Caputo on Exemplary Atonement," in *Religion and Violence in a Secular World: Toward a New Political Theology*, ed. Clayton Crockett (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006) 32.
7. John D. Caputo, "The Poetics of the Impossible and the Kingdom of God," in *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Graham Ward (London: Blackwell, 2001) 470; subsequent references will be cited as "Caputo, 'Poetics'" parenthetically in the text.
8. This is not to suggest that Hauerwas is not committed to linguistic concerns and the role of theological grammar in the Christian life; see for example his recent collection of essays, *Working with Words: On Learning to Speak Christian* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011).
9. Hauerwas lays this method out in a foundational way in his classic book *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).
10. Stanley Hauerwas, *War and the American Difference: Theological Reflection on Violence and National Identity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011); subsequent references will be cited as "Hauerwas, *War*" parenthetically in the text.
11. See Hauerwas, "C.S. Lewis and Violence" (*War* 71-82).
12. An earlier version of this essay was presented at the Ninth General Meeting of the Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland, held April 13-15, 2012 at Oakham School, Rutland, UK.