

The Christian mystic is well aware of the need to attain this inner state of unity, wholeness and holiness with all life. Merton called this spiritual rebirth by the names of the New Man or the New Adam. One of the recurring themes in Merton's writings is this spiritual transformation where the old self must die (*kenosis*) in order for the true self to be born in God (*pleroma*). Now in this *unio mystica* the Divine is seen present in all beings and all beings are present in God. Thus the real goal of Christian mysticism is to help the seeker experience this rebirth in the here and now.

Children of the twenty-first century are desperately crying out for signs of hope and longing for new leaders who can address their social, economic and spiritual needs in humane and compassionate ways. I believe the contemplative message of Merton can help us identify the root cause of our contemporary problems by asking the right questions and move us towards implementing this contemplative vision in a world of action. This deep questioning in search for solutions will require from us a creative response that can directly and effectively address the most urgent problems of our time and at the same time move us from a fragmented existence to a new wholeness. As Merton had clearly stated in "Final Integration," "the finally integrated man is a peacemaker, and that is why there is such a desperate need for our leaders to become such men of insight" (*CWA* 212).

1. See Merton's letters to Arasteh in Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 40-43.
2. Thomas Merton, *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (New York: New Directions, 1965).
3. A. Reza Arasteh, *Rumi the Persian: Rebirth in Creativity and Love* (Lahore: Ashraf, 1965).
4. A. Reza Arasteh, *Final Integration in the Adult Personality* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1965).
5. Thomas Merton, "Final Integration, Toward a 'Monastic Therapy,'" *Monastic Studies* 6 (1968 87-99; Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971) 205-17; subsequent references will be cited as "*CWA*" parenthetically in the text.

Chanting the Square Demonic

By Frederick Smock

Thomas Merton may not appear on the syllabi of many English professors teaching twentieth-century American poetry; however, I always include his "Chant to Be Used in Processions around a Site with Furnaces"¹ in my general education literature courses. On that day, we meet in the Merton Center on my campus, Bellarmine University. I give my students a brief tour, as I sketch out the essential details of his biography. Then we gather around the big table in the library room for a choral reading of "Chant." The brilliant thing about this poem is that it is written in the first person, in the voice of a Nazi death-camp commandant, and in small blocks of prose (as if his story does not merit the lovely lineations of poetry). Thus, as we hand the poem around the table, the students momentarily "become" the commandant. The poem never fails to affect; students are always a bit shaken. Historically, we in the West tend to think of the Nazis as "Others."



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Certainly we could never be like them. We could never descend to their level of depravity. Yet here we are, intoning the commandant's words in our own voices. And, as he concludes: "Do not think yourself better because you burn up friends and enemies with long-range missiles without ever seeing what you have done." This is a prescient description of our recent remote-controlled wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The students feel the sting of that indictment. And, lest we think culture will save us, remember that Germany in the 1930s was, in terms of the arts, perhaps the most "cultured" country in the world. France, which colluded with Germany, was likewise deeply cultured. (American exceptionalism will not save us either.) Robert DeNiro once said of acting – and I think it pertains equally well to reading – that it lets you live other people's lives for a while but without suffering the consequences. As we hand off Merton's "Chant," stanza by stanza, around the big table, the students get to "live" the life of the doomed commandant, and they also feel, at gut level, the gross misappropriation of language in the euphemisms he employs: "clean" and "purify" for kill, etc. The politically-inclined stand-up comic Lenny Bruce used to recite this poem during his nightclub act. Surely it came as a shock to some of his audience. Yet, Merton approved. He called Bruce a "monk in reverse." Students get the reversal of humor. This poem remains as relevant today as the day that Merton wrote it, perhaps more so.

1. Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 345-49.

Merton's Call to Activism – 2015

By Thomas Spencer

Over fifty years ago Thomas Merton called upon Christians to become activists for non-violence. In his essay "The Root of War is Fear" (1961) Merton stressed that "Christians must become active in every possible way, mobilizing all their resources for the fight against war." He added, "Prayer and sacrifice must be used as the most effective spiritual weapons in the war against war."¹

In a later essay he again addressed the issue of Christian responsibility and emphasized that all Christians are peacemakers by virtue of their relationship with Christ. He noted the importance of forming our conscience and convictions regarding issues that portend universal destruction. In words particularly relevant to our world today he listed among these issues torture, genocide and the killing of innocent hostages.²

Merton wrote in an era dominated by the threat of nuclear confrontation with the Soviet Union and the divisiveness of the Vietnam War, but the challenges facing the world today appear even more daunting. Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the perpetual violence and turmoil in the Middle East, worldwide terrorism, domestic violence, mass shootings and random violent acts committed by individuals for unknowable reasons cause many Christians



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