

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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to despair. Merton's call for non-violent activism remains as urgent and timely today as it did over a half-century ago.

Activism for many connotes a dramatic and sometimes militant involvement, or a bold, decisive action or statement. Merton's concept of activism was different. He did not participate in marches or speak at rallies. He did not undertake acts of civil disobedience, nor, as he related to Dorothy Day, did he consider himself a pacifist in the strict sense.³ Yet through his writings he promoted peace and non-violence and articulated a concept of activism that was personal, authentic, charitable and applicable to all Christians. Joan Baez summed it up best when she stated that Merton "preached nonviolent activism, within the limits that he had set around him."⁴

What is there in Merton's writings on non-violence that is relevant to the world in 2015? What lessons can we apply today to become better activists for the cause of peace? The simplicity of Merton's message is that activism does not mean all Christians must join peace organizations, write letters, participate in protests or become involved politically, although Merton found these methods constructive if done with clarity, humility and the proper sense of purpose. The underlying theme in all of his writing on the subject is that true non-violent activism starts from within. Before we can address the world's violence we must first assure that we practice authentic non-violence ourselves and stand as an example for all who seek a less violent world.

For Merton, being truthful to ourselves and others is a necessary first step in developing a deep spiritual philosophy of non-violence. In a particularly revealing section entitled "Truth and Violence: An Interesting Era" in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, Merton quotes Gandhi stating "*lying is the mother of violence*" that not only breeds disorder and violence with others, but within ourselves as well. Hatred of others is often a manifestation of our own inner violence disorder. "The way of peace is the way of truth." A "truthful man cannot long remain violent."⁵

Merton stressed that the tactic of non-violence "is a tactic of love that seeks the salvation and redemption of the opponent, not his castigation, humiliation and defeat." True non-violence operates "without hatred, without hostility, and without resentment." (CGB 73). In another essay, "Blessed Are the Meek," he again affirms this when he states "the non-violent resister" should not be content "to prove to *himself* that he is virtuous and right" (PP 249). The basis for "true Christian non-violence" is "meekness and humility" which Christ extolled in the Sermon on the Mount (PP 257).

The frenetic pace of today's society and the limitless challenges it poses to our ability to develop a meaningful spiritual life is something Merton addressed fifty years ago. He noted that as activists we must be careful not to succumb or to cooperate with violence by becoming so involved with a multitude of concerns and projects that it destroys our inner capacity for peace. Ridding oneself of distractions and tendencies that are barriers to truth and inner peace is another necessary prerequisite for any authentic social action. In what is perhaps his most prophetic passage in *Conjectures*, he states, "The greatest need of our time is to clean out the enormous mass of mental and emotional rubbish that clutters our minds and makes of all political and social life a mass illness." In words seemingly written for today's Internet age where facts, opinions, truth and falsehoods are often presented without discernment, he notes, "The purification must begin with the mass media" (CGB 64).

Those looking for specific advice in Merton's writings on what causes to undertake or specific strategies and tactics to employ as an activist will not find it. He does offer counsel for those seeking to become more involved in political action, noting that "political action itself is a kind of spiritual action, an expression of spiritual responsibility, and a witness to Christ." But to be truly authentic

such action should “elevate man to a level consonant with his dignity as a son of God” (*CGB* 69). Merton defines such action as having three emphases. First, it must emphasize the human and affirm the human person. Second, it should stress the personal, and the personal value all humans have that are spiritual and incommunicable. Finally, it should emphasize wisdom and love. In a word of caution germane to those wishing to engage politically in today’s polarized political debate, he states that if one does in engage in political action they should not act as a Pharisee, exhibiting self-righteousness and taking pride in proving someone wrong to prove one’s self right.

Merton’s writings call upon Christians to make a commitment and develop a personal, authentic and deeply spiritual philosophy of non-violence. By doing so we assure that however we address the world’s violence we do so with charity and humility. This philosophy remains as simple and relevant today as it was when written five decades ago.

1. Thomas Merton, *Passion for Peace: The Social Essays*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Crossroad, 1995) 12-13; subsequent references will be cited as “PP” parenthetically in the text.
2. See “Peace: Christian Duties and Perspectives,” in Thomas Merton, *The Nonviolent Alternative*, ed. Gordon C. Zahn (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980) 13, 19.
3. Thomas Merton, *Cold War Letters*, ed. Christine M. Bochen and William H. Shannon (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006) 152 [6/16/1962].
4. Paul Wilkes, ed., *Merton by Those Who Knew Him Best* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984) 44.
5. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 71; subsequent references will be cited as “CGB” parenthetically in the text.

Avatars of the Absurd: Thomas Merton, Dorothy Day and Nonviolence

By Brad Stull

“[Dorothy Day’s witness] . . . reveals that hospitality and nonviolence are at the heart of the gospel and are the basis for critiquing our culture.”

Coleman Fannin¹

“Merton knew that prayer, contemplation, meditation, adoration and communion mean entering into the presence of the God of peace, dwelling in the nonviolence of Jesus, that, in other words, the spiritual life begins with contemplative nonviolence, that every one of us is called to be a mystic of nonviolence.”

John Dear²



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