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 Fannin[1]

"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 Dear[2]

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If we are to recognize Thomas Merton and Dorothy Day as avatars of nonviolence – and I argue that we should – we must also look at them as avatars of the absurd. Humans, after all, are thoughtfully violent creatures. What I call "constructed" violence permeates all human cultures, both symbolically and actually (e.g. football games, first-person-shooter video games, the death penalty, war). Thus, the call to nonviolence is absurd. The absurd, after all, is something that is "against or without reason or propriety; incongruous, unreasonable, illogical."[3] The premise of this brief essay is that humans thoughtfully permeate our cultures with violence. If this premise is true – and I cannot think of any way it is not – then to commit oneself to the path of nonviolence is to commit oneself to the absurd, to a life-practice that runs counter to what is, at both the deepest and most superficial levels of human cultures, the norm.

What else is Dorothy Day other than an avatar of the absurd? She was, as we all know, committed to an unreasonable dream of houses of hospitality for the poorest among us, putting herself at odds with the powers and principalities of church and state. She was, extraordinarily so, committed to pacifism even in the midst of what some call the war of the greatest generation, the war that documentary filmmaker Ken Burns has called "a necessary war." To read Dorothy Day's monumental memoir *The Long Loneliness*[4] is to accept an invitation to a life lived incongruously, to a life lived absurdly, to a life lived counter to human cultures that seem, at their worst, to worship at the altar of the god of blood and death.

What else is Thomas Merton other than an avatar of the absurd? He was, at least in his work from the late 1950s onward, committed to unveiling the insanity of the sane among us who built the Shoah. He was, during this period of his life, committed to unveiling the insanity of the sane among us who create and maintain (and have twice used) atomic and nuclear weapons. Of course, and painfully so, Merton reminds us, in his ultimate commitment to ironic truth, that the "sanely insane" are in fact we ourselves. In what I call his "theopolitical essays," Merton reminds us that Eichmann is not an "other" who can be dismissed, but, rather, a product of the best of Western culture.[5] In these essays, Merton reminds us that the scientists and engineers who have developed catastrophic weapons of mass destruction are products of the best of Western (and now global) culture. To read these essays (and, indeed, much of his poetry of this period) is to accept an invitation to a life lived incongruously, to a life lived absurdly, to a life lived counter to human cultures that seem, at their worst, to glorify not love but hate, not life but death.

I would guess that neither Merton nor Day would want to be called an avatar. Yet, do they embody the divine? Do they embody the abstract idea of nonviolence? I suggest that the answer to both questions is, yes. I also suggest that both Merton and Day would want their readers likewise to become embodiments of the divine, of the abstract idea of nonviolence, of, indeed, the absurd.

1. Coleman Fannin, "Dorothy Day's Radical Hospitality," Center for Christian Ethics, Baylor University, 2007 (http://www.baylor.edu/content/services/document.php/53381.pdf).
2. John Dear, "Thomas Merton and the Wisdom of Nonviolence" (http://www.fatherjohndear.org/speeches/thomas_merton_wisdom.htm).
3. *Oxford English Dictionary* (http://www.oed.com/viewdictionaryentry/Entry/792).
4. Dorothy Day, *The Long Loneliness* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959).
5. See "A Devout Meditation in Memory of Adolf Eichmann," in Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966) 45-49.