

movement in the United States (under the gifted leadership of Merton's confrere Thomas Keating, OCSO) is largely due to Merton's influence through his own appropriation not only of Zen (as is often popularly assumed), but of the fourteenth-century book *The Cloud of Unknowing* which teaches this form of prayer.

There is something wonderfully instructive about a life which, with and not in spite of its warts and woundedness, has God as its central reality. By his life and writing Merton teaches us not that God is "out there" somewhere, but "in here," in ourselves as well as our world. Like the fourth-century desert Christians whom he so admired, Merton left the world and remained in the monastery not because he hated the world, but because he loved it. A consistent theme in his writing is "the primacy of love over everything else in the spiritual life."² He reminds us that we find God, not by withdrawing from life, but by becoming fully alive. "If we want to be spiritual . . . let us first of all live our lives."³

Merton the man was iconic. Merton the thinker will be listed among the great Christian intellectuals of the twentieth century. But as Merton knew, "Spiritual life is not mental life" (*TS* 27). Time marches on; other issues will claim our attention, and some of his work will seem dated. Finally, it is Merton the spiritual writer whose work will remain fresh because it is timeless and invites the reader into timelessness. Merton's lyrical and incisive descriptions of the inner life will chart the way for spiritual journeys of future travelers who will follow him to a certain point and then, as he did, make their own way into the great and beguiling mystery of God. I suspect *New Seeds of Contemplation* and *Thoughts in Solitude* will be to the twentieth century what sayings of the Desert Christians are to the fourth or *The Cloud of Unknowing* is to the fourteenth or *The Dark Night of the Soul* and *The Interior Castle* are to the sixteenth – and for the sake of future seekers, I hope I am correct.

1. In 1982, for example, Merton's *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968) was one of the texts in my Harvard Divinity School class on Buddhist-Christian dialogue. His correspondence with Abdul Aziz (Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon [New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985] 43-67) is one of the most complete Islamic-Christian "conversations" extant in English.
2. Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert: Sayings from the Desert Fathers of the Fourth Century* (New York: New Directions, 1960) 17.
3. Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1958) 46-47; subsequent references will be cited as "TS" parenthetically in the text.

We Always Need a Prophet

By **Monica Weis, SSJ**

The world always seems to be in crisis, and people ask – Where are the prophets? Where are the visionaries? Who can show us the way to

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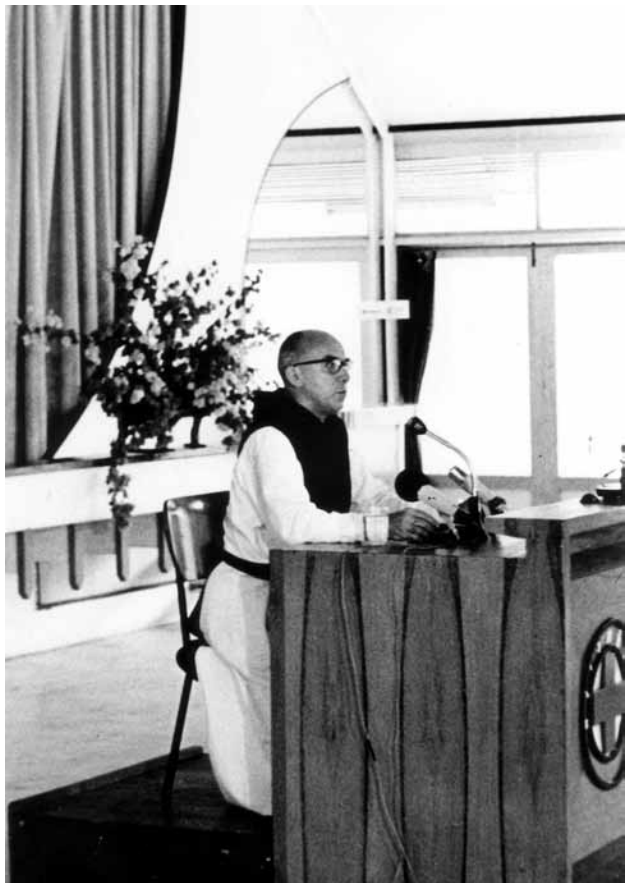
Monica Weis, SSJ

go? Thomas Merton has long been considered a prophet, primarily for raising issues and asking questions before the rest of American society recognized the problems. While a book could be written about Merton's keen insight and prophetic witness on a number of spiritual and social topics, I want to offer three examples that challenge our contemporary adherence to technology.

Factory Farming: a little known fact of Merton's social justice efforts was his response in April 1965 to a request from Roger Moody in England to support the "West of England Campaign against Factory Farming" (WCAFF). The purpose of the WCAFF was to raise awareness of the injustice and unethical practices of factory farming with an ultimate goal of eradicating the practice altogether. Merton's one-page statement, printed in their "manifesto," illustrates his affirmation of life in humans and non-humans alike. Indeed, he equates artificial animal husbandry with "a more general phenomenon: the increasingly destructive and irrational behaviour of technological man. . . . The mistreatment of animals in 'intensive husbandry' is the part of this larger picture of insensitivity to genuine values and indeed to humanity and to life itself – a picture which more and more comes to display the ugly lineaments of what can only be called by its right name: barbarism."¹

Notice that Merton sees not just cattle and chickens, but the "big picture" – the panorama that is characteristic of the prophet. He sees consequences, ramifications, and can articulate the inherent logical contradictions that such actions precipitate. Today aren't we plagued with abusive practices of raising calves, chickens and pigs, practices technology advocates for greater economic return? Aren't we just beginning to realize the extreme amount of waste and environmental stress created by raising so many animals in confined spaces?

Chemical misuse: this same prophetic vision is revealed in Merton's January 1963 letter to Rachel Carson,² complimenting her on *Silent Spring*, which exposed the dangers of DDT, but also acknowledging how she has a gift for diagnosing "the ills of our civilization" – of seeing the macro scale of human decision-making that all too often thwarts the interdependence of creation. Merton credits Carson with a vision of how we humans disregard the value of small things such as garden



pests, yet exhibit “portentous irresponsibility” on the grand scale, such as in world politics and war. By relinquishing wisdom in favor of unlimited technology – to eliminate garden pests and human pests we label “the enemy” – “we instinctively destroy that on which our survival depends.” Merton would have us return to an older incarnational spirituality that recognizes the world “as a transparent manifestation of the love of God . . . manifested in all His creatures, down to the tiniest, and in the most wonderful interrelationship between them.”³

Technology, violence and busyness: it is no secret that the leisure promised to our society in the 1950s at the advent of the technological revolution has not occurred. People work longer and more frantically, doing violence to their own psyches and often to family harmony. We are not free, but slaves to a host of techno-gadgets. Merton, so strong in his support of non-violence on the global scale (in his Cold War Letters, for example), also grasped the limitations of technology and its potential for de-humanization which causes “a profound spiritual crisis.”⁴

His reading of French philosopher Jacques Ellul was certainly at the forefront of his thinking about the limitations of technology and its potential to imprison the human spirit. Indeed, technology too often becomes “an expensive and complicated way of cultural disintegration” (CGB 60) – a violence that contemporary society certainly struggles with. When we buy into the ethic that what “*can* be done . . . *must* be done” (CGB 63), we allow technology to possess us. Merton lays it on the line by applying this notion of violence to our own *busyness*. Although erroneously attributed to Merton, his stirring comment is actually a paraphrase of Quaker Douglas Steere:

[T]here is a pervasive form of contemporary violence to which the idealist . . . most easily succumbs: activism and overwork. The rush and pressure of modern life are a form, perhaps the most common form, of its innate violence. To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything is to succumb to violence. . . . The frenzy of the activist neutralizes his work for peace. It destroys his own inner capacity for peace. It destroys the fruitfulness of his own work, because it kills the root of inner wisdom which makes work fruitful. (CGB 73).

Merton’s solution for this kind of violence is the “tactic of love” that operates “without hatred, without hostility, and without resentment” (CGB 86) – and, I might add, without i-phones and i-pads.

In celebration of Merton’s one-hundredth birthday, these three brief examples about technology are worth pondering. Each of them illustrates Merton’s sense of the dignity of creation that can too easily be compromised. Never has his prophetic voice been more apt; never has his wisdom been more needed.

1. See Monica Weis, SSJ, “The Prophetic Merton – Once Again,” *The Merton Seasonal* 36.1 (Spring 2011) 12.
2. See the discussion of this letter to Rachel Carson in Monica Weis, SSJ, *The Environmental Vision of Thomas Merton* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011) 9-21.
3. Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994) 70-71.
4. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 55; subsequent references will be cited as “CGB” parenthetically in the text.