

## **Lessons from the School of Love: Thomas Merton – A Centennial Tribute**

**By E. Glenn Hinson**

I am among an increasingly small number of people still living, apart from the monks at Gethsemani, who knew Thomas Merton personally and attended klatches in his hermitage. Strange as this may sound, our friendship developed accidentally or, perhaps as I said in the title of an article, by “happy chance.”<sup>1</sup> It happened in this way. In November 1960 I took the first group of students to whom I taught church history at Southern Seminary in Louisville to the Abbey of Gethsemani. No, I didn’t take them to meet Thomas Merton, about whom I knew virtually nothing. I wanted to expose them to the Middle Ages. And they were, for Gethsemani was a very austere place in those days. Merton was our bonus.

He talked to us about life in the monastery. His insight, humor and engaging manner disarmed us. We expected someone who could barely communicate, I think. When he finished, he asked if anyone had any questions. One student asked what I feared someone would ask. I don’t have an exact memory, but the question went something like this: “What is a smart fellow like you doing throwing his life away in a place like this?” I waited for Merton to open up his mouth and eat that guy alive, but he didn’t. He grinned a little and said, “I am here because I believe in prayer. That is my vocation.” You could have knocked me over with a feather. I had never met anyone who believed in prayer enough to think of it as a vocation. All the way back to the seminary that day his statement kept echoing down the corridors of my mind alongside the Protestant rubric, “God has no hands but our hands, no feet but our feet, no voice but our voice.” And I kept thinking, “If our axiom is right – that everything depends on us – then our world is in a desperate condition.” I began to pray that Merton and the contemplatives at Gethsemani rightly assumed that the God of this vast universe is doing something we can’t control and thus need to pay attention to. In that lies hope.

Two weeks after that visit to Gethsemani, Tom sent me a card: “Glenn, I’m coming to Louisville. I’d like to stop in to see you.” I immediately wrote back, “Great! How about speaking to my class?” He planned to come on Saturday; at the time we had morning classes on Saturday. He replied promptly, “I can’t speak to groups, but if some of my friends happen to be around I can talk to them.” I assembled the faculty of Southern Seminary, and we “friends” had a two-hour conversation with Thomas Merton. Criticisms I’d heard about taking my students to a Catholic monastery stopped. I took a class to Gethsemani every semester until Tom’s death in Bangkok on December 10, 1968.

I must confess that I didn’t really get to know his writing and thinking until after his death. Oh, he invited me several times to take part in seminars in his

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hermitage. In fact, I was one of the very first group of ten or so to meet with him there on June 10, 1961. He invited me several other times. At that point, before Pope John XXIII's "New Pentecost" produced the rich fruit it eventually bore, and having had few contacts with Catholics, I wasn't yet ready to make the most of "the sacrament of the present moment." What prompted me to read Merton's writings, all then in print, were invitations just after his death to speak about him. If you will look at articles I published about him, you will see that I had to do that incrementally as lights turned on in my limited understanding. In my very first speech not long after he died I spoke about "Merton's Many Faces," looking at the varied ways people spoke or wrote about this precocious personality who mystified himself as much as or more than he mystified others.<sup>2</sup>

Little by little, I thought that I had enough of a handle on his central concerns to try to incorporate some of his thinking into my own. When a Baptist college in Cardiff, Wales asked me to give the Edwin Stephen Griffiths Lectures in the spring of 1970, I put together for ministers living in that secular environment what eventually appeared in the little book entitled *A Serious Call to a Contemplative Lifestyle*.<sup>3</sup> It wasn't an exposition of any of Merton's writings but rather my earnest effort to adapt his insights to a setting where Christians struggled more than we do to have some relevance. As my grasp of his life and thought deepened, I made bold to speak about his progression from radical world-denial to critical world-affirmation,<sup>4</sup> his effort to show the urgency of contemplation in a world caught up in action,<sup>5</sup> his expansive ecumenical perceptions,<sup>6</sup> his frantic search to frame a non-violent alternative to a world of "collective unreason," and his resolution of human loneliness in the solitariness of God.<sup>7</sup> Those are the reasons for which we remember Thomas Merton on the hundredth anniversary of his birth, and we will honor him most in the years ahead by trying to articulate his message as engagingly as he did and to extend it to an ever-wider range of people on our benighted planet.

### *Plugging into the Contemplative Tradition*

Before we look at those issues I would like to make a couple of observations that will help us to see how we can grasp more firmly what Merton was trying to communicate and, more critically, venture beyond where he left us at his untimely death. One thing no student or admirer of Merton should miss is that *he would never have thought he had spoken a final and definitive word on any subject*. He continually fed earlier thoughts through his fertile mind in an effort to come up with more mature perspectives. When James T. Baker presented Merton with his dissertation, later published as *Thomas Merton: Social Critic*,<sup>8</sup> it aroused serious misgivings. Baker, he noted, was complimentary and sympathetic with Merton's ideas.

Yet the whole thing showed me clearly so many limitations in my work. So much that has been provisional, inconclusive, half-baked. I have always said too much, too soon. And then had to revise my opinions. My own work is to me extremely dissatisfying. It seems trivial. I hardly have the heart to continue it – certainly not with the old stuff. But is the new any better?<sup>9</sup>

This is the reason that it is very important to pay attention to the evolution of Merton's thinking and the springs from which he drank. Let me underscore here that *Thomas Merton was not attempting to create anything novel. Quite to the contrary, he sought to plug others into the Catholic contemplative tradition that had helped to rescue him*, a badly scarred youth furious at the "world" and wanting to have no more to do with it, and had enabled him to see rays of light penetrating dark and ominous

clouds on the horizon. That is not to say that he did not have times when he despaired of finding solutions to the human condition. But in the worst of times he could cling to the contemplative tradition like a shipwrecked sailor would cling to whatever flotsam he could lay hold of. I would characterize Merton as an “unconventional traditionalist.” Tradition is “the kernel,” the essence, convention “the husk,” the external. So we must hold steadfastly to tradition. “Tradition is living and active,” he wrote, “but convention is passive and dead.”<sup>10</sup>

Merton’s encounter with other religions might seem to conflict with unconventional traditionalism. On leaving for Bangkok in 1968 he declared, “I see no contradiction between Buddhism and Christianity. The future of Zen is in the West. I intend to become as good a Buddhist as I can.”<sup>11</sup> As shocking as those words may sound, however, we should note that he poured everything through a Catholic sieve and measured everything by his own inheritance as a Trappist monk. And I would contend that we will make the most of Merton by interpreting his thinking critically within that tradition and then striving to go beyond what he said and wrote to reach the level of maturity he recognized that he had not reached and would not attain in this life, not even if he had lived to see his hundredth birthday. We, too, need constantly to search in the rich tradition from which he drew.

### *Progression from Radical World-Denial to Critical World-Affirmation*

To understand Merton and his contribution to us and to the world, we must look first at what I consider to be “a second conversion.” The badly scarred youth who entered Gethsemani on December 10, 1941 wanted to clang the doors shut and never go back into the “world” that had inflicted so much hurt and seemed so hopeless. He idealized Gethsemani as “the center of America” and “an earthly paradise” holding the country together.<sup>12</sup>

Many Merton admirers look upon Merton’s “epiphany” or “revelation” at the corner of Fourth and Walnut (now Muhammad Ali) in Louisville on March 18, 1958, now marked by a plaque, as the critical moment for his shift from radical world-denial to critical world-affirmation. He reported: “I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness.”<sup>13</sup> Following a paragraph contending that monks lived in the same world as everybody else, he reflected more fully on the experience:

This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud. And I suppose my happiness could have taken form in the words: “Thank God, thank God that I *am* like other men, that I am only a man among others.” To think that for sixteen or seventeen years I have been taking seriously this pure illusion that is implicit in so much of our monastic thinking. It is a glorious destiny to be a member of the human race, though it is a race dedicated to many absurdities and one which makes many terrible mistakes: yet, with all that, God Himself gloried in becoming a member of the human race. A member of the human race! To think that such a commonplace realization should suddenly seem like news that one holds the winning ticket in a cosmic sweepstake. (CGB 141)

As dramatic and significant as this event was, we can see that a strategic shift of outlook was taking place much earlier, just after the publication of *The Seven Storey Mountain* in 1948. Letters he received in response to his autobiography prompted him to reexamine his views about the world he left behind. After a trip to Louisville on August 13, 1948 he wrote, “Perhaps the things I had resented about the world when I left it were defects of my own that I had projected upon it.”<sup>14</sup> A period of physical, emotional and spiritual crisis between his ordination in 1949 and his appointment as Master of Scholastics in 1951 churned out a far different outlook. On February 20, 1949 he reassessed the negativism of *The Seven Storey Mountain* as “a weakness” and his reaction to the world as “too natural” and “impure” and “perhaps a figment of my own imagination” (SJ 162). On March 3, 1951 he did a lengthy critique of even more anti-worldly views he expressed in the *Journal of My Escape from the Nazis* (posthumously published as *My Argument with the Gestapo*).<sup>15</sup> When he wrote the book, he thought he “had a very supernatural solution,” but after nine years in the monastery he saw that “it was no solution at all. . . . Actually,” he went on to say, “I have come to the monastery to find my place in the world, and if I fail to find this place in the world I will be wasting my time in the monastery” (SJ 322). Wars are evil, but people involved in them are good. Thus, he concluded:

Coming to the monastery has been for me exactly the right kind of withdrawal. It has given me perspective. It has taught me how to live. *And now I owe everyone else in the world a share in that life.* My first duty is to start, for the first time, to live as a member of a human race which is no more (and no less) ridiculous than I am myself. And my first human act is the recognition of how much I owe everybody else. (SJ 323; emphasis added)

On June 13, 1951 he opined that he had “become very different from what I used to be. . . . Thus I stand on the threshold of a new existence. . . . For now I am a grown-up monk and have no time for anything but the essentials. The only essential is not an idea or an ideal: it is God Himself” (SJ 328, 330). His next book was *No Man Is an Island!* Were it not for this “second conversion,” we would not be commemorating Merton’s hundredth birthday and thinking about how we might extend his message to a wider circle of humankind.

### *The Catholicizing of Contemplation*

With that preface it is appropriate to begin reflection on his great gifts to us with the obvious – his determined effort to convince people caught up in active pursuits that they need contemplation, that contemplation could do much to enrich their lives and indeed might lead to transformation of the world. For Merton contemplation always held the prior place. In *No Man Is an Island*, as he reframed his understanding of the monastic *contemptus mundi*, he wrote: “Action is charity looking outward to other men, and contemplation is charity drawn inward to its own divine source. Action is the stream, and contemplation is the spring. . . . When action and contemplation dwell together, filling our whole life because we are moved in all things by the Spirit of God, then we are spiritually mature” (NMI 70).

For a monk to write as penetratingly and as empathetically as Merton did about western society’s social ills and needs might seem to have pulled him a long way from his contemplative vocation. Certainly the spiral wound outwards. But Thomas Merton still communicated the message of contemplation, the only message he had. And even in widening the aperture to the outside world, he did not act without precedent. In his own Order he followed in the footsteps of Bernard

of Clairvaux, who was a more than ordinary statesman for his own times. He had antecedents also in the Franciscans and Dominicans. More particularly, he had precursors in German and Dutch mysticism, which, while not at first cloistered, eventually ended in cloisters in the Brothers of the Common Life. A major feature of the Renaissance development of religious orders was devotion to practical social activities – care of orphans, education and various charitable activities. Merton took some pains to justify his venture into an exploration of the world's problems. In 1960 he argued that the desert hermits had been falsely maligned for hatred of other people in their opposition to the world. What they opposed was the false and unreal “world,” the one dominated by the forces of evil. However, this did not imply rejection of others. “To seek a union with God that would imply complete separation, in spirit as well as in body from all the rest of mankind, would be to a Christian saint not only absurd but the very opposite of sanctity.”<sup>16</sup>

What spurred him further to interpret the contemplative tradition for his widening audience was his conviction that modern persons, just as persons in any age, need contemplation, that the active person needs it as much as the monk. We need it because we have “an instinctive need for harmony and peace, for tranquility, order and meaning.”<sup>17</sup> But western technological society denies us these things. It leaves no place for us to seek truth for its own sake, to seek the ground of being. Thus, far from being outmoded, the contemplative message about separation from the illusory and deceptive world of collective unreason, and union with the transcendent ground and source of being, is “where it’s at.” This is not something for monks only; it is something for every child of God, for every human person.<sup>18</sup> Contemplation is essential for meaningful action. The problem of western society is precisely that we have made a fetish out of action and lost the sense of contemplation. Our action is purposeless because it does not proceed from authentic being.

He who attempts to act and do things for others or for the world without deepening his own self-understanding, freedom, integrity and capacity to love, will not have anything to give others. He will communicate to them nothing but the contagion of his own obsessions, his aggressiveness, his ego-centered ambitions, his delusions about ends and means, his doctrinaire prejudices and ideas. (*CWA* 164)

At this point we have turned full circle back to Merton's interest in greater solitude, the hermitage,<sup>19</sup> and the East. Whereas others were seeking solutions to the problems of technological society in more technology, Merton was seeking solutions in contemplation. The farther he extended his pipelines into the world, the deeper he had to drill into the source of all being. Western society has somehow gone astray in its mad race to conquer nature. It could learn from the East. Thus in 1961 Merton laid aside certain reservations and issued a challenge to study oriental wisdom. He cited with approval Christopher Dawson's remark that western society has a “religious vacuum” in its education. Then he added:

It is absolutely essential to introduce into our study of the humanities a dimension of *wisdom* oriented to contemplation as well as to wise action. For this it is no longer sufficient merely to go back over the Christian and European cultural traditions. The horizons of the world are no longer confined to Europe and America. We have to gain new perspectives, and on this our spiritual and even our physical survival may depend.<sup>20</sup>

Merton, I think, concluded that oriental religions had injected their contemplative bent into their societies much more powerfully than Christianity had. Despite its potential for this, Christianity had

somehow failed to do the same. Instead, it had encouraged the development of human rational powers to such an extent that they were overshadowing and even obliterating the powers of transcendence. The result is an autonomous technology that dehumanized and depersonalized. “The fact remains,” he said in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, “that we have created for ourselves a culture which is not yet livable for mankind as a whole” (CGB 60). The total emancipation of technology has reduced our society to a state of moral infancy. If technology remained in service of higher ends – reason, man or God – it could fulfill a useful function. But by becoming autonomous, it threatens to destroy us. The hope is that we will return to contemplation in order to bring it under control (see CGB 62-64).

### *Ecumenical Perceptions*

This should be an appropriate place to speak about Merton’s ecumenical perceptions that connected directly to his quest to catholicize contemplation. Merton cannot be labeled an ecumenist in the traditional sense of the word, but I’m convinced that he was making a significant contribution to ecumenical dialogue from the background of the contemplative tradition and was unusually well equipped to do so. Indeed, he came to envision a “quite momentous” part Christian contemplatives could play in any dialogue involving the world’s religions.

Students of Merton will recognize that he experienced much the same evolution of outlook toward other Christians, toward persons of other faiths, and even toward persons of no faith that he underwent in his view of the “world.” The Merton of *The Seven Storey Mountain* weighed the Quaker faith of his mother and Episcopal faith of his father and found them wanting by comparison with his newfound Catholic faith. During the 1940s and 1950s he regularly criticized eastern religions with stock charges of “pantheism,” “immanentism” and “absorptionism.” In *The Seven Storey Mountain* he concluded that Oriental mysticism, with which he flirted in his college years, belonged “purely in the natural order” and, while not per se evil, was “more or less useless, except when it is mixed up with elements that are strictly diabolical” (SSM 188).

Merton later looked back on such statements with embarrassment. Although he welcomed the official changes in the Church’s outlook inaugurated by the elevation of Angelo Roncalli to the papacy in 1958, the “new” Merton antedated those changes. What he was doing was enlarging and expanding his concept of Catholic. The change was clearly visible when he wrote *No Man Is an Island*. “I do not intend to divorce myself at any point from Catholic tradition,” he wrote. “But neither do I intend to accept points of that tradition blindly, and without understanding, and without making them really my own” (NMI xiv). He proceeded to affirm his identification with humankind, something he had tried earlier to disown.

Every other man is a piece of myself, for I am a part and a member of mankind.  
Every Christian is part of my own body, because we are members of Christ. What I do is also done for them and with them and by them. What they do is done in me and by me and for me. But each one of us remains responsible for his own share in the life of the whole body. (NMI xxii)

You see here a more expansive attitude toward humankind and toward other Christians. In *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, published eleven years later, he confessed, “I will be a better Catholic not if I can *refute* every shade of Protestantism, but if I can affirm the truth in it and still go further” (CGB 129). His definition of Catholic now sounded much like the Apostle Paul’s missionary formula. “To be truly Catholic is not merely to be correct according to an abstractly universal standard of truth,

but also and above all to be able to enter into the problems and joys of all, to understand all, to be all things to all men” (CGB 167).

The most far-reaching and enduring ecumenical contribution of Merton probably involved his contacts with people of other faiths. In his essay “Christian Culture Needs Oriental Wisdom” he constructed an unequivocating apology for study of eastern religions in the west. “We have to gain new perspectives, and on this our spiritual and even our physical survival may depend.” These religions offer values in the realm of spiritual experience, which is not unlike “supernatural wisdom itself.” Thus, he concluded,

At least this much can and must be said: the “universality” and “catholicity” which are essential to the Church necessarily imply an ability and a readiness to enter into dialogue with all that is pure, wise, profound, and humane in every kind of culture. In this one sense at least a dialogue with Oriental wisdom becomes necessary. A Christian culture that is not capable of such a dialogue would show, by that very fact, that it lacked catholicity. (SE 112)

Merton adopted the same stance toward other faiths as he did toward Protestantism. As a Catholic, he judged, he needed to acknowledge truth wherever he found it. “If I affirm myself as a Catholic merely by denying all that is Muslim, Jewish, Protestant, Hindu, Buddhist, etc., in the end I will find that there is not much left for me to affirm as a Catholic: and certainly no breath of the Spirit with which to affirm it” (CGB 129).

So Merton approached people of other faiths as a Catholic. He carried on a rich correspondence with Abraham Heschel, Professor of Jewish Mysticism in the Jewish Seminary of America; with Abdul Aziz, a Sufi Muslim from Pakistan; with Daisetz Suzuki, Zen Buddhist scholar; with Doña Luisa Coomaraswamy, widow of Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, a Hindu philosopher; and Amiya Chakravarty, Indian poet, philosopher and scholar teaching at Smith College. Among all his contacts Zen Buddhism exerted the strongest pull in his last years, and he also developed a close friendship with the Dalai Lama. What impressed him was their ability to “communicate with one another and share an essentially spiritual experience of ‘Buddhism’ which is also somehow in harmony with Christianity.”<sup>21</sup> *The Asian Journal* shows that he quaffed eagerly from the Buddhist cup in his journey to the East, always testing by the contemplative tradition he knew.

A few of his comments about other religions may leave you with mouth agape. *On Judaism*: “One has either got to be a Jew or stop reading the Bible. The Bible cannot make sense to anyone who is not ‘spiritually a Semite’” (CGB 5). *On Islam*: “I have no doubt in my mind whatever that a sincere Muslim will be saved and brought to heaven, even though for some reason he may not subjectively be able to accept all that the Church teaches about Christ.”<sup>22</sup> *About Buddhism*: I’ve already quoted his intention to “become as good a Buddhist as I can.” To Daisetz Suzuki, the Zen scholar, he wrote: “The fact that you are a Zen Buddhist and I am a Christian monk, far from separating us, makes us most like one another. How many centuries is it going to take for people to discover this fact?”<sup>23</sup> *On Hinduism*: He wrote Doña Luisa Coomaraswamy:

We both belong to Him in His mercy which is inscrutable and infinite and reaches into the inmost depths of every being, but especially of all who, with all their deficiencies and limitations, seek only truth and love, as best they can. I do not understand too much of any kind of Church which is made up entirely of people

whose external conformity has made them comfortable and secure, and has given them the privilege of looking down on everybody else who is automatically “wrong” because not conformed to them. This does not seem to me to have a great deal to do with the message of Christ.<sup>24</sup>

He told Smith College students studying his writings under Chakravarty:

I do really have the feeling that you have all understood and shared quite perfectly. That you have seen something that I see to be most precious – and most available too. The reality that is present to us and in us: call it Being, call it Atman, call it Pnuma . . . or Silence. And the simple fact that by being attentive, by learning to listen (or recovering the natural capacity to listen which cannot be learned any more than breathing), we can find ourself engulfed in such happiness that it cannot be explained: the happiness of being at one with everything in that hidden ground of Love for which there can be no explanations.<sup>25</sup>

As I noted earlier, Merton thought contemplatives like him would play a special role in dialogue with persons of other faiths. In notes jotted down for a paper he was to have delivered in Calcutta in October 1968 on “Monastic Experience and East-West Dialogue,” he observed, “True communication on the deepest level is more than a simple sharing of ideas, of conceptual knowledge, or formulated truth.” It requires “‘communion’ beyond the level of words, a communion in authentic experience which is shared not only on a ‘preverbal’ level but also on a ‘postverbal’ level” (*AJ* 315). He demonstrated his gift for such communication in his meeting with the Dalai Lama and other Buddhists. The Dalai Lama called him a “Catholic geshe,” which a friend interpreted as “the highest possible praise from a Gelugpa, like an honorary doctorate!” (*AJ* 125).

### *Contemplation and Critical Social Issues*

Merton readers and admirers should not imagine that his contemplative life enabled him to speak a definitive word on critical social issues we face in American society and in our world. He would urge us to keep searching for answers both vertically and horizontally in our day in the same way he sought answers in his day with a consciousness that we could be wrong.

Thomas Merton did come up with profound insight about some issues that still plague our society. One of these was *racism*. M. L. King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” inspired him to write “Letters to a White Liberal.”<sup>26</sup> In it he refused to let off the hook northern whites who did not face the problem of massive change in their whole way of life that southerners face. By comparison with the South the North had few blacks. But let the change which a solution to the racial problem demands occur and, Merton insisted,

I visualize you, my liberal friend, goose-stepping down Massachusetts Avenue in the uniform of an American Totalitarian Party in a mass rally where nothing but the most uproarious approval is manifest, except, by implication, on the part of silent and strangely scented clouds of smoke drifting over from the new “camps” where the “Negroes are living in retirement.” (*SD* 41-42)

Martin Marty took Merton to task for these letters, but, three years later, retracted and admitted Merton was right.<sup>27</sup> You see here how Merton located the problem in fear of disruption of whites’ way of life. He expanded on this in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*:



The core of the race problem as I see it is this: the Negro (also other racial groups of course, but chiefly the Negro) is victimized by the psychological and social conflicts now inherent in white civilization that fears imminent disruption and has no mature insight into the reality of its crisis. White society is purely and simply incapable of really accepting the Negro and assimilating him, because white people cannot cope with their own drives, cannot defend themselves against their own emotions, which are supremely unstable in a rapidly changing and overstimulated society. (CGB 21-22)

He sided wholeheartedly with King's nonviolent civil rights movement, which he called "one of the most positive and successful expressions of Christian social action that has been seen anywhere in the twentieth century" (FV 130-31). That movement made evident the refusal of white society to make room for blacks.

The fact remains that the Negro is now in the home the white man has given him: the three square miles of broken-down tenements which form the ghetto of Harlem, the biggest Negro city in the world, type of all the Negro ghettos in America, full of crime, misery, squalor, dope addiction, prostitution, gang warfare, hatred and despair. (FV 137)

Another issue he brought prophetic insight to was *autonomous technology*. Technology itself is not the problem. It is "not in itself opposed to spirituality and to religion" (CGB 16). He admired "the astonishing achievements of technology," but he was convinced that "the very splendor and rapidity of technological development is a factor of disintegration. . . . The fact remains that we have created for ourselves a culture which is not yet livable for mankind as a whole" (CGB 60). Where is the problem? Not in technology per se but in "the complete emancipation and autonomy of the technological mind at a time when unlimited possibilities lie open to it and all the resources seem to be at hand" (CGB 62). As a result of this emancipation, human beings have become slaves to the machines they designed to serve them.

If technology really represented the rule of reason, there would be much less to regret about our present situation. . . . It is by means of technology that man the person, the subject of qualified and perfectible freedom, becomes *quantified*, that is, becomes part of a mass – mass man – whose only function is to enter anonymously into the process of production and consumption. . . . The effect of a totally emancipated technology is the regression of man to a climate of moral infancy, in total dependence not on "mother nature" (such a dependence would be partly tolerable and human) but on the pseudonature of technology . . . . If technology remained in the service of what is higher than itself – reason, man, God – it might indeed fulfill some of the functions that are now mythically attributed to it. But becoming autonomous, existing only for itself, it imposes upon man its own irrational demands, and threatens to destroy him. Let us hope it is not too late for man to regain control. (CGB 76-77)

A third issue concerned *violence*. The long and costly war in Vietnam and the threat of a nuclear holocaust consumed Merton during the mid-sixties. Napalm, saturation bombing, chemicals plunged him into depression. Forbidden to publish his book entitled *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*,<sup>28</sup> he

bootlegged his observations on this and a variety of related topics as “Cold War Letters.”<sup>29</sup> In 1964 he also steered around the prohibition by publishing a collection of writings of *Gandhi on Non-Violence*.<sup>30</sup> Entries on Vietnam saturated his journals throughout the last six years of his life. He viewed Vietnam as another sign that the U.S. had become a warfare state dominated by big business, the military and political extremists. Far from achieving its aims against Communism in Asia, the war strengthened Communism.

In my estimation Merton’s most lasting contribution in this sphere lay in the way he applied Gandhi’s teaching on nonviolence. Christianity, he thought, had a more positive and creative message than opposition to war, renunciation of nuclear weaponry, and outright condemnation of the war in Vietnam. He moved little by little from the traditional “just war” theory toward a “relative pacifism.” According to Gordon Zahn, he preached a message of nonviolence “more rigorous” than Martin Luther King’s. Like Gandhi, he preferred violent resistance to expedient surrender where one’s basic rights were at stake. “In practice, where nonviolent resistance is impossible,” he wrote, “*then violent resistance must be used, rather than passive acquiescence*.”<sup>31</sup> The nonviolent, however, should place the interest of opponents above their own objectives. Not only must they not cause bodily harm, they must avoid humiliating and causing psychological harm. The object is to turn the enemy into a collaborator. The nonviolent must also respect the law and be willing to accept punishment under it. Acceptance of punishment is a form of witness and takes on a spiritual dimension that adds to a protest.

Nonviolent protest can lead to self-righteousness, and Merton had misgivings about some of the actions of the Berrigan brothers and other protesters, although he gave his blessing to their objectives. Even though he could not take part in them, he did support “direct action” demonstrations so long as they did not cross a line beyond which they could defeat their purpose. He gave full support to lunch-counter sit-ins, freedom rides and mass demonstrations in Selma and Birmingham. He admired Martin Luther King, Jr. in the way he tried to apply Gandhi’s principles. Although he held fast to nonviolence, he understood why blacks resorted to violence. Nevertheless, he opposed the militancy that crept into anti-war activities. Resistance and revolution had to be nonviolent. He felt revulsion at the immolation of a young protester in front of the U.N. building in November 1965,<sup>32</sup> and had serious reservations about burning of draft cards and raids on draft board offices. He had question even about Dan Berrigan eluding capture. Acceptance of punishment distinguishes a nonviolent resister from “the mere revolutionary.” Berrigan thought of the postponement of punishment as extending his witness, and Merton may have eventually agreed, as Zahn contends (*NA xxxvii*). Still, he would have held steadfastly to the classic form of nonviolence practiced by Gandhi and King.

### *Honoring a Legacy*

In concluding this reflection on Merton in the year of his one hundredth birthday, I think it will be useful to make a few observations as to how we may honor his legacy and “catholicize” the insights he bestowed. May I say once again that we will honor him and his legacy best by trying not only to conserve but to carry forward ideas he propounded as we walk into different circumstances than those in which he worked out his thinking. He never assumed that he had spoken the final word on these issues.

1. Let me begin by underscoring that we, though far less equipped and without his direct contact, should *try to immerse ourselves as deeply as we can in the contemplative tradition that was Merton’s*

*fallowing ground*. We can't understand Merton without deeper knowledge of the rich tradition he fed through his fertile mind and heart, "mertonized," and shared with the "world" he once contemned.

2. If there is one thing he would want us to continue beyond where his all-too-brief life permitted him to go, it would be *that we become contemplatives in a world of action*. No one was more conscious than Thomas Merton that this would not mean a vast movement from the "world" to monasteries. Monasteries would survive and, with significant changes in their understanding of *contemptus mundi*, would make a contribution to the world. The monk's business is "cultivation of a certain *quality* of life, a level of awareness, a depth of consciousness, an area of transcendence and of adoration which are not usually possible in an active secular existence" (*CWA* 7). While critical toward the world, therefore, monks could set an example for people living active lives. We, however, have to accommodate their example to the busy world we live in. How might we do this?

3. We might begin with *adaptation of the three main pillars of the Benedictine model*: (a) chanting of the Psalms in the daily office about three or four hours a day; (b) *lectio divina* about three or four hours a day; and (c) labor spent in silence about six hours a day. Of course, few of us could equal the amount of time for those functions. Actually I think what we should *strive toward is to achieve the goal of all three – attentiveness to God*. We should perhaps begin with a scaled-down *lectio divina* because the scriptures provide our chief source for listening to God. At the same time we should recognize that we can listen to God through nature, as Psalm 19 reminds us. "The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge" (Ps 19:1-2). If we have learned how to listen to God through those two media, then we might also listen to God through our own lives. Michel Quoist in his wonderful collection of *Prayers* has said, "If we knew how to look at life through God's eyes, we would see innumerable tokens of the love of the Creator seeking the love of his creatures. The Father has put us into the world, not to walk through it with lowered eyes, but to search for him through things, events, people. Everything must reveal God to us."<sup>33</sup> As preface to another section of prayers, he added, "If we knew how to listen to God, if we knew how to look around us, our whole life would become prayer" (Quoist 29). That's it. *That's what Merton would want to happen – that we make all of life a prayer*.

4. I can hear you protesting, "But it is so difficult to be attentive to God in the way Merton did there in the monastery." I agree. We live in a busy and distracting culture filled with activity. Indeed, as Merton observed, we get caught up in activity for activity's sake. That is why we need to draw another insight from the monastic model – the retreat. The monastery is a lifetime retreat; in active lives we have to be satisfied with short-term retreats. Retreats permit us to draw back from the press and struggle of every day and to *spend time in solitude and silence*, just as Merton did. Solitude allows us to get away from the constant bombardment we experience in our daily lives. Silence sensitizes and enables us to be better listeners, to be more attuned to others and to God beyond in our midst. In my estimation, we need four kinds of retreat – daily retreats, weekly retreats, longer retreats once or twice a year, and sabbaticals.

5. Permit me to add one other note relating to our churches. Bernard of Clairvaux thought of Cistercian monasteries as *scholae caritatis* or *scholae dilectionis*, "schools of love." Merton experienced that. He wrote in his journal on September 26, 1948:

Love sails me around the house. I walk two steps on the ground and four steps in the air. It is love. It is consolation. I don't care if it is consolation. I am not

attached to consolation. I love God. Love carries me all around. I don't want to *do* anything but love. And when the bell rings it is like pulling teeth to make myself shift because of that love, secret love, hidden love, obscure love, down inside me and outside me where I don't care to talk about it. Anyway I don't have time or energy to discuss such matters. I have only time for eternity, which is to say for love, love, love. Maybe Saint Teresa would like to have me snap out of it but it is pure, I tell you; I am not attached to it (I hope) and it is love and it gives me soft punches all the time in the center of my heart. Love is pushing me around the monastery, love is kicking me all around like a gong I tell you, love is the only thing that makes it possible for me to continue to tick. (*SJ* 120)

I would propose that, despite their differences from monasteries, our churches should set as their goal to become “schools of love.” Is that only a pipe dream? Judging by his great hymn of love in 1 Corinthians 13, I would say that the Apostle Paul believed this should be the *goal* of churches, even the Church at Corinth that seemed so far removed from that goal. Wouldn't that be truer to the intention of Jesus than that our churches be businesses marketing religion?<sup>34</sup>

1. E. Glenn Hinson, “O Happy Chance!” *Weavings* 29.4 (Nov./Dec. 2014-Jan. 2015) 41-47.
2. E. Glenn Hinson, “Merton’s Many Faces,” *Religion in Life* 42 (Summer 1973) 153-67.
3. E. Glenn Hinson, *A Serious Call to a Contemplative Lifestyle* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974; rev. ed. Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 1993).
4. E. Glenn Hinson, “Contemptus Mundi – Amor Mundi: Merton’s Progression from World Denial to World Affirmation,” *Cistercian Studies* 26 (1991) 339-49.
5. E. Glenn Hinson, “The Catholicizing of Contemplation: Thomas Merton’s Place in the Church’s Prayer Life,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 1 (Spring 1974) 66-84; *Cistercian Studies* 10 (1975) 63-76.
6. E. Glenn Hinson, “Expansive Catholicism: Ecumenical Perceptions of Thomas Merton,” *Religion in Life* (Spring 1979) 63-76.
7. E. Glenn Hinson, “Loneliness as a Key to the Merton Story,” *Cistercian Studies* 40 (2005) 395-410.
8. James T. Baker, *Thomas Merton, Social Critic* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1971).
9. Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey. Journals, vol. 7: 1967-1968*, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998) 129.
10. Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1955) 150; subsequent references will be cited as “*NMI*” parenthetically in the text.
11. See David Steindl-Rast, “Man of Prayer,” in Patrick Hart, ed., *Thomas Merton/Monk: A Monastic Tribute* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1974); enlarged edition, *Cistercian Studies* vol. 52 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1983) 88.
12. See Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 325; subsequent references will be cited as “*SSM*” parenthetically in the text.
13. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 140; subsequent references will be cited as “*CGB*” parenthetically in the text. See also the original version of this passage in the journal entry for March 19, 1958: Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk’s True Life. Journals, vol. 3: 1952-1960*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 181-82.
14. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1953) 91; subsequent references will be cited as “*SJ*” parenthetically in the text.
15. Thomas Merton, *My Argument with the Gestapo: A Macaronic Journal* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969).
16. Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert: Sayings from the Desert Fathers of the Fourth Century* (New York: New Directions, 1960) 17.
17. Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968) 215; subsequent references will be cited as “*FV*” parenthetically in the text.
18. See “The Contemplative Life in the Modern World” (*FV* 215-24); see also “Contemplation in a World of Action” and “Is the Contemplative Life Finished?” in Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971) 157-65, 331-84; subsequent references will be cited as “*CWA*” parenthetically in the text.

19. On the connection of the hermitage with his conviction regarding the problems of western society see his article entitled “Christian Solitude” (*CWA* 237-51).
20. “Christian Culture Needs Oriental Wisdom,” in Thomas Merton, *Selected Essays*, ed. Patrick F. O’Connell (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2013) 111; subsequent references will be cited as “SE” parenthetically in the text.
21. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973) 148; subsequent references will be cited as “AJ” parenthetically in the text.
22. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 57 [10/18/1963 letter to Abdul Aziz]; subsequent references will be cited as “HGL” parenthetically in the text.
23. *HGL* 566 [4/11/1959 letter to Daisetz T. Suzuki].
24. *HGL* 133 [9/24/1961 letter to Doña Luisa Coomaraswamy].
25. *HGL* 115 [4/13/1967 letter to Amiya Chakravarty].
26. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964) 3-71; subsequent references will be cited as “SD” parenthetically in the text.
27. See *HGL* 454-58.
28. Finally published as Thomas Merton, *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*, ed. Patricia A. Burton (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004).
29. Thomas Merton, *Cold War Letters*, ed. Christine M. Bochen and William H. Shannon (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006).
30. Thomas Merton, ed., *Gandhi on Non-Violence: Selected Texts from Non-Violence in Peace and War* (New York: New Directions, 1964).
31. Thomas Merton, *The Nonviolent Alternative*, ed. Gordon C. Zahn (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980) 104; subsequent references will be cited as “NA” parenthetically in the text.
32. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage. Journals, vol. 5: 1963-1965*, ed. Robert E. Dagg (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 314.
33. Michel Quoist, *Prayers*, trans. Agnes M. Forsyth and Anne Marie de Commaille (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963) 17; subsequent references will be cited as “Quoist” parenthetically in the text.
34. An earlier version of this material was presented on May 14, 2015 at the Candler School of Theology at Emory University, Atlanta, GA as part of the university’s celebration of the one hundredth anniversary of the birth of Thomas Merton.