

Metaphors and Allusions: The Theopolitical Essays of Thomas Merton

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A dream: the old television show "To Tell the Truth" is on. Sitting before the celebrity panel are three male contestants. Balding, dressed in the black and white robes of the Trappist monk, each pretends to be the same person, Thomas Merton. At the end of the show, the celebrities secretly write down their picks: they try to guess the identity of the real Thomas Merton. The host then asks the famous question: "Will the real Thomas Merton please stand up?"

Sadly, the dream ends before the true Thomas Merton rises. Perhaps it so ends because there is no real Thomas Merton. Like the Zen koans he admires, perhaps Merton is, finally, a twentieth-century model of the postmodern paradox, a man who is, at once, the author of the devout, nearly xenophobic *The Seven Storey Mountain* and the author of the extraordinary, sometimes impenetrable long poem, *The Geography of Lograire*. Still, the desire to see the end of the dream compels this essay, generates a desire to construct an end albeit tentatively, temporarily. Who is the Thomas Merton that rises? None other than the author of the theopolitical essays, essays that weave together the discourses of religious reflection and political commentary in order to address social concerns. Among other strategies, these essays deploy metaphor and allusion to suggest the possibility of a faithful, counter-cultural awakening, an awakening desperately needed in an age marked by the presence of the bureaucratization of death, of bureaucratic killers.

Faithful Awakening

In a decidedly provocative strategy for a Roman Catholic monastic, Merton metaphorically alludes to the early Marx in order to explore what the faithful awakening might mean. He asks in the Preface to *Faith and Violence*, a collection of theopolitical essays, this: "Is faith a narcotic dream in a world of heavily-armed robbers, or is it an awakening?"¹ Merton's allusion makes clear what any reader of the early Marx knows: while hardly a defender of faith in God, Marx discusses faith within the context of peasant and working-class suffering, suffering caused by oppressor classes. For the early Marx, faith is not simply an opiate, but one that helps people survive the brutality of a world gone awry.

Merton's allusion also makes clear that he himself had Marxist sympathies. The metaphor "heavily armed robbers" is not only the paraphrased voice of Marx: it is, in fact, the melded voice of both Marx and Merton. The essays collected in *Faith and Violence* make clear that Merton understood faithful people to live amongst, between, within, armed camps, armed camps that rob, maim, murder. Merton had, by the 1960s, fully embraced the terrifying reality of a world where, as Frances Quéré suggests, "fascism and Auschwitz haunt our nights," where "cocktails of bacteria and neutrons will perhaps be the last cups from which we drink."²

It is needless to say that Merton did not opt fully for the early Marx. While Merton understands the world's powers and principalities to be oppressive, he nonetheless articulates the meaning of faith in a way that allows it to be something other than a narcotic, something other than an opiate which mercifully allows people to suffer more easily, more painlessly, than they would otherwise. For Merton, faith is an awakening. However, faith is not an awakening in the way some Merton aficionados might think. Merton is often understood to be a devoted monk who can help people discover, rediscover, kindle, rekindle, dip into or deepen their Christian practice and devotion, thereby awakening them to the reality of a loving and salvific God. Laity and professional theologians and religious alike have tended to see Merton as one who offers a profound vision of Christian practice, as Roman Catholic spiritual master *par excellence*, as nuanced avatar of Christ.

1. Thomas Merton, Preface, *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Social Practice* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968) x.

2. Frances Quéré, Introduction, *The Book of Christian Martyrs*, Chenu, Bruno, et al., trans. John Bowden (New York: Crossroad, 1990) 13.

Such a reading of Merton was conspicuously present at the 1995 International Thomas Merton Society (ITMS) meeting at St. Bonaventure University. At the opening banquet, for instance, conversation at one table spun around this question and its corollaries: "When did you meet Merton and what has he done for you?" The most eloquent testimony at the table came from an elderly Colombian woman. A devout lay Roman Catholic, she finds in Merton not only her spiritual director, but a holy man who, as she understands it, wrote out of the driven necessity to glorify God.

Other, even more devoted stories swirled constantly at the conference. One woman suggested that Merton's corpse should be exhumed in order to determine whether or not it has begun to decompose; she thinks Merton is a good candidate for beatification. Another person claimed that the smudged entry in Merton's St. Bonaventure Journal, where Merton writes of deciding to join Gethsemani, was caused by Merton's passionate tears, tears falling as he decided to commit to God. At times, the ITMS meeting resembled what one could imagine to be the beginning of the redaction of the Gospels, or the formation of a saint's cult.

This particularly reverent reading of Merton also is manifest among professional scholars. For instance, E. Glenn Hinson, a professor of Church History writing in the field of ecumenical affairs, draws on Merton as a model for ecumenism. He writes that "What we can learn from Thomas Merton, then, has something to do with the preparation for ecumenical encounter. . . . Unless we discover, as Merton did, the cosmic Christ who precedes us in our encounters with one another, we will remain hopelessly tied to our parochial perceptions."³ Hinson clearly looks to Merton as a Christian master of Christological discernment whom we should read in order to help us experience Jesus Christ as a "cosmic" figure of salvation.

This is not an illegitimate approach to Merton. After all, the answer to the question, "Who is the real Thomas Merton?" has yet to be answered fully. Merton is a moving figure for a host of complex reasons, only one of which is the academic desire to understand his work, to place it in intellectual perspective. In fact, the academic reading of Merton, juxtaposed to the Colombian woman and her

3. E. Glenn Hinson, "Expansive Catholicism: Ecumenical Perceptions of Thomas Merton," *The Message of Thomas Merton*, ed. Br. Patrick Hart. (Kalamazoo: Cistercian, 1981) 69.

eloquent testimony of spiritual growth, sounds somewhat dreary, even unimportant.

Nonetheless, these readings of Merton are dangerously close to expressing what Lawrence Cunningham has called "those pieties that one so often identifies with Christian writing."⁴ Many readers tend not to find Merton to be a sharp counter-cultural critic, but rather a sweet guide to the Lord Jesus Christ. Cunningham's deliciously sarcastic tone—"those pieties"—is well founded in Merton himself. In a letter to the then-rising feminist theologian Rosemary Ruether, Merton acidly wrote that "I love all the nice well-meaning good people who go to mass and want things to get better and so on, but I understand Zen Buddhists better than I do them."⁵ This sentiment arises from a time in Merton's life when *The Seven Storey Mountain*—that zealous autobiography of the world-weary new monk—could be characterized as the "early Merton." At a time when Merton immersed himself in conversation with a wide range of figures, few of whom populate a local parish, he more and more found the reverent religious practice of church Catholicism troubling.

In a 24 March 1967 letter to Ruether, Merton writes that he hadn't "even been reading about monasticism, or monastic literature at all." Instead, he had been delving into Faulkner and Camus, and thus "sneaking out the back door of the Church."⁶ This is not to suggest that Merton did not remain a committed priest and monk, even though a common myth suggests that he was on the verge of leaving the church during this period. Merton remained a committed Catholic, but his Catholicism was not that of the Baltimore Catechism, of the local parish priest. Rather, it became the Catholicism of a counter-cultural, even counter-Church monk who, not incidentally, had devoted his life to language. He was not reading Faulkner and Camus by accident or happenstance. With Cunningham,⁷ I see Merton more as a writer, less as a theologian; more as a rhetorician, less as a guide to piety. Merton himself admits to Ruether that "I am not a pro at anything except writing: I am no theologian."⁸ It is here that one can, perhaps, begin to examine the truth.

4. Lawrence Cunningham, "Thomas Merton: The Monk as a Critic of Culture," *Merton Annual* 3 (1990) 198.

5. *At Home in the World: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Rosemary Radford Ruether*, ed. Mary Tardiff, O.P. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1995) 17.

6. *Ibid.*, 50.

7. Cunningham, 187.

8. *At Home*, 50.

Theopolitical Essays

While Merton is often best known for his meditative, autobiographical, and even devotional nonfiction, he came to write, during the 1960s, "theopolitical essays" that join the rhetorics of religious discourse and political commentary in order to speak to the great problems of the social order. I use the term "theopolitical essay" to distinguish a certain sort of nonfiction that intentionally, even seamlessly, weaves together the discourses of religion and political commentary. I do not mean nonfictional theology that speaks to the political order, like that of Johann Baptist Metz, Jon Sobrino, Rosemary Ruether or other political, liberation, or feminist theologians. Nor do I mean nonfictional political commentary that dips into religious discourse at times, like that of the conservative Catholic newspaper columnist Cal Thomas. Theopolitical nonfiction is not religious reflection on the political order. Nor is it political reflection that borrows from religion in order to make its point. Within the work of the "theopolitical essay," religious and political discourse fully inform each the other.

An excellent example of such nonfiction is Martin Luther King, Jr.'s famous "I Have a Dream" speech, delivered at the 28 August 1963 March on Washington. John Patton, in an illuminating essay, holds that the speech is a "significant example of theo-political rhetoric" "developed in the fashion of a theological proclamation."⁹ As such, it melds "the messages of agape-love, non-violence, hope for the future, and the dream of a just society."¹⁰ Furthermore, the speech is generated and unified by what Martha Solomon calls a "matrix metaphor": "the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution as a covenant."¹¹ King's speech is not primarily religious discourse that comments upon politics, nor is it political commentary that borrows from religious discourses. Rather, "I Have a Dream" weaves the discourses of religion

9. John H. Patton, "I Have a Dream: The Performance of Theology Fused with the Power of Orality," *Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Sermonic Power of Public Discourse*, ed. Carolyn Calloway-Thomas and John Louis Lucaites (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1993) 104, 105.

10. *Ibid.*, 126.

11. Martha Solomon, "Covenanted Rights: The Metaphoric Matrix of 'I Have a Dream,'" *Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Sermonic Power of Public Discourse*, ed. Carolyn Calloway-Thomas and John Louis Lucaites (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1993) 69.

and the political world into a form of nonfiction that is properly called theopolitical. It lives, at once, in the political and religious worlds. So too Merton, an older contemporary of King, turned to theopolitical nonfiction as a way to speak to the crises of his age. Neither purely theological nor political, Merton's theopolitical essays show that his self-description is apt: he was not a professional at anything but writing.

Professor Cunningham insightfully has begun to explore this dimension of Merton. As Cunningham suggests, "Any careful reader of Merton soon realizes that his serious writing needs a good deal of 'unpacking' both because Merton was a poet who understood the polyvalence of language and because he had absorbed so much reading in his contemplative years in the monastery."¹² Cunningham rightly finds in Merton not the pious tones of a "Christian writer" but the complex brilliance of a writer who was a Trappist monk, a Trappist monk who was a writer. Anyone acquainted with Merton's life knows that this particular monk was not particularly silent, not particularly disengaged from the world, or focused on the adoration of the icons. Rather, Merton spent his years at Gethsemani reading voluminously, writing copiously. What emerged, as Cunningham writes, was polyvalent language dense with the presence of other texts.

This Thomas Merton rises boldly, strongly, in a number of places. Consider for, instance, the lead essay in *Faith and Violence*, "Toward a Theology of Resistance." This theopolitical essay explores the possibility of faithful awakening through the use of polyvalent language (metaphor) and allusions to others (the reading to which Cunningham refers). These rhetorical techniques, playful as they are, lead Merton's serious readers into counter-cultural and intertextual worlds that can awaken them, in the fashion of Zen rhetoric, to the reality of violence as a way to counter the destructiveness of humanity.

Metaphorical Play

As Kenneth Burke argues in *Process and Change*, central to human being is the ability to abstract; further, metaphors are the way that humans accomplish the act of abstraction.¹³ Metaphors allow hu-

12. Cunningham, 198.

13. Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose*, 3rd Ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984) 103-6.

mans to move from one class of thing to another class, thus illuminating, even systematizing, the meaning of experience.

Elena Malits has already suggested that such as understanding of metaphor was central to Merton's work, work that was, perhaps not incidentally, contemporaneous with much of Burke's. Malits writes that "Merton appreciated that metaphor represents a conceptual leap which takes us into new intellectual territory. But he also would have insisted that metaphors have something to do with the very form, the existential shape, of one's life."¹⁴ For Merton, as for Burke, metaphors allow humans to cross boundaries, to break down the lines of demarcation that might, at first or even second glance, seem permanent. Yet for Merton, again as was true for Burke, metaphor is more than an intellectual game to be played by language dilettantes. Rather, metaphor is central to human being. As Malits holds, "metaphors have something to do with the very form, the existential shape, of one's life." In Merton's "Toward a Theology of Resistance," central to this the existential shape is the awakening of faith.

To join the awakening is to move metaphorically, to make a conceptual leap beyond and across borders of existence. To unpack the essay, as Cunningham claims that Merton readers must do, is to realize that metaphor does "have something to do with the very form, the existential shape, of one's life." Merton, through his use of metaphor, invites his readers into a counter-culture awakening that challenges the foundations of American life itself. Merton asks his readers to leap conceptually in order to reshape existence.

Consider these counterposed metaphors from "Toward a Theology of Resistance":¹⁵

[our antiquated theology] shudders at the phantasm of muggings
and killings where a mess is made on our own doorstep
and

[our antiquated theology] blesses and canonizes the antiseptic violence of corporately organized murder because it is respectable, efficient, clean, and above all profitable.

With the metaphors that inform the first of these sentences and give it its energy, Merton suggests that theology—and culture—is

14. Elena Malits, C.S.C., "Thomas Merton and the Possibilities of Religious Imagination," *The Message of Thomas Merton*, ed. Br. Patrick Hart (Kalamazoo: Cistercian, 1981) 52.

15. Merton, "Towards," 7.

deluded. The verb "shudders" metaphorically personifies the subject of the sentence, "theology," giving this abstract practice bodily weight and presence. Theology shudders, within this world Merton linguistically constructs, not at muggings and killings, but at the "phantasm" of muggings and killings. Unless one lives in world where specters literally haunt one's nights, surely "phantasm" metaphorizes the muggings and killings. The metaphorization of those actions is both positive and negative. Positively, it reinforces our primal fears: muggers and killers are specters, people who violate the codes of civilization, thus calling civilization into question. This phantasm evokes terror because this violence, while distant in most American lives, is rooted in the tangible, the visible. Muggings and killings do sometimes strike in our homes, in our neighborhoods. Negatively, "phantasm" calls into question the legitimacy of the "shudder" theology experiences when it thinks of these muggings and killings. "Phantasm," after all, implies imaginative activity, the sense that these are not real fears, merely the nightmares of a child who thinks monsters live under the bed. Read this way, the metaphors suggest that theology shudders at the imaginative creation of its own mind.

Conversely, the metaphors of the second sentence turn the subject "theology" into a member of the church hierarchy, a priest who can exercise canonical authority. This theology, the very same theology that shuddered at the phantasms of muggings and killings, is able to view other sorts of "messes" much differently. It blesses and even canonizes what Merton suggests is corporately organized murder. Of course, at one level, this language is literal. One need only think of a certain cardinal who blessed the troops on their way to Vietnam. As Merton writes in another essay, a Catholic Bishop in the United States assured President Johnson that "the war in Vietnam is a 'sad and heavy obligation imposed by the mandate of love.'"¹⁶ Protestants, in an ecumenical spirit, are not exempt. Merton tells his readers that "Billy Graham declared that the war in Vietnam was a 'spiritual war between good and evil.'"¹⁷

At another level, the quotation is also metaphorical. This level of interpretation depends on the word "murder." It is one thing to

16. Thomas Merton, "Vietnam—An Overwhelming Atrocity," *Thomas Merton: The Nonviolent Alternative*, ed. Gordon C. Zahn (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1971) 91.

17. *Ibid.*

bless "killing." "Killing," finally, tends to indicate a human action within the bounds of civilized conduct: one kills a deer; one does not murder it. Killing might be justified, defensible, even blessable in certain situations. Murder never is because murder is violation of law. Merton, with the use of the word "murder," metaphorically charges this sentences, suggesting that theology, as a priestly subject, clerically condones and supports that violation of a fundamental human taboo. The U.S. government and businesses with corporate concerns in Vietnam would not have called the killing in Vietnam murder. Neither would have the U.S. clergy that patted the troops on their way to the war. In fact, these clergy provided the veneer of blessing, claiming that Vietnam was a holy war to be waged by God's troops. That the killing fields were murderous fields was inconceivable to these parties. Murder, after all, is immoral. Rather, Vietnam resided on the plane of war and, thus, was sanitized, made culturally and religiously acceptable: it was killing, not murder. Merton, however, metaphorizes the sorts of corporate violence we have come to condone or at least ignore, as murder. He asks one to leap conceptually, to explore the possibility that the killings justified by state and Church are both illegal and immoral.

The counter-cultural energy of this sentence also depends on the metaphorical phrase "antiseptic violence." The killing fields of Cambodia and Vietnam, drinking blood as Merton wrote, were hardly clean. "Antisepsis," the root of the adjective "antiseptic," indicates destruction of the microorganisms that cause septic disease. Septic disease, most graphically, involves the invasion of a body by bacteria, and often involves pus, rotting pus. The clerics then, the personification of "theology," bless corporate violence because it is that tool that wards off the sepsis, the invasive rotting of the body. Merton, it goes without saying, finds this posture laughable. The metaphorical power of this phrase is finally ironic, a rhetorical trope Merton returns to again and again in his work. The irony is immediately revealed at the head of the sentence: this theology that blesses and canonizes is "antiquated." It offers both the wrong diagnoses and prescription; it identifies the patient as the microorganism and kills it with the treatment.

The play of these metaphors about antiquated theology are aided by the following set:¹⁸

18. Merton, "Towards," 6.

The violence we want to see restrained is the violence of the hood
waiting for us in the subway or the elevator

and

Violence today is white-collar violence, the systematically organized and bureaucratic and technological destruction of man.

In the first quotation, Merton invokes what is for us in the late nineteen nineties a dated metaphor—the hood. We would speak of gangbangers, but the import is clear. Merton imagines, and asks his readers to do so as well, violence personified in the mythic boogie man who lurks on our street corners, ready to prey. Merton admits that our fear of the hood is “reasonable”: after all, there are “hoods” who do prey on people. The problem, however, is that violence as the hood becomes an inflated metaphor: we come to associate all violence in our lives with that particular image. As Merton writes, in an effort to unpack this metaphor and thus decrease its power, the “violence of a few desperate teen-agers in a slum” does not warrant the attention given to it.¹⁹ Rather, we would do better to focus on the larger picture: global, institutionalized violence that is produced and managed by what he calls the white collars.

This is the importance of the second quotation in the set. “Violence” as the subject of the sentence is metaphorized adjectivally and thus becomes associated with a class: it is “white-collar” violence. This is an old cry, dating at least to Marx. Not incidentally, Merton’s readers again realize that a marxist analysis of social problems was not foreign to his world view. Merton suggests, with this metaphor, that those whom our own counter-cultural youth call “the suits” manage a global system of violence that threatens human being itself. Merton implicitly sides with the “blue-collar,” those who labor but don’t direct. In order to explore the violence of human life, he names it with a class marker, providing the image of planners, desk-workers, whose trade in violence arises from their offices, their files, their appointment books. What the white-collar workers offer to violence is the power of the modern state: bureaucratized technology. Americans should fear the street violence of the hood less than the white-collar violence of the bureaucrat because, finally, the white-collar violence is globally organized: the extraordinary organizational power of the modern state is turned over to the “destruction of man.”

19. *Ibid.*, 7.

For Merton this white-collar violence is found, among other places, in Vietnam and American inner-cities. *Faith and Violence*, after all, emerges when the smell of Napalm and Watts was in the air. White-collar violence is also found, according to Merton, in Auschwitz, or at least in Auschwitz as it stands metaphorically for the entire Shoah. In “Toward a Theology of Resistance,” Merton quickly, briefly, even cryptically offers a single example of the white-collar murder machine: Adolf Eichmann. After discussing the “meticulous efficiency” of white-collar violence, Merton writes that “Adolf Eichmann and others like him felt no guilt for their share in the extermination of the Jews” in part because the extermination, at least at Eichmann’s level, took place on paper: the Jews became numbers and thus erasable.²⁰

With this name “Eichmann,” Merton moves out of the world of metaphorical play into the world of realism. Drawing from recent world history, he suggests that his metaphors are not pure fantasia, the feverish dreams of a left-wing monk. Rather, Eichmann stands, plain and simple, as the classic, real, example of the sociopolitical, white-collar elite that corporately organizes murder. The Nazi organization of the Shoah was, sadly, a model of efficient bureaucracy. How else can 6 million be killed in a few years, short of nuclear and biological weapons? And, of course, these sorts of weapons aren’t as clean.

Eichmann, to complicate the essay even further, serves a dual function. At one level, he is a literal example of the white-collar murder machine metaphor. At another level, he is also metaphoric. Merton uses Eichmann as a way to step out of metaphoric play and also as a way to return to it. It is not only Eichmann who is an example of the murder machine. It is “Adolf Eichmann and others like him.” Eichmann implicitly serves as metaphor for the U.S. suits, among others, who are pursuing “modern technological mass murder.”²¹ After reading Merton’s essay, one might look at a suit who heads an armament concern and think, “Eichmann.”

In all, Merton uses metaphor as a way to bring his readers into a faithful awakening that is more than a trip into the triune God, more than a journey of adoration to the divine. It may include this triune trip, this journey of adoration—again, after all, Merton was a priest—but he plays these metaphors off each other in order to move his readers to see the reality of violence. This reality is not the hood. It is, rather,

20. *Ibid.*, 6.

21. *Ibid.*, 7

the respected white collar. The white collar, moreover, is Adolf Eichmann. If one stands by, blinded by the metaphor of the hood on the corner, one will again witness the destruction of an innocent people of God.

Allusive Wandering

"Eichmann" also serves as an allusive marker, an intertextual connection, as will be discussed in more detail below. For now, let it suffice to highlight this: in the brief discussion of Eichmann, Merton presumes a great deal of knowledge about World War II, about the Nazis, about the Shoah. So too Merton suggests connective possibilities: to unpack me, he seems to be saying, one needs to unpack Eichmann.

Just as he uses metaphor, Merton uses allusion to invite his readers into a faithful awakening that would have them see the reality of violence in order to counter the destructiveness of a world gone awry. As Cunningham suggests, one cannot read Merton with sophistication unless one reads him with an eye toward unpacking his suitcase full of other writers and figures to whom he alludes. To read Merton's theopolitical essays is to become an intertextual creature, to embrace a decidedly counter-cultural, theopolitical faith that involves wandering through words.

Merton's allusive, intertextual play is common among theopolitical figures, as it is among most members of the literary class. The phrase "allusive, intertextual play" means more than what Julia Kristeva calls the "banal sense of 'study of sources'" and something other than what she calls "transposition."²² Rather, "allusive, intertextual play" points to a demand placed upon Merton's readers. "Toward a Theology of Resistance," for instance, requires its readers to enter into worlds beyond the bounds of the essay itself. The essay cannot be read fully, even fruitfully, unless one moves with Merton through what the rhetorical theorist Patricia Bizzell has called "cultural archives," through what E. D. Hirsch, in his famous, or infamous, *Cultural Literacy* has called the cultural background presumed by the text.²³

22. Bradford T. Stull, *Religious Dialectics of Pain and Imagination* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994) 180, note 5.

23. Patricia Bizzell, "The Function of Cultural Archives in Persuasion: The Examples of Frederick Douglass and William A. Pease." Paper presented at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Milwaukee, March 1996;

Merton did not spend a quarter of a century in the monastery prayerfully silent, contemplatively absorbed in the mysteries of the incarnation. Merton, as Cunningham reminds us, read, and read widely.

Consider again Merton's invocation of Adolf Eichmann as a realistic example of the white-collar murder machine metaphor and as the metaphorical representative of all white-collar murderers. Merton does not "unpack" Eichmann. Rather, he lets Eichmann stand as a brief metaphorical flash, an illuminating moment within the discussion about white-collar violence. Merton presumes either that the reader knows Eichmann and the world of suffering that Eichmann represents or will be willing to delve into this world.

This presents a wonderfully rich complexity for readers, but it also necessarily presents some difficulties. For instance, I once taught "Toward a Theology of Resistance" to a class of lower-division undergraduates. They well recognized the intertextual, allusive demands that Merton makes. As they put it, "why doesn't Merton write so that we can understand him?" What they meant was this: to confront Eichmann as a representative name was to confront a world of texts with which Merton was intimately familiar, for which he had the greatest respect, to which he demands his reader go.

Unfortunately, for most of my students, Eichmann was an unknown entity. At first read, they could not move with Merton because they could not move with Merton into the texts that are imbedded in "Eichmann." To read Merton, to enter into the possibility of his faithful awakening, my students had to be led into the intertextual world that Eichmann represents. After they were, the allusive density of Merton's text became more manageable, more meaningful.

Not surprisingly, Merton himself provides an intertextual connection, a way into Eichmann. Were "Toward a Theology of Resistance," and his other theopolitical essays, coded into the hypertext markup language (html) now available for the World Wide Web, the word "Eichmann" would appear highlighted, indicating that it serves as a link to other sites on the WWW. One such site would be Merton's "A Devout Meditation in Memory of Adolf Eichmann." Published in 1966 as part of *Raids on the Unspeakable* and reprinted in *Thomas Merton: The Nonviolent Alternative*, this theopolitical essay at once ironically explores

E. D. Hirsch, *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (New York: Vintage, 1988).

Eichmann in more detail and ironically alludes, as part of this discussion, to the white collar murder machine discussed in "Toward a Theology of Resistance." Consider, for instance, the following quotation, presented at length:

No, Eichmann was sane. The generals and the fighters on both sides, in World War II, the ones who carried out the total destruction of entire cities, these were the sane ones. Those who invented and developed atomic bombs, thermonuclear bombs, missiles; who have planned the strategy of the next war; who have evaluated the various possibilities of using bacterial and chemical agents; these are not the crazy people, they are the *sane* people. The ones who coolly estimate how many millions of victims can be considered expendable in a nuclear war, I presume they do all right with the Rorschach ink blots too.²⁴

While realistic, this entire passage is one of ironic amazement. By the standards of society, Merton suggests, Eichmann and the corporate planners of murder are sane. Yet, he finds this difficult to grasp. The repetition of the word "sane" suggests a dumbfounded tone; Merton keeps repeating the phrase, apparently hoping that it will become sensible as he does so, but of course it cannot. The sanity of these people is juxtaposed with the markers of corporately organized death, calling into question their sanity. The suggestion is implicit, but clear: ones who develop thermonuclear bombs and calmly plan the destruction of millions cannot be sane.

However, Merton admits to the possibility that his own sarcastic reading of modern sanity might be flawed. Perhaps sanity is not what it seems, perhaps it does appropriately and accurately describe corporate murderers. In this reading, Merton claims that the faithful would do well to be a "little less sane, a little more doubtful, a little more aware of his absurdities and contradictions."²⁵ Merton suggests that if white-collar murder is sanity, then sanity is not a desirable state. Rather, the "less-than-sane" is more appropriate, more true to a world gone awry.

Interestingly, the further we move in time away from the direct of experience of Eichmann's world, the more allusively intertextual

24. Thomas Merton, "A Devout Meditation in Memory of Adolf Eichmann," *Thomas Merton: The Nonviolent Alternative*, ed. Gordon C. Zahn (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1971) 161-2.

25. *Ibid.*, 162.

"Eichmann," and thus Merton's text, will become. It may be the case that elder citizens who lived through the revelations of Eichmann's actions in Nazi Germany could read Merton's invocation of Eichmann with the ability to move with Merton. For our youngest citizens, Eichmann and the Shoah are textual worlds that can be entered only through textual wandering. If one's faithful awakening involves Eichmann, one's faithful awakening now, and even more so in the future, will depend upon one's ability, inclination, even monastic desire, to live in a textual world.

Yet, the move into Eichmann can take one through Eichmann into a world beyond text. To awaken to Eichmann and what he represents is to awaken to the suffering of others. To move allusively with Merton is to become awakened to the analogical connection that Merton makes: Eichmann is to the Jews as the U.S. white-collar murder machine is to the Vietnamese, or to oppressed third-world workers struggling under corporate neo-colonialism.

The faithful awakening for Merton is, finally, an encounter with the suffering other.²⁶ Merton directs us to begin a pilgrimage not to a holy place, not to Eden desired, for that holy place, that Eden, is a chimera, an illusion. Paradise, be it the holy city or the pristine garden, does not exist. Rather, Merton claims that the new form of pilgrimage is a journey to the other who has suffered under the advance of the crusading peoples across the globe. Eichmann, then, is an allusive way to make this pilgrimage, to travel to the effects that violence has had on the suffering other.

An examination of Merton's allusive use of John XXIII in "Toward a Theology of Resistance" only strengthens this point and provides it with a particularly Catholic twist.²⁷ Merton first refers to John XXIII as one who quotes Augustine, thus beautifully demonstrating Cunningham's argument. To enter into Merton's faithful awakening is to enter into intertextual play. To read Merton is to read John XXIII is to read Augustine.

Merton writes with reference to *Pacem in terris* and its allusion to Augustine: "what are kingdoms without justice but large bands of robbers?" Merton thus demonstrates that he is a citizen of the church as well as the world. With Eichmann, Merton shows that a cloistered monk can move intertextually—and ask his readers to do likewise—

26. Stull, *Religious Dialectics*, 64-5.

27. Merton, "Toward," 4-6.

through the world at large, through the complexities of global violence. With John XXIII and Augustine, Merton anchors his allusive, intertextual play in the church itself. To read Merton's theopolitical essays is not simply to read the global culture. It is, as well, to read the culture of the church, particularly the church of Vatican II. This allusion to *Pacem in terris* also demonstrates that metaphor and allusion are not strictly separable. To read John XXIII is to read Augustine is to read a metaphorization of the world. The intertextual becomes the metaphorical. Modern nation states become kingdoms which, without justice, become ruled not by governments but by criminals, by groups of thieves.

Following his allusion to John XXIII and Augustine, Merton asserts that "The problem of violence today must be traced to its roots: not the small-time murderers but the massively organized bands of murderers whose operations are global."²⁸ With this, Merton allusively and firmly anchors his claims regarding the problem of violence in the Catholic tradition. To see the reality of violence—that is, to discern the real nature of violence and thus be able to counter it—requires not only a metaphorical play, an oppositional encounter of symbols that will lead to awakening. To see the reality of violence requires not only allusive wandering through the texts of the world, in one case those represented by Eichmann. To see the reality of violence also requires allusive wandering through the theopolitical texts of the church. John XXIII and Augustine lead Merton and thus readers into the world of corporately organized murder, of globally sanctioned death. The texts of the Church, we must understand, are not simply about salvation through Christ Jesus. Rather, they are complex indictments, rooted in Christian practice, of the white-collar murder machine—whatever its century.

Metaphor, Allusion, the Hint of Zen

Merton's theopolitical essays are rooted firmly in the Christian tradition, but because they demand conceptual leaps and studious journeys through intertextual reality, one might well begin to look at them as Merton's attempt to practice his understanding of Zen language theory. In effect, the theopolitical essays, with their use of metaphor and allusion, might be understood as aids to Zen contemplation.

28. *Ibid.*, 4.

In this way, the real Thomas Merton might be standing before his readers not in the robes of a Trappist monk, but a Zen practitioner.

Anne Carr claims in her insightful study of Merton that Zen has developed rhetorical strategies that call language about reality into question. These strategies are not meant to call into question reality, however. Rather, they are used to bring about ontological awareness, to help practitioners understand the nature of reality itself.²⁹ As Merton understands this Zen rhetorical process, language can help open world views, help dislodge misconceptions about the nature of the world.³⁰

Thus, one might begin to think about the metaphorical play and allusive wandering demanded by Merton's theopolitical essays as Zen rhetoric. The metaphorical juxtapositions, for instance, are meant to upset accepted notions about violence and the causes of violence. The connections that link the hood, the white-collar managers and the Eichmann are outlandish, but that is the point. The metaphors attempt to disrupt "business as usual" in order to move readers to see the reality of violence as it is. So too allusive wandering requires diligent, dedicated readers to move beyond preconceived understandings of reality into wider, more complex, less graspable visions. One might understand Catholicism as an organization that supports the civic order in which it finds itself. To wander with John XXIII and Augustine, however, is to wander into a counter-cultural world. This counter-cultural world disrupts any understanding of Catholicism and culture that permits the blessing of soldiers who labor for the governments and corporations which organize murder.

The metaphorical play and allusive, intertextual wandering of Merton's theopolitical essays lead the reader into the possibility that the world is not as it appears that, in fact, nothing is as it is. It is in this frame of disrupted perceptions that the real Thomas Merton stands, or so it seems.

29. Anne E. Carr, *A Search for Wisdom and Spirit: Thomas Merton's Theology of Self* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988) 78–9, 81–6.

30. Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968) 49.