

# Thomas Merton's Revelation of Justice & Revolutions of Love: Perspectives from the San Diego Conference

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The Ninth General Meeting of the International Thomas Merton Society held in San Diego in June of 2005 focused attention on Merton's contribution to our understanding of the essential relation between spiritual formation and social action. In this volume of *The Merton Annual*, ten of the presenters have developed their papers into articles which continue the conversations initiated at that meeting. It has been rewarding to work as a guest editor with these writers whose academic disciplines and professional expertise contribute new insights into the life, work, and influence of Merton. The articles have been arranged in the following manner. Judith Hunter, Michael Sobocinski, and Fred Herron situate Merton's work within historical and intellectual contexts that inform our understanding of his monastic vocation of dissent, protest, and affirmation that challenged his contemporaries to rethink critical social issues confronting the world. Monica Weis, Lucien Miller, and John Collins direct our attention to places in Merton's life where revelations of the hidden wholeness of love became revolutions for justice and peace. Patrick F. O'Connell, James Harford, and Joseph Raab, exploring one of those places, open new inquiries into Merton's poetry, correspondence, and friendships with regard to his work on war and peace. And, finally, Paul Dekar draws our attention to Merton's spiritual formation and the monastic discipline of simplicity as a contributing factor to his social witness.

**Judith Hunter's** "No Solution in Withdrawal; No Solution in Conforming: Merton, Teilhard, Kung, and Curran" places Merton's dissent within the 1960's when notable Roman Catholics raised their voices in loyal opposition to the teachings of the Church. The author invites the reader to consider with her a perplexing question: "Why would these men express ideas that they knew

would not be welcomed by Rome. All were ordered by Rome to stop expressing these ideas. All continued to love the church. None of them walked out. Why not?" This article compares and contrast ways in which these four men dissented and addressed the pressing issue of their days.

**Michael Sobocinski's** "The Psychology of Hatred & the Role of Early Relationships in Discovering Our True Self" illuminates our understanding of Merton's understanding of the self with insights from modern psychology on the interpersonal, multicultural, and constructivist perspectives self with regard to love and hate as epistemologies for justice. Love and hate define self and other. Love frees both self and other to realize the freedom that comes with full personhood, while hate restricts, confines, and ultimately imprisons us in our efforts at fleeing the anxious awareness of separation. Against this understanding of the self, Sobocinski demonstrates how questions of justice became radically transformed in Merton's writings.

**Fred W. Herron** in "The Bricoleur in the Monastery; Tactics in a Nothing Place" notes Merton's "continual ability to prompt, chide and even infuriate people who approach his work from a variety of perspectives" and "his ability to confirm the preconceived notions of so many of those who approach his work from such widely disparate and sometimes contradictory points of view." With this in mind, he turns to the French Jesuit historian, theologian and ethnologist Michel DeCerteau whose work on the *bricoleur* offers insights into ways in which Merton's complex and perplexing self might be understood as an authentic and creative process of disintegration of the social and cultural self and the reintegration of that self in Christ as a new creation.

**Monica Weis's** "Kindred Spirits in Revelation and Revolution: Carson & Merton" inquires into a moment in Merton's life where revelation moved to revolution; a moment initiated by a letter written by Merton in January of 1963 to Rachel Carson in response to her book, *Silent Spring*. Carson's book resonated with Merton's prophetic vocation and vision of creation as interconnected and interdependent. Monica Weis traces the movement in Merton's life from a contemplative appreciation of nature to a deepening sense of environmental justice from which would eventually

emerge social protest against the destruction of nature by the modern world.

**Lucien Miller's** "Merton—John Wu Letters: The Lord as Postman" presents the correspondence between Merton and John Wu as "a hidden yet seminal movement among the religious encounters between East and West in the Twentieth century." Noting these two men were opposites in politics, brothers in spirit, and mourners over the loss of a woman, Lucien demonstrates how they inspired, taught and consoled each other through a correspondence that lasted six and one-half years. Perhaps more importantly, we are led to see how emerging from this correspondence was the growing awareness that Western Christianity needs the East, and that a reawakening to the Gospel can occur through an encounter with Asian traditions.

**John P. Collins's** "From 'Political Dance of Death' to 'General Dance.' An Insight into the Cold War Letters" traces the movement in Merton's thought on war and peace from the propensity for self-destruction, the political dance of death, to the general dance with God which offers the world an opportunity to discover the deeper reality of unity and harmony that alone is able to overcome disunity and separation that drives the military-industrial machines of nations to manufacture war.

**Patrick F. O'Connell's** "The Landscape of Disaster: The War Poems of Thomas Merton" draws our attention to poetry written during the period preceding Merton's entrance into the Abbey of Gethsemani in December of 1941 which provides an opportunity "both to observe Merton's struggles with the moral, political and spiritual issues of war at this critical point in his life, and to see him trying to articulate these struggles in poems that are aesthetically coherent and intellectually and emotionally effective." O'Connell presents an overview, in roughly chronological order, of Thomas Merton's premonastic war poems, highlighting the particular approach to the war taken in each poem.

**James Harford's** "Lax, Merton, and Rice on War and Peace" recalls Merton's lifelong friendship with Robert Lax and Edward Rice, their correspondence, and articles for *Jubilee*, the magazine that all three worked on for fifteen years. Harford shows how

these letters and articles, as well as, writings in other publications, share their thoughts on the absurdity and cruelty of war, and of the importance of peace activism. His book length study of this same subject is also published this year.

**Joseph Quinn Raab's** "Comrades for Peace: Merton, the Dalai Lama and the Preferential Option for Nonviolence" recalls the encounter between Thomas Merton and the Dalai Lama, the two most prominent monks of modern times, and then seeks to clarify the religious sources of their common commitment to nonviolence with a special emphasis on its monastic character. Finally, Joseph Raab offers some reflections on the contribution of their legacy to the growing momentum of the nonviolent option in Christian theology and practice.

**Paul R. Dekar's** "The Spirit of Simplicity: Merton on Simplification of Life" considers an early and less-known book on the subject of simplicity in the Cistercian tradition. In addition to providing historical background and summary of its contents, Dekar shows how the insights developed in this early work continue to unfold in later works and why this revival of monastic values is of importance to the world today as it struggles against narcissism, depersonalization and totalitarian structures.

Together, these papers provide us with an opportunity to clarify and deepen our understanding of Merton as a monk who struggled with himself and the world in which he lived and in that struggle discovered his authentic self, a self grounded in God's love; a love that compelled him to participate in a community of dissenters and protestors who call us to join with them in the movement from revelation to revolution.