

Thomas Merton and Racial Reconciliation

Albert Raboteau

April 4th 1968—For Martin Luther King

On a rainy night
On a rainy night in April
When everybody ran
Said the minister

On a balcony
Of a hotel in Tennessee
“We came at once
Upstairs”

On a night
On a rainy night in April
When the shot was fired
Said the minister

“We came at once upstairs
And found him lying
After the tornado
On the balcony
We came at once upstairs”

On a rainy night
He was our hope
And we found a tornado
Said the minister.

And a well-dressed white man
Said the minister.
Dropped the telescopic storm

And he ran
(The well-dressed minister of death)
He ran
He ran away

And on the balcony
Said the minister
We found
Everybody dying

This Merton poem came to my mind when I first visited the Lorraine Motel, the site of King's assassination in Memphis. The motel, now remodeled as a museum, was much smaller than I expected for such a massive event. Yet, it keeps the event in memory, holds it in our memory, as does Merton's poem, waiting to be mourned.

*

Merton's reflections on the nation's racial problem dated back at least to 1941, when he volunteered to work in central Harlem at Friendship House, a recreation program, clothing center, and library, founded by the Baroness Catherine DeHueck. Impressed by her dedication to serving the poor, Merton seriously considered giving up his teaching position at St. Bonaventure's College to join the staff at Friendship House full-time. However, a retreat at the Cistercian monastery of Our Lady of Gethsemani in Kentucky had left Merton with a strong attraction for the monastic life. During the fall of 1941, three years after his conversion to Catholicism, he faced a difficult choice between the active life of serving the poor in Harlem and the ascetic life of contemplative solitude at Gethsemani. In his journal entry for 30 November Merton attempted to clarify what attracted him to Harlem:

"A saintly woman in the tenements, was dying of cancer... but she was very holy and her holiness was in this suffering, and the Blessed Virgin has appeared to her... There is no doubt that the Blessed Virgin Mary, when she appears to people in this country, appears in places like Harlem—or Gethsemani, Harlem—or Gethsemani—are the stables of Bethlehem where Christ is born among the outcast and the poor. And where He is, we must also be. I know He is in Harlem, no doubt, and would gladly live where He is and serve Him there.¹

Merton was impressed not only by the poverty of Harlem, but also by the mute judgment of its oppressed citizens against the degradation of the larger white society whose vices Harlem mirrored. He viewed both Harlem and Gethsemani as symbols of judgment and sites of holiness forestalling God's wrath against an evil society. On November 23, 1941 he attended a retreat for Friendship House volunteers led by Fr. Paul Hanley Furfey, a professor of sociology and social justice advocate from Catholic University. Furfey focused his reflections on the Mystical Body of Christ, "the one infinite source of life," as Merton put it, "that nourishes both Friendship

House and the Trappists." Merton claimed that he returned from the retreat "all on fire with it."² Perhaps we can get a hint of Fr. Furfey's message from his book *Fire on the Earth*, published a few years before the retreat. Emphasizing the social implications of the doctrine of the Mystical Body, he wrote:

If we realize that we are each bound to the other members of the human race in the Mystical Body of Christ, that we must love the human race as a whole, and love all the groups which constitute it, then we can scarcely fail to realize the evil as well as the stupidity of hating any part of the Mystical Body of Christ... There are persons who feel quite acutely the duty of individual kindness to persons of other races, and yet who seem to be totally unconscious of the injustice of race relations as a whole...who are violently antagonistic to any effort to reform the political, economic, social, and even religious oppression of the colored race. Would this be possible to any one who really believed in the doctrine of the Mystical Body?³

Would it be Harlem or Gethsemani? Merton resolved the choice by entering the monastery in December 1941, but he did not forget Harlem, or the racial injustice that its poverty revealed, or Fr. Furfey's notion of the interdependence of the races.

Twenty years later, Merton, whose post-*Seven Storey Mountain* books on contemplation and monasticism, had continued to attract a wide readership, suddenly began to speak out forcefully on social issues -- on war and nonviolence in 1961, and on civil rights and race in 1963. What, many of his readers wondered, did this new "turn toward the world" have to do with spirituality? Quite a lot as one of his most perceptive interpreters argues:

What had happened to him was that his solitude had issued into what all true solitude must eventually become: compassion. Finding God in his solitude, he found God's people, who are inseparable from God and who, at the deepest level of their being...are at one with one another in God, the Hidden Ground of Love of all that is. This sense of compassion bred in solitude... moved him to look once again at the world he thought he had left irrevocably twenty years earlier...when he had entered the monastery. He now felt a duty, precisely because he was a contemplative, to speak out...⁴

Merton asserted that it was the particular task of the contemplative monk, as a man on the margins, to speak out of his silence and solitude with an independent voice in order to clarify for those who were “completely immersed in other cares” the true value of the human person amid the illusions with which mass society surrounds modern people at every turn.

During the summer of 1963 Merton wrote a series of three “Letters to a White Liberal.” Revised and published in several journals, they formed a major part of *Seeds of Destruction*, published in 1964. The book attracted critical attention, especially a negative review in the “Book World” Sunday Supplement to the *New York Herald Tribune* by the University of Chicago historian of Christianity Martin Marty. Taking issue with Merton’s criticism of white liberals and his assessment of the limitations of the Civil Rights movement, Marty accused Merton of posing as the white James Baldwin from behind the safety of his monastery’s walls.

Marty was upset especially by Merton’s accusation that white liberals were unprepared for the radical social change required to effectively solve America’s race problem. White Americans were primarily interested in profits not persons. A truly radical reordering of priorities was needed. Once they realized the cost of such change, white liberals would end up supporting the status quo. Addressing white liberals directly, Merton claimed that their participation in the March on Washington was not because the Negro needed them, but because they needed the Negro. Actually their participation blunted the revolutionary impact of the March. Mincing no words, Merton lambasted the liberal’s hypocrisy:

“North or South, integration is always going to be not on our street but ‘somewhere else.’ That perhaps accounts for the extraordinary zeal with which the North insists upon integration in the South, while treating the Northern Negro as if he were invisible, and flatly refusing to let him take shape in full view, lest he demand the treatment due to a human person and a free citizen of this nation.”⁵

Merton had indeed read James Baldwin’s *Nobody Knows My Name* (1961) and *The Fire Next Time* (1963) and agreed with Baldwin’s “statements about the futility and helplessness of white liberals, who sympathize but never do anything.” Merton, locating himself alongside the liberal as a “guilty bystander,” observed that their and his “impotency is in our love of abstraction, our inability to

connect with a valid image of reality. In a word, total alienation is the real tragedy, the real root of our helplessness. And our lotus-eating economy is responsible for that."⁶ The roots of white racism he argued were tangled up with the materialism, alienation, fear, and violence spawned by a society bent on mindless, mass consumption. Consumerism commodified human relationships and trivialized freedom of choice, so that individuals became alienated not only from others, but also from themselves. "Our trouble," he stated in *Seeds of Destruction*, is that we are alienated from our own personal reality, our true self. We do not believe in anything but money and the power of the enjoyment which comes from the possession of money."⁷ The ironic tragedy of this condition is that the white man who thinks himself to be free "is actually the victim of the same servitudes which he has imposed on the Negro: passive subjection to the...commercial society that he has tried to create for himself, and which is shot through with falsity and unfreedom from top to bottom. He makes a great deal of fuss about 'individual freedom' but one may ask if such freedom really exists. Is there really a genuine freedom for the person or only the irresponsibility of the atomized individual members of mass society?"⁸ The alienation of the person from the true self, Merton insisted, led to violence: "The problem of racial conflict is part and parcel of the whole problem of human violence... all the way up from the suppressed inarticulate hate feelings of interpersonal family and job conflicts to the question of the H-bomb and mass extermination. The problem is in ourselves. It is only one symptom."⁹ Merton's pessimistic assessment, then, of the Civil Rights movement was due to his analysis of the need for profound social change, if the deep and tangled sources of the racial problem were ever to be addressed.

He agreed with white liberals that passing Civil Rights legislation was good and necessary, but, he also concluded it was insufficient. How effectively and quickly would the laws be enacted on the local level? The resistance of southern whites to desegregation, backed by outright violence, seemed intransigent. In the North, "where such rights are still guaranteed in theory more than practice" Civil Rights legislation aroused "pressures and animosities" between whites and blacks. He noted perceptively that even if the law "were perfectly enforced it would still not be able to meet critical problems that were more strictly economic and sociological (jobs, housing, delinquency, irresponsible violence)." In short

he concluded, "Civil Rights legislation is not the end of the battle but only the beginning of a new and more critical phase in the conflict."¹⁰ Our problem is that too many of us have concluded that the battle already is won.

The paternalistic attitudes of white liberals would have to give way to a new modesty and respect for the independent leadership of blacks in the movement. White benevolence still served as a mask for white leadership, and, blacks readily saw it for what it was: an attempt to hold onto some control over the "Negro's fight for rights, in order to be able to apply the brakes when necessary." For the African-American knows, Merton caustically observed, "that your material comforts, your security, and your congenial relations with the establishment are much more important to you than your rather volatile idealism, and that when the game gets rough you will be quick to see your own interests menaced by his demands. And you will sell him down the river for the five hundredth time in order to protect yourself."¹¹

Merton had no doubt that the Civil Rights movement was a *kairos* for African Americans, a providentially appointed moment in history: "It is the Lord of History who demands of the Negro a complete break with his past servitudes. And the break must be made by the Negro himself without any need of the white man's paternalistic approval. It is absolutely necessary for the Negro to dissolve all bonds that hold him, like a navel cord, in passive dependence on the good pleasure of the white man's society."¹²

According to Merton, "one of the most striking and mysterious characteristics of the Negro freedom movement ... is this sense, which awakening everywhere in the Negro masses of the South, especially in the youth, has brought them by the hundreds and thousands out of the ghettos" and "has moved them to action." Earlier, than most, he understood the African-American movement to be part of a larger worldwide movement by which "the entire Negro race, and all the vast majority of 'Colored races' all over the world, have suddenly and spontaneously become conscious of their real power and... of a destiny that is all their own."¹³

But this destiny was not solely theirs alone. Black writers, such as James Baldwin and William Melvin Kelley, insisted that "there is one *kairos* for everybody. The time that has providentially come for the black man is also providential for the white man." Acknowledging both authors' distrust and alienation from Christianity, Merton insisted that

[Their] view is still deeply Christian and implies a substantially Christian faith in the spiritual dynamism with which man freely creates his own history, not as an autonomous and titanic self-affirmation, but in obedience to the mystery of love and freedom at work under the surface of human events. In the light of this, then, the hour of freedom is seen also as an hour of salvation. But it is not an hour of salvation for the Negro only. The white man, if he can possibly open the ears of his heart and listen intently enough to hear what the Negro is now hearing, can recognize that he is himself called to freedom and to salvation in the same *kairos* of events which he is now, in so many different ways, opposing or resisting.¹⁴

Why should the white man listen? Merton's answer to this question harkens back to his youthful intuition of Harlem as a site of holiness and of judgment. In a passage that rivals Baldwin for eloquence, Merton interpreted the profoundly religious meaning of the nonviolent Civil Rights movement to his white readers, many of whom had initially viewed it as a merely political conflict between extremists:

The Negro children of Birmingham, who walked calmly up to the police dogs that lunged at them with a fury capable of tearing their small bodies to pieces, were not only confronting the truth in an exalted moment of faith, a providential *kairos*. They were also in their simplicity, bearing heroic Christian witness to the truth, for they were exposing their bodies to death in order to show God and man that they believed in the just rights of their people, knew that those rights had been unjustly, shamefully and systematically violated, and realized that the violation called for expiation and redemptive protest, because it was an offense against God and His truth. They were stating clearly that the time had come where such violations could no longer be tolerated. These Negro followers of Dr. King are convinced that there is more at stake than civil rights. They believe that the survival of America is itself in question.... [They] are not simply judging the white man and rejecting him. On the contrary, they are seeking by Christian love and sacrifice to redeem him, to enlighten him, so as...to awaken his mind and his conscience, and stir him to initiate the reform and renewal which may still be capable of saving our society.¹⁵

Why should the white man listen?—because of the authenticity of the black voice, an authenticity born of suffering:

The voice of the American Negro began to be heard long ago, even in the days of his enslavement. He sang of the great mysteries of the Old Testament, the *magnalia dei* which are at the heart of the Christian liturgy. In a perfect...spontaneous spirit of prayer and prophecy, the Negro spirituals of the last century remain as classic examples of what a living liturgical hymnody ought to be, and how it comes into being...where men suffer oppression, where they are deprived of identity, where their lives are robbed of meaning, and where the desire of freedom and the imperative demand of truth forces them to give it meaning: a religious meaning. Such religion is...a prophetic fire of love and courage, fanned by the breathing of the Spirit of God who speaks to the heart of His children in order to lead them out of bondage. Hence the numinous force of the...‘Freedom Songs’ which he now sings, in the Baptist Churches of the South where he prepares to march out and face the police of states...which arm themselves against him with clubs, fire hoses, police dogs and electric cattle prods, throwing their jails wide-open to receive him. His song continues to resound in prison like the songs of Paul and his companions in the Acts of the Apostles.¹⁶

If whites chose not to listen to the message that blacks were trying to give America, Merton warned at the end of his “Letters to a White Liberal,” “the merciful *kairos* of truth will turn into the dark hour of destruction and hate.”¹⁷

On August 30, 1967, an open letter from Martin Marty to Thomas Merton appeared in the *National Catholic Reporter*. Near the end of the “long hot Summer of Sixty Seven” Marty took occasion to apologize for his negative 1963 review of Merton’s *Seeds of Destruction*. Merton had, after all, he acknowledged, “told it like it is, and like it probably will be.” Responding in the same Journal a few weeks later, Merton expressed his pleasure at the renewal of their friendship but remained somber about the outbreak of racial riots around the country. “The injustice and cruelty which are by now endemic beneath the surface of our bland and seemingly benign society are too deep and too serious to be cured by legislation...[The]un-Christianity of American Christianity is going to be inexorably exposed and judged: mine perhaps, included.” He

tentatively held out "some hope that out of this hot summer we may at last get the serious beginning of a really effective radical coalition where, in spite of all the black separatism...there may in fact be collaboration between white and black on the left toward peace, new horizons constructive change..."¹⁸

In the two and a half years between Marty's review and his recantation, the rhetoric of the "black liberation struggle" seemed to have shifted from integration to black power, and from King's non-violence to Malcolm X's "by any means necessary."

Responding to the appeals for black power, Merton took the militancy of H. Rap Brown and Stokely Carmichael seriously, refused to demonize them, and carefully explained the sources of their anger in the violence suffered by black people and their impatience at the slow pace of change. He wrote an appreciative review of Malcolm X's posthumous *Autobiography*, concluding that Malcolm was "a person whose struggles are understandable, whose errors we can condone. He was a fighter whose sincerity and courage we cannot help admiring, and who might have become a genuine revolutionary leader—with portentous effect in American society!"¹⁹

All the while he extended his discussion of racism beyond the situation of African-Americans to include Indians in North and South America and the cargo cults of Melanesia, noting their common experience of western imperialism. "In one word, the ultimate violence which the American white man, like the European white man, has exerted in all unconscious 'good faith' upon the colored races of the earth (and above all on the Negro) has been to impose on them invented identities, to place them in positions of subservience and helplessness in which they themselves came to believe only in the identities which have been conferred upon them."²⁰ In his last published statement on race, "From Nonviolence to Black Power," published in 1968 in *Faith and Violence*, Merton described his own role in the Civil Rights struggle: "The job of the white Christian is then partly a job of diagnosis and criticism, a prophetic task of finding and identifying the injustice which is the cause of all violence, both white and black, which is also the root of war..."²¹ Aware that the *kairos* moment of Christian non-violence seemed to have passed, he did not despair, but continued to hope for the realization of an earlier vision, a Catholic approach to the issue of race which bore a family resemblance to the doctrine of

the Mystical Body as propounded by Fr. Furfey's retreat so many years before:

A genuinely Catholic approach to the Negro would assume not only that the white and the Negro are essentially equal in dignity (and this, I think we do generally assume) but also that they are brothers in the fullest sense of the word. This means to say a genuinely Catholic attitude in matters of race is one which concretely accepts and fully recognizes the fact that different races and cultures are correlative. They mutually complete one another. The white man needs the Negro, and needs to know that he needs him. White calls for black just as black calls for white. Our significance as white men is to be seen entirely in the fact that all men are not white. Until this fact is grasped, we will never realize our true place in the world, and we will never achieve what we are meant to achieve in it.²²

In this passage, I believe, Merton echoes the closing sentences of Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*: "If we—and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others—do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world."²³

With extraordinary sensitivity and sympathy Merton listened to the voices of black Americans and tried with honesty and candor to convey what they were saying during a time of social crisis to white Americans. Seeking to communicate across a racial divide that many whites did not even perceive, he pressed on toward the ultimate end of communication: compassion and community, based upon his own contemplative experience of the hidden wholeness of us all. The path to racial reconciliation remains, as he predicted, difficult and steep.

1. It requires the radical realization that alienation from our true selves, fed and disguised by mass consumerism, leads to violence and to the reduction of persons into things. As Martin Luther King put it "we must move rapidly from a thing oriented society to a person oriented society."

2. Contemplation and action need to be joined lest our activism become merely another form of violence and our contemplation another form of self gratification. Contemplative silence, solitude, and simplicity are necessary in order to come into contact with the

true self, what the Orthodox Christian tradition calls “hesychia”—the stillness at the heart, the center of each of us. But action is also required in identification with, solidarity with, presence among the poor, in the tradition of Dorothy Day, Catherine DeHueck, and St. Maria of Paris, lest we remain “guilty bystanders,” obsessed by our desire to enjoy “spiritual” experiences.

3. Kairos time may be accurate, but misleading, if we use it as an excuse for inaction. “The time has passed; the movement is over.” It is not over, unless it is over in our lives. The struggle goes on in local communities across the nation, just as it did before “the movement” began. We can get stuck within the past as a recollection of dead heroes to be memorialized in Civil Rights museums. Our memory of the struggle for racial and economic justice needs to be enlivened by a sense of liturgical memory or *anamnesis*. *Anamnesis* is our response to Jesus’ words at the Last Supper: “Do this in remembrance of me.” It is our Eucharistic remembrance and repetition of his transformation of bread and wine into his body and blood, which is then extended out into the world in the “liturgy after the liturgy,” where we see the body of Christ, as Mother Teresa and St. John Chrysostom remind us, in the distressing disguise of our poor and oppressed brothers and sisters.

4. Moreover, this re/membering involves telling and listening to our stories, sharing them with each other truthfully and receiving them openly so that our hard hearts may be softened to *penthos* – a sorrowful mourning for our nation’s history of racism. This mourning, as Merton (and King) well knew, is a difficult but necessary step before we can be comforted and truly reconciled.

Endnotes

1. Thomas Merton, *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation*, ed. by Patrick Hart, O.C.S.O. (New York: Harper Collins, 1995), p. 464.

2. Letter of Thomas Merton to Catherine DeHueck Doherty, December 6, 1941, *The Hidden Ground of Love*, ed. by William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985), p. 10.

3. Paul Hanley Furfey, *Fire on the Earth* (New York: Macmillan, 1943) pp. 51-52.

4. Thomas Merton, *Passion for Peace: The Social Essays*, ed. by William H. Shannon (New York: Crossroad, 1997) pp. 2-3. The quotation is from Shannon’s Introduction. *Passion for Peace* includes the essays in “Part One: Black Revolution” from *Seeds of Destruction* (1964) as well as several later essays of Merton on race.

5. Merton, *Passion for Peace*, p. 163.
6. Merton's journal entry of February 13, 1963, published in *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years*, ed. by Victor A. Kramer (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), p. 297.
7. *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1964) p. 25.
8. *Passion for Peace*, p. 196.
9. *Passion for Peace*, p. 289.
10. *Passion for Peace*, p. 155.
11. *Passion for Peace*, p. 169.
12. *Passion for Peace*, p. 196.
13. *Passion for Peace*, p. 191-192.
14. *Passion for Peace*, pp. 197-198.
15. *Passion for Peace*, pp. 174-175
16. *Passion for Peace*, pp. 189-190.
17. *Passion for Peace*, p. 187.
18. *Hidden Ground of Love*, pp. 456-457.
19. *Passion for Peace*, p. 275
20. Thomas Merton, *Ishi Means Man* (Greensboro, NC: Unicorn Press, 1976), p. 11.
21. Reprinted in *Passion for Peace*, p. 216
22. *Passion for Peace*, p. 183.
23. James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (1963, reprinted New York: Modern Library, 1995), pp. 104-105.