

# PROPHET OF JUSTICE AND PEACE

## Review of *THE SOCIAL THOUGHT OF THOMAS MERTON*

by Rev. David W. Givey

— Reviewed by **M. Madeline Abdelnour, S.C.N.**

Of the many works of Thomas Merton, none perhaps have more felt relevance than those embodying his social analyses and criticisms. Our own times demand an urgency with regard to social issues, especially that of nuclear war. The decade following Merton's death in 1968 has seen a maturing and strengthening of the peace movement, with many leaders, not a handful as formerly, facing imprisonment for the cause of peace and justice. Just as in Merton's lifetime such leaders sought him out to test, clarify and find support in their efforts, so today Thomas Merton is the invisible mentor for persons seriously and actively in quest of peace and justice through non-violent resistance.

Rev. David W. Givey, of Merion Mercy College in Pennsylvania, in his recently published work *THE SOCIAL THOUGHT OF THOMAS MERTON*, subtitled *THE WAY OF NONVIOLENCE AND PEACE FOR THE FUTURE*, has put together in a succinct and very effective way a good summary of Merton's social writings.

While some attention is given to Racism, the major portion of the book is given over to non-violence with relation to peace-making. This is done not only in reference to Merton's formal analysis of non-violence in *FAITH AND VIOLENCE* and other less extensive works, but also in reviewing lives of persons for whom non-violence was the characteristic lifestyle. Among these are Gandhi, Franz Jagerstatter, Father Alfred Delp, Father Max Metzger, Simone Weil, and Martin Luther King.

Givey also shows the important influence of Pope John XXIII and *Pacem in Terris* in confirming Merton's own attitude toward war and peace, good and evil in the human family. Both men, Givey points out, were basically optimistic with regard to human nature and strongly believed in the rights and dignity of the human person. For them evil was not seen as final and irreversible but as capable of being converted and transformed to good through forgiveness. In this way true liberation comes about where both the oppressor and oppressed are liberated together.



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Early in the book Givey assists the reader in bridging the gap of understanding Merton as a solitary, a monk living a life based upon enclosure and separation from the world, and that of a thorough-going Christian immersed in the world of his day and intensely concerned with its future. The very fidelity of Merton to a life of contemplation and a quest for inner unity and true self-knowledge is seen as the matrix from which his sense of oneness with all humanity emerges and grows strong. To live as a Christian himself was not enough for Merton. It was something that needed to be made possible for others. But, he realized, Christian living supposes a balanced and peaceful social order. Therefore we find him pressing toward a sapiential view of life in its wholeness, a life with stability and purpose. For Merton, moral passivity was considered one of the most terrible dangers of our times. For change to come about in society, individuals would have to be transformed. As Pope Paul VI said to the United Nations: "There will be no disarmament of weapons if there is no disarmament of hearts."

Interestingly, Givey points out that Merton's newly acquired American citizenship (1953) coupled with a sense of Christian responsibility also served as an impetus to be articulate with regard to American involvement in the world. With characteristic courage, Merton (SEEDS OF DESTRUCTION) exposes the American concept of the "free world" as primarily the world in which business is free; where the freedom of persons is subordinated to the most basic freedom of all, namely, to make money.

Merton also attacks "white collar" violence which is outwardly ordered and respectable but systematically bent on destruction.

When one realizes such criticisms of Merton's were written in the early sixties, one can only marvel at the insight and foresight of the man, and even, after his death, give to him a respectful hearing before it is too late.

THE SOCIAL THOUGHT OF THOMAS MERTON by Father David Givey will serve as a worthwhile guide not only as an introduction to non-violence as delineated by Thomas Merton, but also for persons well acquainted with this prophet of justice and peace. It could well be used with college students and in discussion groups. Givey writes with clarity and conciseness, dealing with his subject in 109 well-written pages. Especially valuable is a summary of the development of the Just War Theory from early Christian writers such as Origen and Augustine to St. Thomas and into the present.

Some will also benefit from Givey's analysis of Merton's thought process following, he believes, typical Hegelian modality. Some may find it too "rational" an explanation of the contemplative's insight and awareness of connections.

The book also includes a prologue by the renowned John Tracy Ellis, a foreword by Brother Patrick Hart of Gethsemani and an epilogue by Cardinal Krol of Philadelphia. Each of these persons underscores the value of Father Givey's work on Merton in light of the most pressing task of our time: to become non-violent peacemakers in a world of violence. Thomas Merton has been given to us as a uniquely gifted brother leading the way.