

The Challenge of Radical Humility

Review of

Making Peace in the Post-Christian Era:

Thomas Merton's Challenge to the 'War on Terror'

By Valerie Flessati, Gerry McFlynn and Anthony Maggs

London: Pax Christi, 2006

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Reviewed by **David A. Griffith**

Recently I attended the Thomas Merton Center of Pittsburgh's annual award dinner, where Angela Y. Davis, African-American activist, revolutionary and professor was to be recognized, joining a list of distinguished awardees, including Father Daniel Berrigan. I have to admit that I did not see the connection between Davis and Merton's work, and a bad feeling crept over me. But as I stood in the grand dining room of the Sheraton and mingled with scores of delightful people who I thought must be of like mind, I pushed this bias aside. By the end of the three-hour dinner and ceremony that bad feeling had turned to utter disbelief. For at no point during the evening was Thomas Merton, the man, acknowledged, nor was there even a brief obligatory statement concerning his career as a writer, thinker and monk and its influence on the work of the Merton Center. Instead, Angela Davis spent an hour rambling on about -isms – feminism, racism, militarism, consumerism – leaving out, I'm sure by design, Catholicism.

With this experience as a lens, I read *Making Peace in the Post-Christian Era*. This is why when I first read the ambitious, risky subtitle of this book – *Thomas Merton's Challenge to the 'War on Terror'* – I once again had a bad feeling. The introduction further intensified this bad feeling: “the ‘war on terror’ has so many parallels with the earlier Cold War on Communism” (1). “Oh no,” I thought. It seemed that this slim volume might fall into the same trap as Davis (and so many politically partisan monographs on the “war on terror”) in which jargon-heavy bombast is passed off under the guise of scholarship and in which Merton is reduced to merely an occasion to speak vaguely about social justice. Thankfully, these papers, taken together, are nothing of the sort. Rather, the reader is more likely to come away feeling empowered by its thoughtful scope, which leads us from the pre-Vatican II infancy of the global Catholic peace movement and the ways in which Merton played a crucial supportive role in its burgeoning, to the contemporary moment where the Church and its members are called to look upon Merton's rich and challenging legacy and ask, “What now?”

This book is comprised of three papers delivered in 2005 at a conference sponsored by Pax Christi, UK and the British Merton Society, examining the ways in which Thomas Merton's writ-

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ings, especially his *Peace in the Post-Christian Era* and *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, come to bear on the “war on terror.”

The first essay, Valerie Flessati’s “Thomas Merton and Pax Christi” (2-8) is the foundation on which the other two essays are built, giving us a concise overview of the rise of the British peace society, PAX, and how it came to be the epicenter of the world Catholic peace movement. It did so in large part because it attracted the admiration of Thomas Merton, who, according to Flessati, believed (“perhaps naively”) that the English had resisted worshipping the “gods of money and militarism” (7). Merton’s support of the organization and its publication, *PAX Bulletin*, where he published several excerpts from the *Peace in the Post-Christian Era* manuscript, sparked its growth and made it a beacon for Catholics on both sides of the Atlantic. Charles Thompson, editor of the bulletin, is revealed by Flessati to be the dynamo driving the urgent protest in the middle sixties against war and the use of nuclear weapons. The bulletin and yearly conferences sponsored by PAX at the Dominican retreat centre, Spode House, informed, organized and mobilized the Catholic peace movement by bringing together Catholic peace activists for discussion and strategy sessions. With the vision of Thompson and the sponsorship of Merton, PAX eventually, through a complex chain of events that really demands more attention and space than Flessati gives it, successfully lobbied to have the morality of war and the role of individual conscience moved onto the agenda for the Second Vatican Council. But despite the summarized tone, Flessati’s contribution is important in that it beautifully complicates that seminal period in the history of Catholic peace activism.

Fr. Gerry McFlynn’s paper, “Merton Today: No Guilty Bystander” (9-24), is a more feisty and pointed excoriation of the broad support the “war on terror” has received and how that support is antithetical to the spirit of Christian witness. He cries for a return to a pre-Constantinian understanding of Christians as revolutionaries, resisters of the dominant culture and suggests that the West turn to theologians from the East on the issues of peace and justice, pointing out that they never accepted “just war” theory and therefore hold a more theologically pure view, one unsullied by the philosophical apologies for war by Constantine and Aquinas.

McFlynn frames this age-old clash by citing Merton’s response to the sentencing of Fr. Daniel Berrigan to six years in prison for his role in the burning of draft cards in Catonsville, Maryland. Merton writes: “If, in fact, I basically agree with them, then how long will I myself be out of jail? I suppose I can say ‘as long as I don’t make a special effort to get in’ – which is what they did. All I can say is that I haven’t deliberately broken any laws. But one of these days I may find myself in a position where I will have to” (9). The quotation illustrates the difficult position Merton found himself in when ordered by his religious superiors in 1962 to stop writing about politics. Cleverly, McFlynn, vice-president of Pax Christi and Director of the Irish Commission for Prisoners Overseas in England and Wales, uses Merton’s struggle to cast light on what he sees as the current predicament: Christians living in democracies that are seen as increasingly militaristic in their foreign diplomacy and totalitarian in their dealings with dissenters.

What’s fresh and poignant about McFlynn’s essay is that he dramatizes Merton’s struggle to decide what his response to militarism, racism and consumerism should be – remain an obedient contemplative and simply pray, indifferent to what happens in the world outside, or break his vows and continue publishing essays and books that radically critique what he called post-Christian culture. We see how Merton effectively redefines the aim of contemplative life as a means

of both giving himself permission to keep writing on political and social issues and to instruct lay people on how they might think of their role as (guilty) bystander. Merton wrote in *Seeds of Destruction*: “The contemplative life is not, and cannot be, a mere withdrawal, a pure negation, a turning of one’s back on the world with its suffering, its crises, its confusions and its errors” (12). McFlynn interprets: “[T]he task of the monk is to speak out of his silence and solitude from the margins of the monastery on behalf of those who were too close to the centre of things, too immersed in the daily grind of life to be able to distance themselves and have a detached view of things” (12). He astutely draws our attention to the way Merton is pitting the personalist theology of late twentieth-century Catholic peace activism (as seen with the Catholic Worker movement and the protests of the Berrigan brothers) against the Constantinian model, in which “theology served to reinforce and provide ideological support for the dominant political system” (15). It is only through prayerful contemplation that we can hope to be “subversive” because it is the only way to effectively get outside “the system” and gain a better vantage point from which to single out and correct those impediments to a clean heart and conscience.

Ultimately, though, it’s difficult to decide whether McFlynn is correct that there is an abundance of parallels between the Cold War on Communism and the “war on terror.” This is the least convincing part of his argument, not because this reviewer is not sympathetic, but because McFlynn hastily – in one paragraph – and broadly accuses the corporate media of “constantly magnify[ing]” the 9/11 attacks for profit and the neoconservatives of using the attacks for “political advantage.” He sums up his point with: “For this group and those who think like them, the attacks are the rationale for expanding a global American empire” (18). And while certainly such exploitation and profiteering goes on, the style of McFlynn’s point is more Michael Moore than Merton.

But this moment aside, McFlynn’s essay brims with erudite observations concerning how Merton can help Christians regain the pre-Constantinian view of Christian morality, defined by being “no longer at ease in the current social and political dispensation” (23) and living a life of “continual questioning underpinned by reflection” (24). In the end, McFlynn’s essay is well worth the read because he helps even the most politically squeamish see themselves as inheritors of Merton’s “theology of resistance” by virtue of the fact that one is Christian and living in an imperfect world.

Fr. Anthony Maggs’ contribution, “The Voice from the Hermitage – Thomas Merton’s Contribution to Peace,” is by far the most mystical, and it is refreshingly so, focusing on the vital importance of conversion in the life and ministry of Merton and in the lives of those who hope to work for lasting peace. Maggs quotes to us the now-famous passage from Merton’s *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* about his epiphanic conversion experience at the corner of Fourth and Walnut in Louisville:

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. The whole illusion of a separate holy existence is a dream. Not that I question the reality of my vocation or of my monastic life. But the conception of separation from the world that we have in the monastery too eas-

ily presents itself as a complete illusion (26).

Maggs, a parish priest himself, says of this moment: “I think that such a conversion moment is really so necessary for anyone who wants to do anything for the world” (27). And, more importantly, that such a conversion does not make us a “different species of being, pseudo-angels, spiritual men, men of interior life Nor does it entitle one to despise the secular. Throughout the world we are in the same world as everyone” (26). But, what it does mean is that the converted eyes are opened to see militarism, racism, etc. in a different way because “we belong to God” (27).

The conclusion of the essay draws upon Archbishop Rowan Williams’ *The Truce of God* in order to drive home how “deeply radical” Jesus was. Jesus was not merely advocating “universal brotherhood” – that would have been “so much more comfortable to live with” – no, Jesus was “advocating a new creation, which turns out to be infinitely more demanding. And therefore, because of that preaching, he becomes a sign of contradiction” (32). Maggs’ essay is a fitting ending because it reminds us how contradictory, radical and controversial Merton’s example is.

However, this is not *the* end of the book. Maggs’ essay is followed by discussion questions and fascinating letters exchanged between Merton and Charles Thompson, publisher of the *Pax Bulletin*, who asks permission of Merton to publish excerpts from his finished, yet restricted, manuscript, *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*. Merton declines his request but points him to places where some pieces included in the book had been published prior to his censure and were thus available for reprinting. The letters are not scintillating but they reveal Merton’s curious obedience to his religious superiors and thus his devotion and belief in religious life – in a word, his humility. Indeed, it is the power and grace of humility that again and again is raised in this book as the answer to the “war on terror” – a potentially endless war.

It is revealing that the word “humility” never crossed the lips of Angela Davis that evening in Pittsburgh.