

Incarcerated Prophets: Crisis Letters of Thomas Merton and Martin Luther King, Jr.

By Edward K. Kaplan

Thomas Merton excelled in a powerful literary genre: letters written with intellectual curiosity, spontaneous desire to communicate, and moral passion, but also under duress. Although one could say generally that all of Merton's correspondence, as a monk vowed to silence, was written under duress, his "Cold War Letters" of 1961-1962 occur at an especially significant historical moment, a period during which fears of nuclear destruction were widespread, right before the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 that pits the United States and the Soviet Union against each other. This capacity to pen letters of prophetic insight in a time of heightened political and moral crisis links Merton with another towering religious figure of the 1960s, Martin Luther King, Jr.

The book which Merton formed of these letters has its origin in an institutional drama, a monastic predicament of censorship. He began writing essays on war and peace around 1961, and by April 1962 the superiors of his Order required him to stop publishing on these controversial issues. He was permitted only to submit essays to marginal newspapers and journals. A book he was preparing was denied permission, and only forty years later, in 2004, was Merton's *Peace in the Post-Christian Era* published by Orbis.¹

In spite of censorship, and taking into account his vow of obedience, Merton asserted his intellectual and spiritual independence by constructing a book from letters to individuals – eventually called *Cold War Letters* – which he distributed to a limited number of friends in mimeographed form – thus avoiding disobedience on a technicality. This project almost became an obsession. Merton began to distribute a first collection of forty-nine letters from April 1962. He marked the mimeographed copies "(Strictly Confidential. Not for Publication)." An augmented edition of one hundred and eleven letters was available to his friends by January 1963. In this semi-public way, Merton confronted his nation's dependence on the politics of nuclear destruction, providing readers with a spiritually radical understanding of violence, panic, and peacefulness. He had successfully circumvented the censors, his abbot, and a non-activist Church hierarchy.

After Merton's death, the letters became publicly available, at first scattered in collections of correspondence such as *The Hidden Ground of Love*² (1985) and *Witness to Freedom* (1994) – both volumes selected and edited by William Shannon. The first complete publication of *Cold War Letters* appeared in 2006, with introductory material by James Douglass, William Shannon, and Christine Bochen.³



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This journey from censorship to freedom paralleled the liberation of American Catholicism, instigated in large part by the Second Vatican Council, which began around the time of Merton's original writings on

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peace and war. In the intimate dimension, Merton's *Cold War Letters* demonstrate how he integrated within himself the monk and the prophet.

The location of the ITMS Tenth General Meeting in Memphis, where the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. succumbed to an assassin's bullet in April 1968, provides an opportunity to reflect on another "Cold War Letter," King's 1963 "Letter from Birmingham Jail," one of the great manifestos of the civil rights movement. The author's literal incarceration in jail inspired him to summarize in writing his deepest principles of nonviolence. Just as Merton wrote essays and books under the threat of ecclesiastical suppression, so Martin Luther King, Jr. struggled with his adherence to the rule of law, and the demands of his supporters, before committing himself and his movement to civil disobedience.

Both writers were "incarcerated prophets" not only because they were physically and spiritually constrained; they challenged human authority for the sake of divine truth. Their "incarceration" forced a crisis in which each witness denounced not only the ills of their society (segregationist America, addiction to military thinking, or a rigid Church hierarchy) but also the very legitimacy of obedience to law that makes those institutions function.

Merton and the Censors

Merton developed his published essays on war and violence in three stages: (1) his personal journal and letters to individuals; (2) essays published in periodicals, some of which he derived from his private writings; (3) entire books, some of which began as collected essays. His original journals having now become available, with only some names omitted for reasons of privacy, we can verify how Merton habitually mined these journals as raw material for his publications. During the summer of 1961, Merton wrote several pieces on war which he placed in newspapers or periodicals. He wrote a poem on Auschwitz, "Chant to be Used in Processions around a Site with Furnaces," a prose piece entitled "Original Child Bomb," and a letter-essay to Pablo Antonio Cuadra, a Latin American poet.⁴ He sent a major essay, "The Root of War is Fear," to Dorothy Day for inclusion in the October 1961 *Catholic Worker* (it was reprinted in *Fellowship* magazine of 1 January 1962).⁵ Then the threat of censorship became concrete. Merton had prepared this piece for *New Seeds of Contemplation*, a book approved by the censors. He also wrote a long article, "We Have to Make Ourselves Heard," which appeared in *The Catholic Worker*, published in two issues, May and June 1962. Merton expanded those thoughts into a book, *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*, which his abbot did not even allow him to submit to the censors (Shannon 221).

Merton then circumvented the authorities with his essay, "The Root of War is Fear."⁶ He added three paragraphs at the beginning, one of which referred to a controversial article in the Jesuit magazine *America* by Father L. C. McHugh, SJ, which suggested that a man who builds a nuclear fall-out shelter for his family has the right to defend it against intruders, at the point of a gun.⁷ Merton commented: "This is a nation that claims to be fighting for religious truth along with freedom and other values of the spirit. Truly we have entered the 'post-Christian era' with a vengeance. Whether we are destroyed or whether we survive, the future is awful to contemplate" (*PP* 12). Father John L. McKenzie responded with even more vehemence in the next issue of *America*: "In a crisis which demands heroic virtue, Father L. C. McHugh and others offer us the morality of the cornered rat. . . . I can imagine Jesus Christ dying gracefully, which He did; I cannot imagine Him gunning down his neighbors to defend his rights to a hole in the ground."⁸ For the first time in his life, Merton committed himself to total peace: "The duty of the Christian in this crisis is to strive with all his power and intelligence, with his faith, hope

in Christ, and love for God and man, to do the one task which God has imposed upon us in the world today. That task is to work for the total abolition of war” (PP 12).

“The Root of War is Fear” was followed by other essays which appeared in *Commonweal*, *Jubilee*, *Fellowship*, *Blackfriars*, and more in *The Catholic Worker*. Such was the inception of Merton’s “cold war year” of prophetic writing (from October 1961 through October 1962). A new, more militantly political Thomas Merton had entered the public scene.

Before moving on to Martin Luther King, here is a passage from Merton’s Preface to *Cold War Letters*, which may explain why the authorities were so skittish. The author was particularly defensive, even aggressive: “The writer is . . . confident that the values of free speech and free opinion traditional in the western world are still not so far subverted by totalitarian thinking as to make these letters, even in their carelessness, and at times in their confusion, totally unacceptable” (CWL 3). This doesn’t sound like monastic obedience. After asserting that he “never was and never will be a Communist,” and acknowledging his “somewhat belligerent tone,” Merton boldly asserted: “These letters are, indeed, biased by a frank hatred of power politics and by an uninhibited contempt for those who use power to distort the truth or to silence it altogether” (CWL 4). Briefly put, Merton’s private distribution of his *Cold War Letters* and the limited publication of essays strain the limits of his vow of obedience.

King and the Birmingham Movement

Martin Luther King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” also marked a significant personal breakthrough, and certainly a new phase in his leadership. He told the story of its conception in his book *Why We Can’t Wait*, published in 1964,⁹ as he described his excruciating experience in jail during Easter Week of April 1963. That story was typical of the strategy, practiced by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), of organizing non-violent demonstrations with local people. When the protesters provoked arrests, the SCLC provided legal aid as well as inspiration, and money to bail the activists out of jail so they could continue their lives.

That April 1963 in Birmingham, however, King and his allies were confronting difficulties in mobilizing the local black community. At that moment in civil rights history, their decision to face arrest and incarceration was unusual for several reasons – first among them, they still needed to raise money for bond for dozens of other nonviolent protestors already in jail. A second factor was the unwillingness of SCLC leaders, up until then, to break the law, to violate a court injunction forbidding them to demonstrate or to march. Thirdly, King himself, subjectively, was apprehensive about going to jail.

King’s crisis had practical as well as personal dimensions. As a man of faith, however, he was able to form his experience of incarceration into a coherent spiritual process, which he analyzed post-facto in his book. The crisis began as the SCLC leaders decided to disobey a court injunction forbidding them to exercise their right to demonstrate. King knew that it was a risky tactic since the Alabama justice system predictably used and abused delays, as he wrote, “This has been a maliciously effective, pseudo-legal way of breaking the back of legitimate moral protest” (King 70). King and his team faced another practical obstacle when they learned that the bondsmen could no longer provide money for bail; the SCLC leaders, King included, became despondent: “Good Friday morning, early, I sat in Room 30 of the Gaston Motel discussing this crisis with twenty-four key people. As we talked, a sense of doom began to pervade the room” (King 13). One leader told King that he should not go to jail; he must remain available. As King reflected on the pros and cons, he experienced the radical solitude of leadership, of his task as prophet and witness: “I sat in the midst of the deepest quiet I have ever felt, with two dozen others in the room. There comes a time in the atmosphere of leadership when a man

surrounded by loyal friends and allies realizes he has come face to face with himself. I was alone in that crowded room” (King 13). He went off to be physically alone, and reflected deeply on his choices; he decided to go to jail: “I don’t know what will happen; I don’t know where the money will come from. But I have to make a faith act,” he later wrote (King 73).

That day King and his closest associate Ralph Abernathy led a march into downtown Birmingham, to be faced, this time without violence, by Bull Connor and his police. There was no resistance as King and Abernathy and dozens of others were arrested and taken to the Birmingham jail. There, in his cell, King braved an enforced solitude for which he was not prepared. Separated even from Abernathy, he was put into a dark cell, in solitary confinement and incommunicado.

No one was permitted to visit me, not even my lawyers. Those were the longest, most frustrating and bewildering hours I have lived. Having no contact of any kind, I was besieged with worry. . . . I suffered no physical brutality at the hands of my jailers. Some of the prison personnel were surly and abusive, but that was to be expected in southern prisons. Solitary confinement, however, was brutal enough. In the morning the sun would rise, sending shafts of light through the window high in the narrow cell which was my home. You will never know the meaning of utter darkness unless you have lain in such a dungeon, knowing that sunlight is streaming overhead and seeing only darkness below (King 74).

King yearned to speak with his wife Coretta who had just given birth to their fourth child. She called the Attorney General, Robert Kennedy, who quickly informed his brother the President of King’s situation. President John F. Kennedy himself called Coretta King and assured her that her husband would be protected. His incarceration became more livable. On Easter Sunday, King was allowed visits from his lawyers, and he spoke to his wife on the telephone.

Eventually, lawyers brought a copy of the April 13 Birmingham *News* in which King read a statement signed by eight clergymen, Catholic priests, Protestant ministers, and one rabbi, criticizing his tactics as “untimely.” The headline read: “White Clergymen Urge Local Negroes to Withdraw from Demonstrations.”¹⁰ As a response to these “white liberals,” allies, but too lukewarm, King was inspired to write his most profound statement of principled, militant, and nonviolence resistance to unjust authority.

The sequence of events that led up to his “Letter from Birmingham Jail” traced a classic pattern of a religious insight, inspiration emerging from despair. In jail, when King was informed that Harry Belafonte and other supporters had raised enough money for bail bonds, he emerged from the darkness, strengthened:

I found it hard to say what I felt. Jones’s message had brought me more than relief from the immediate concern about money; more than gratitude for the loyalty of friends far away; more than confirmation that the life of the movement could not be snuffed out. I was aware of a feeling that had been present all along below the surface of consciousness, pressed down under the weight of concern for the movement: I had never been truly in solitary confinement; God’s companionship does not stop at the door of a jail cell. I don’t know whether the sun was shining at that moment. But I know that once again I could see the light (King 75).

And with that, in his published narrative, King introduced his “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” with an author’s note explaining that he began writing it “on the margins of the newspaper in which the

statement appeared while I was in jail . . . continued on scraps of writing paper supplied by a friendly Negro trusty, and concluded on a pad my attorneys were eventually permitted to leave me” (King 76). He scrupulously concluded: “Although the text remains in substance unaltered, I have indulged in the author’s prerogative of polishing it for publication.”

The moderate white clergymen had criticized King’s impatience while questioning the morality of his nonviolent tactics: “such actions as incite hatred and violence, however technically peaceful those actions may be, have not contributed to the resolution of our local problems” (Branch 738). King felt rebuked by his fellow clergy and became angry. His “Letter from Birmingham Jail” began: “Seldom do I pause to answer all the criticism of my work and ideas” (King 76). Citing Saint Thomas Aquinas, he explained that “An unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal law and natural law. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust” (King 82).

Recognizing that he had never before written such a long letter, he ended by affirming his loyalty to truth above all: “If I have said anything that understates the truth and indicates my having patience that allows me to settle for anything less than brotherhood, I beg God to forgive me” (King 95). The published version appeared several times and was circulated widely as a pamphlet. It became Martin Luther King’s classic defense of nonviolent resistance to injustice.

Conclusion

Thomas Merton and Martin Luther King, Jr.: incarcerated prophets, yes; but more than that, they were writers, deeply introspective individuals, who were also democratic activists. The written word mediated their conflicts between sacred autonomy and narrow-minded obedience. Merton cleverly circumvented the censors; King broke an unjust law to affirm God’s standard of human equality. At the right moment, incarceration gave both Merton and King unaccustomed courage to reject unworthy compromises.

1. Thomas Merton, *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*, ed. Patricia A. Burton (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004). In his introduction to Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994), Shannon notes that Father Louis was struggling with “an authentic understanding of freedom [and] a monk’s commitment to obedience” (ix).
2. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985).
3. Thomas Merton, *Cold War Letters*, ed. William H. Shannon and Christine M. Bochen (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006); subsequent references will be cited as “CWL” parenthetically in the text.
4. Thomas Merton, *Collected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 345-49, 291-302, 372-91.
5. See chapter 11 of William H. Shannon, *Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story* (New York: Crossroad, 1992) 209-24; subsequent references will be cited as “Shannon” parenthetically in the text.
6. Thomas Merton, *Passion for Peace: The Social Essays*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Crossroad, 1995) 11-19; subsequent references will be cited as “PP” parenthetically in the text. Shannon accompanies these essays with brief analyses of their context and revisions.
7. See Shannon, introduction to Thomas Merton, “The Shelter Ethic” (PP 20).
8. See Shannon, PP 20.
9. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can’t Wait* (New York: New American Library, 1964) 70; subsequent references will be cited as “King” parenthetically in the text.
10. For further details see Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters. America in the King Years 1954-63* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988) 734-40; subsequent references will be cited as “Branch” parenthetically in the text.