

## Thomas Merton on Marx and Marxism

By **Ross Labrie**

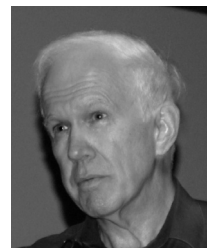
Although, following the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, some might regard an article on Marx and Marxism as flogging a dead horse, Thomas Merton would have felt this an optimal occasion on which to carry out such an assessment. The distancing from both sides in the Cold War which he felt his monastic vocation had fortuitously provided him gave rise to a viewpoint on Marxist communism and on capitalism that was both perspicacious and balanced. Moreover, the recent collapse of the stock markets in the West and the accompanying recession Merton no doubt would have felt has provided an ideal time in which to weigh the competing claims of capitalism and Marxism.

In a 1961 letter to Arthur Hays Sulzberger, Chairman of the Board of *The New York Times*, Merton proposed a series of articles designed to better inform American readers about Karl Marx and Marxism. Included in the series, which was never published, would have been a piece by Merton himself on Marx and religion.<sup>1</sup> In a journal entry from October 1957, Merton considered writing a poem about Marx, but hesitated lest he should not have “meditated and thought enough” to attempt a poem about someone whose ideas might have been responsible for propelling the world toward a final, cataclysmic war.<sup>2</sup> In a similar vein, in an entry in his journal for May 13, 1957, Merton characterized Marx as one who because of his enormous influence needed to be understood, especially in the light of Marx’s rejection of religion (SS 90).

In *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton recounted his flirtation with Marxism and with communism while he was a student at Columbia University in New York City.<sup>3</sup> Not alone among liberal students in the 1930s, Merton regarded communism as opposed to war and as a friend of the arts. For this reason, Merton scholar Patrick O’Connell has observed that Merton’s attraction to communism was in part due to “an aversion to bourgeois complacency,” an aversion that could be seen as “more aesthetic than economic.”<sup>4</sup> Merton conceded as much himself in suggesting that he had projected his spiritual struggles in the 1930s “into the sphere of economic history and the class-struggle” (SSM 132). In the 1930s, although Merton was not formally a member of the Communist Party, he participated in anti-war protest activity sponsored by it. Moreover, he affirmed the truth of Marx’s critique of capitalism and, more importantly, emphasized that Marx was correct in seeing that at least in part social injustice was linked not to individual behavior but rather to structural causes inherent in the makeup of society itself. In particular, Marx claimed that the history of human beings was the history of the domination of one social class over another.<sup>5</sup> While in seeking to redress historical wrongs Marx had demanded the release of political life and governance from religious influence, he also pointed out that such emancipation would allow religion to

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continue as religion though not in a privileged position (Marx 10, 13-14). Indeed, Marx perceived religion as an expansive self-consciousness by human beings of themselves in their fullest possible dimension, as it were, as opposed to transcendentalism (Marx 28). In spite of Marx's distancing of himself from religion, over the course of his life Merton became more and more interested in the overlapping between the social reforms suggested by Marx and the monastic life that he himself had embraced. As will be seen, this is nowhere more evident than in the final talk that Merton gave in Thailand hours before his accidental death in 1968, a talk entitled "Marxism and Monastic Perspectives," later published in *The Asian Journal*.<sup>6</sup>

In the 1930s one of Merton's close friends at Columbia, the painter Ad Reinhardt, was attached to the communist movement, and Merton, influenced by him, described a communist as one who, considered ideally, was drawn toward "one aspect" of God, the aspect that represented a love for human beings and especially for those who were the working poor.<sup>7</sup> In the New York of the 1930s Merton felt challenged by the communists, who were active in helping the poor in Harlem, and this led him to join a Christian outreach to the poor where he did not feel the sort of moral ambivalence that he did toward communism. This was the community at Friendship House which had been established by the Baroness de Hueck. There, Merton came to realize how much more active the communists were in social and political reform than were those in religious institutions.

On the whole Merton's discussion of Marx and Marxism in the 1930s and into the 1950s is negative and even scornful. His comments at times amounted to personal attacks, as in his reference to Marx in a journal entry in 1957 as a "misanthrope, with piles" who "refused to work for his living" while getting his friend Engels to support him (SS 91). On another occasion, while conceding Marx's genius, Merton argued that Marx had been driven by a neurotic guilt that issued from a "bourgeois and Jewish conscience."<sup>8</sup> In 1958 Merton wrote that because Marx had been possessed by an underlying anger and driven by the discomfort of his "boils," there were twenty million persons in Soviet work camps (MP 44). It must be remembered that Merton's early writings about Marx and Marxism were written against and colored by the background of the Cold War with its apocalyptic ambience. In the 1960s, following a cooler assessment of the confrontation of the two superpowers, Merton was able to look at the Cold War with a more analytical viewpoint from which he regarded the two antagonistic superpowers with comparable distrust.

On the particular issue of religion Merton portrayed Marx as unconsciously pursuing a secular religion while consciously employing a secular social and historical analysis. Marx, he believed, had transferred to humanity a hope for justice traditionally addressed to God. This was a grievous error in Merton's view since it presumed that human beings could purge themselves of their inherent moral weaknesses and vices. In the poem "Landscape, Prophet and Wild-Dog," which was part of the 1947 collection *Figures for an Apocalypse*,<sup>9</sup> Merton derided Marx's assumptions about the proletariat and the Marxian expectation that, freed from oppression, workers would "die of brotherly love" (l. 22). Merton's skepticism about this aspect of Marx's writings would never abate.

Merton's doubts about Marx in the 1940s and 1950s were paralleled and indeed surpassed by his growing disdain for Marxists. This began in the 1930s when Merton awoke to find that the Soviets had abandoned their anti-war rhetoric to fight in the Spanish Civil War and later signed a pact with Hitler. By the 1940s Merton had decided, as he indicated in a 1967 letter to Mario Falsina, that communism was a form of political absolutism that sacrificed "human values" to "abstract

political principles” and that relied on violence to achieve its ends.<sup>10</sup> As James Baker observed, Merton felt that Marxists, especially in Eastern Europe, had not only abandoned Marx’s ideals but had themselves become the “demons” that Marx had condemned.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, while Merton respected Marx’s analysis of the evils of capitalism, especially regarding the turning of human beings into commodities, he had harsh words for Marxism, which had turned Marx’s expectations about a classless society into a coarse materialism in which production was everything (SS 91). The irony of this situation, Merton noted, was that the reorganization of life in Eastern Europe under Lenin and Stalin had drained human existence of “personal meaning,” and led to an “economic alienation” of human beings at least equal to that which Marx had attributed to religion.<sup>12</sup>

In the early 1960s Merton’s view of both capitalism and communism moved in a new direction. This was in part due to the influence of Herbert Marcuse, an influence that was followed by that of Albert Camus and of Erich Fromm in the late 1960s. Merton paid homage to both of these writers in his talk on Marx at the aforementioned conference of monastics in Bangkok in 1968. Indeed, Merton confided to his Bangkok audience that he regarded Marcuse as a “kind of monastic thinker” (*AJ* 327). The book by Marcuse that particularly engaged Merton was *One-Dimensional Man* (1964).<sup>13</sup> In this study Marcuse argued that the differences between capitalism and communism were not as great as they might seem and that both systems were essentially totalitarian. By this Marcuse meant that while those in, say, Eastern Europe, were forced into a totalitarian pattern, those in the West were seduced into a consumerist totalitarianism driven by false needs. Furthermore, what was quintessentially totalitarian about both capitalism and communism was that each could only conceive of the world dualistically, a world that was totally described as containing either one or the other of the two systems.

In his well-known essay, the “Letter to Pablo Antonio Cuadra Concerning Giants,” which was published in *Emblems of a Season of Fury* in 1963, Merton suggested that, if life in the West was more “gently persuasive” than in communist countries, nevertheless the West was a modern-day Magog, reminiscent of the prophecies of Ezekiel and the Book of Revelation.<sup>14</sup> In the case of the U.S. in particular, Merton argued that capitalistic totalitarianism had come about through a merging of the interests of “big business,” militarism, and the “phobias of political extremists.”<sup>15</sup> While Merton frequently criticized the communist bloc for leading the world toward a cataclysmic war, he also felt that capitalism’s preeminence depended upon a political and economic drive for dominance that included war. Moreover, he agreed with Marx’s prediction that in this way capitalist states would eventually destroy each other (*CWL* 159).

Marx came to believe that religion in the West was hand in glove with capitalism, which had incorporated it as simply another marketplace in which to produce and consume (*ESF* 80). Reading Marcuse, Merton came to see capitalism’s immersion in technology as the facilitator par excellence of totalitarianism (see Marcuse xv-xvi). Moreover, in an essay entitled “Terror and the Absurd: Violence and Non-Violence in Albert Camus” (1966), Merton perceived in Camus someone who, like Marcuse, viewed East and West as “twins.”<sup>16</sup> A writer who further augmented Merton’s attitude in this respect was Boris Pasternak, who had experienced Eastern European totalitarianism first-hand. In “The Pasternak Affair,” which was published in *Disputed Questions* (1960), Merton argued audaciously that Pasternak had spoken out for a freedom that was “almost as dead in the West” as it was “behind the Iron Curtain” (*DQ* 28).

Apart from Merton's perception of the dead ends faced by both capitalism and communism, his view of Marx became more positive after reading Erich Fromm's book, *Marx's Concept of Man* (1966).<sup>17</sup> In that book Merton discovered a writer who identified the spiritual aspects of Marx's thinking, notably in Marx's early writings. Fromm portrayed Marx as someone who disdained the heavy materialism of capitalism and who saw the future, which the proletariat would inherit through an inevitable progression of class struggles, as a time in which, in Fromm's words, the "material interest" would cease to be the dominant interest (Fromm 14). Marx was as far removed from Hegelian idealism, Fromm observed, as he was from bourgeois materialism (Fromm 11). The influence of Fromm can be seen in Merton's *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1966) in which Merton praised Marx as "a great diagnostician" of capitalism but also as someone who regretfully recognized that modern human beings had come to be ruled by "things," by "money," and by "machines."<sup>18</sup> In the same vein Merton softened his earlier scornful assessment of Marx as someone whose thought was said to have simply mirrored a troubled personality, observing that it was wrong to judge the problems of Marx's personality "with an exaggerated severity" (*CGB* 13). The important thing about Marx, Merton added, was not his personality but his insightful and intuitive analysis of the hidden "inconsistencies" in particular ideologies and societies. While Merton felt that Marx's objection to the idea that human beings possessed an essence was a limitation in his thinking, nevertheless he would have agreed with scholars like Laurence Simon that Marx's projection of a classless society constituted a moral vision of sorts, even if one that had little, empirically speaking, to stand on (see Marx xxxii).

Merton praised Marx for recognizing the importance of history, as the pre-Vatican II Church by contrast, in Merton's view, had not, having focused too greatly on dogma and too little on history.<sup>19</sup> History in Marx's view was the conveyer of the truth "of this world" in contrast to the infection of traditional political ideology in Europe, for example, by religious or otherworldly beliefs. Philosophy in turn would analyze history in a search for the sources of social alienation that were secular in origin, the analysis of law and politics, for example (Marx 28-29). In Marx's reliance on history and on the analysis of history, however, Merton felt that Marx's characterization of human beings as lacking an essence and as defined principally by their history – especially their future history – resulted in an implicit devaluing of human beings as they existed in the present. For Marx, Merton concluded, human beings would not truly exist and have their proper dignity until freed from the economic suppression that had determined and diminished their lives. Merton balked at Marx's conception of human beings as marginally existent, arguing that it was futile to deify humanity if at the same time one did not allow it to be "real" (*CGB* 130-31). Refusing human beings their essence meant withholding respect for their existence. Merton stressed that there were two sides to human existence, a nature that reflected its creator, and a history through which human beings modified their humanity.

Still, he praised Marx's realism in focusing not on a Platonic or Hegelian idealism but rather on history through which an existentialist portrait of human beings gradually developed.<sup>20</sup> Coincidentally, Merton was himself moving toward a more existentialist outlook in the 1960s. The Catholic philosopher and theologian, Bernard Lonergan, writing in the same period as Merton, described this way of thinking as a seeing of human beings not in the abstract but in their "concrete self-realization."<sup>21</sup> Moreover, while in his talk on "Marxism and Monastic Perspectives" Merton

noted the physicality of Marx's view of history, he went out of his way to suggest a link between Marx and Teilhard de Chardin, the well-known Jesuit paleontologist. Although the link amounted to nothing more than a suggestion that both Marx and Teilhard had in some way grounded their philosophies in the physical world, Merton's attempt was to be accommodating and inclusive in his view of Marx's thought (*AJ* 331).

For this reason he sought to distinguish his view of Marx, if not of Marxism, from the hostility that Western Christians in the middle of the twentieth century exhibited. He wrote positively about Marx, for example, in a letter to Bruno Schlesinger in 1962. There, Merton echoed Marx's disapproval of a technologically dominated culture "based on profit," and sympathized with Marx's attempt to free human beings from a culture in which technology was paramount (*CWL* 74-75). In a similarly conciliatory mood toward Marx, Merton wrote to Mario Falsina in March 1967 decriing a Christianity that equated Christian faith with anti-communism and indicating that there was "much good" in Marxism (*RJ* 348). At the same time, separating Marx's ideas from the practice of actual communist states, Merton wrote that he had difficulty in accepting the communist "political line" in most things except where it coincided with his own "Christian liberalism" (*RJ* 348). Indeed, if Marx had in some ways constructed a humanistic religion, Merton suggested, communists in general had turned that religious vision into a totalitarian dogma, thereby subverting Marx's intentions just as Christians had frequently done in the case of the founder of their religion (see *CGB* 13).

The power of Marx's analysis of nineteenth-century capitalism, Merton observed, came from his recognition that workers were profoundly alienated from their work and living conditions and that the resentment arising from this alienation would facilitate the eventual liberation of the proletariat (*SS* 199-200). Here, Merton was strongly influenced by Erich Fromm, who argued that in industrial capitalism production took precedence over the worker, who was merely a cog in a process over which he had virtually no control. Merton picked up on this theme in observing that the worker's life in modern industrial society was not his own (see *AJ* 335). While Merton agreed with Marx's analysis of the toxic social and spiritual effects of the alienation brought about by industrial culture, he agreed as well with Albert Camus' suggestion that communism had been just as alienating as Marxists believed religion to have been historically (see *LE* 280). As Marx had argued, the alienation of the workers arose not simply from the class system but primarily from the subordination of workers to technology and what Fromm called the "crippling influence of specialization" (Fromm 42). The problem was that human beings became alienated from their own creative powers and reduced to the specialized functions they performed, thereby losing sight of their full humanity. Merton came to share Marx's belief that the real source of alienation in modern industrial societies was the subordination of workers to production, which was focused either on profit, as in the West, or on totalitarian power in Marxist societies (*CWL* 75). In this connection Merton was impressed by Fromm's insight that industrial society, whether in the West or East, amounted to a kind of idol worship.<sup>22</sup> Drawing on this image from the Jewish scriptures, Fromm contended that the irony was that, instead of worshipping themselves as the creators of the new technologies, human beings had myopically taken to worshipping the technologies themselves (Fromm 48).

Since social change for the better was not likely to come from the capitalist owners, Marx argued, such change would come from a class war that would improve the lot of the workers. Just the bourgeoisie had thrown out the aristocracy so would modern workers, obeying the Hegelian

dialectic that Marx had applied to history, throw off their owner-oppressors. Opposites within a given economic and social tension would inevitably and forcefully give rise to a transcending of this opposition by the recognition of a higher, more satisfying synthesis. In harmony with this view, in a letter to Czeslaw Milosz in 1958, Merton acknowledged that there had to be a third position between the two great powers in the Cold War, and he perceived this solution in Hegelian/Marxian terms as “dialectical.”<sup>23</sup> However, in the essay on Albert Camus entitled “Terror and the Absurd,” Merton argued that the revolutionary leader, unless moved in part by a vigilance toward his or her own ideological program, would likely replace the political establishment with a bureaucracy as rigid as that which was overthrown (*LE* 249). Such, in Merton’s view, had been the effect of European communism. What Merton sought was a political system that, as Camus had suggested, would be self-critical enough to obviate an endless stream of class wars.

That such a system was unlikely to arrive on its own through the Hegelian dialectical process was indicated, Merton thought, by the fact that Hegelian idealism ironically ended up in a “deification of the state” (*LE* 6). Furthermore, even though Marx subjected his concept of the dialectical process to the actualities of history and of historical development there was no reason to assume, Merton noted in connection with Fromm’s commentary on Marx, that on “theoretical” as well as “empirical” grounds the dialectical process was able to turn the tide of human oppression embedded in history (Marcuse 253). To believe otherwise was to place one’s faith in a system that relied as much on technique as had capitalism and communism. Nevertheless, Merton clung to the usefulness of the dialectical process as at least a way of going part way down the road to an enlarged understanding of political and economic cultures. In this way one could progress dialectically beyond the “thesis” and “antithesis” that characterized “East and West” (*AJ* 340-41). At the very least, in the dialectical process one would be able to see in the other’s political and economic system a fresh way in which to look back at one’s own system.

Still, in an essay on Blake written in 1968 Merton indicated the need for something other than the dialectical process as envisaged by Hegel or Marx. Here, Merton contrasted Blake’s contraries with those in the Marxian dialectical process. In particular, referencing both Hegel and Marx, Merton observed that in Blake the transcending of contraries went beyond the “intelligence” in that it visualized human beings in their wholeness (*LE* 7). What Merton cautioned against was that the dialectical process could become reductive by a pitting of groups against each other when these groups or classes were seen as a collection of abstract qualities. In this way, Merton argued, the historical, dialectical relationship that underlay the Cold War, for example, would be two-dimensional at best and merely one-dimensional, as Herbert Marcuse had stated, when looked at from either side of the dialectical standoff (*LE* 7). One-dimensionality occurred when either side adopted a legalistic, frozen, authoritarian point of view.

While Merton looked for a solution to the Cold War in the 1960s, he was actually seeking a more general and more permanent way out of the inevitable repetition of class wars. Thus, he valued Roger Garaudy, the French revisionist Marxist, who had established a dialogue with some Catholic thinkers. Out of this dialogue Garaudy had come to an admiration of St. Teresa of Avila. What Merton stressed, though, was the need for someone like Garaudy to see the differences, as well as the similarities between Marxism and Christianity, and thereby to recognize something in Teresa of Avila that could increase a Marxist’s respect for Christianity even if this was not, strictly

speaking, a quality endorsed by Marx or Marxism (*AJ* 328). In this way the dialectic between Christianity and Marxism could proceed constructively and peacefully.

Merton's dialogic approach to dialectical thinking would help to obviate on the capitalist and Christian side of the divide a narrow view that saw the relationship between Christianity and Marxist socialism as ending in triumph or defeat, a possibility that Merton viewed with disdain (*CGB* 48). In the face of prayers in the Christian West for the defeat of communism, for example, Merton turned toward the dialogic approach to dialectical thinking exhibited by the Czech Protestant theologian Josef Hromadka, who argued that the practice of Christianity was possible within certain limits in Eastern Europe. A recalcitrant resistance to communism as the prevailing reaction to communism by Christians either in the West or East, would, Merton argued, simply make even more rigid the poles of the antithesis between communism and Christianity and thus delay a fruitful historical synthesis.

The seeing of these dialectical poles as more porous than they might appear to be from within one's own side of the dialectic was facilitated by the fact that Marx had not seen religion as the evil perpetrator of illusion but rather as its victim. Merton had to concede, however, that the communist interpreters of Marx made it difficult for Christians to be dialogic toward the government. Nevertheless, in a talk to monastic novices in the 1960s he endorsed Hromadka's breadth of vision in seeing the Christians in Eastern Europe as similar in many respects to the ancient Israelites under Babylon.<sup>24</sup> In any case, for both Hromadka and Merton the survival of Christianity under communism was not unlike its survival in other parts of the world where society had become thoroughly materialistic, whether socialist or not. Given this state of affairs, Merton suggested, there was need of a "radical dialogue" between Christian thinkers in the West and "revisionist Marxists" in the East (*CWL* 75). What would enable such a dialogue to occur, Merton believed, was a mutual recognition by both sides of the "transiency" of both sides and a retreat from absolutism (*CGB* 42). Here, Merton referred not to the message of Christianity but rather to the institutional structure of the Church.

In seeking common ground, Merton recognized that Marx had rejected a false individualism, an individualism that in the West had become synonymous with capitalism. As Laurence Simon put it, Marx had envisioned a society in which the mass of individual human beings would at last be free to develop their individual talents and abilities (see Marx xxxv). Furthermore, Merton recognized that as a monk he had opted for a separation from the mainstream that would help to safeguard an individuality that belonged both to society and to God. At the same time Merton suggested in a letter to Erich Fromm that in rejecting the false individualism of capitalism Marx should have proposed a "personalism" that would have lent substance and dignity to his conception of the individual.<sup>25</sup> Ultimately, Merton, a self-declared humanist himself, affirmed that Marx also had "humanist's concerns" although he added that there could be no worthy humanism without God, that otherwise humanism would become an abstraction leading to the formalist trap that had from time to time entangled both Christians and Marxists (*ESF* 87-88). Marx had been critical of Christianity as a misguided idealism without having noticed, Merton remarked, the existentialist emphasis of the New Testament with its pronounced moral interest in the actualities of human life. By the same token, in justice to Marx, Merton insisted that Christians needed to acknowledge the significance of Marx's moral interest in history, which Merton characterized as the basic idea of the

Bible. Thus, for Merton, Marx was in some respects inadvertently in harmony with a central feature of Christianity even if he had rejected Christianity and indeed religion in general. Moreover, Marx recognized in religious suffering both an expression of real suffering as well as a protest against real suffering. Religion, Marx observed, registered the “sigh of the oppressed creature,” was the “heart of a heartless world,” and in its consolations was what Marx famously called the “opium” of the people (Marx 28). The social revolution sought by Marx would go one better by substituting for the imagined happiness of religious believers the real happiness of those who had thrown off oppression. Nonetheless, Marx made it clear that if religion was the source of illusion, it was not the essential cause of human suffering, which was rather to be found embedded in an ongoing, exploitative class history.

In the Bangkok lecture delivered shortly before his death in 1968, Merton went so far as to align monastic and Marxian thought in some important respects. He had been reminded of this parallel at a conference in Santa Barbara in 1968 when he heard a French university student remark that, like Merton, he and his leftist fellow students were monks also. Merton immediately accepted the comparison and the implication that for both these students and for monks like himself the moral authority of the West was in many respects hollow (*AJ* 329). While Marx had focused on changing social structures, the monk, Merton averred, had set about changing ingrained states of consciousness (*AJ* 330). Through seeing the ontological ground of his being in God, the monk achieved a kind of liberation through not having to assign his existence and significance to other, less worthy beings. For Merton religion was crucial to the value of culture in that it provided human beings with not only a system of social order but, more importantly, with a contextualization of their being as creatures of the God who was the fount of all existence. Marx, on the other hand, regarded religion as a symbolic and yet a meaningless rhetoric in the actual world recorded by history (*SS* 365).

As was intimated earlier, Merton preferred the dialectics not of Marx but of William Blake, who, instead of the mechanical, dialectical model that Merton believed Marx had put forward, postulated a union of “loving and fiery” elements made all the more “ardent,” Merton added, by separation (*LE* 6). The difference between Marx and Blake was that Blake saw human beings as enlarging their understanding and their hearts over time, wearing down the centuries of spiritual alienation that had divided them from those of other classes and cultures. The synthesis that Blake proposed would come about because human beings had learned to choose it. Blake’s vision was close to Merton’s belief that human beings, in order to offset the savagery of history, had to learn to enter into the hearts and minds of “others” (*CWL* 161).

At the heart of Marx’s thought Merton also located an ambivalence that had prompted Marx to call for justice for the working classes but also to doubt the idea that such a thing as justice existed (*SS* 92). Merton believed that, in spite of Marx’s attempt to free human beings from the degradation of the factory system, he had nevertheless imprisoned working men and women within the state, the only power that Marx believed could challenge a capitalist oligarchy. In this way human beings became the captives of the state, no matter how well-meaning the state felt itself to be. The inevitable effect was a continuation of slavery as Merton had witnessed in Boris Pasternak’s depiction of twentieth-century Russia (*DQ* 52). Nonetheless, Merton argued that, as in the monastic dispensation, in Marx there was an underlying resolve to turn “*cupiditas*” or self-centered love into “*caritas*” or selfless love (*AJ* 334). In particular, Merton asserted, the Marxian program of



giving according to one's ability and receiving according to one's need resembled the spirituality that underlay monastic communities. Merton recognized that even in the most successful monastic communities there would be those who would not carry their proper load and who would be a source of distraction and irritation to their fellow monks. At the same time, the monks in his own community, he said, had allowed him to develop his life as a solitary because the presence of the others was supportive and filled with countless acts of kindness that made one grateful to be in the community.<sup>26</sup>

In considering the overlapping of Marx's idea of the classless society and his own experience with monasticism, Merton, instead of looking solely toward structural change, suggested that a more fundamental change involved a transformation from within. Otherwise, one's precious personal freedom, the priceless gift of the creator to human beings, would be overlooked. Buddhist and Christian monasticism, he believed, started with the problem of human beings themselves instead of focusing entirely on social structures. This was because the centuries of human conflict issued from the placing of the individual ego and its needs at the center of one's thought as the escape route from class oppression. What was required, and what was provided by both Buddhist and Christian monasticism, he added, was an awareness of individual moral weakness that had to be recognized before real change was possible. Otherwise one remained a prisoner of ignorance.

The overcoming of this ignorance came about through a profound contemplation of being in which one's inner, creational liberty and the dignity that flowed from it colored every other kind of transformation sought (*AJ* 342). While some might regard Merton's thinking here as a trifle naïve, it would seem that not all would agree. There is, for example, the opinion of the distinguished philosopher, Charles Taylor, about the missing pieces in the otherwise powerful philosophy of Marx and other modern philosophers such as Kant and Nietzsche. In Taylor's view Marx and these others in their search for social transformation overlooked the complex and often unconscious sources of human motivation and moral weakness.<sup>27</sup>

In an unpublished excerpt from *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton, writing in the 1940s, concluded that those in the monastic life, notably his own order, the Cistercians, had carried communism to its "ultimate limit" (*TMR* 147). Similarly, in the Bangkok address Merton asserted that communism could only be successfully applied in a monastic community or presumably in a community that had much in common with a monastic community (*AJ* 334). In this important respect Merton's view of Marxism was similar both at the beginning and end of his life as a Trappist monk. While his reasons for seeing the monastic community as an ultimate form of communism were not made explicit, he frequently emphasized in his writings that only in a community where the members recognized their common weaknesses and yet prized their freedom as creatures formed by God, could such a system of sharing work. Merton's implication, it would seem, was that the admission of fundamental moral weakness in oneself would help to forestall a community that was based on power or that led to the desire for power.

Instead, there was the hope that this confession of weakness would result in a community of love based upon a shared sense of weakness and a corresponding will toward unity. A community based on a caring for the needs of others differed, Merton believed, from capitalism with its prioritizing of financial power and from communism with its overriding interest in a society ruled by the proletariat. Merton also saw the monastic community as a superior protector of personal freedom,

making room for the other's individuality as was the case with Father Stephen, the eccentric priest-gardener in Merton's abbey.<sup>28</sup> Merton's approach to individuality and freedom cautioned against living up to a created, artificial persona, a situation that Merton regarded as a form of bondage. By the same token he stressed the importance of protecting what he called the "necessity" of one's own nature.<sup>29</sup> The monastic community at its best accommodated the Christian "necessity" of caring for other human beings within the context of one's own nature and of one's own spiritual development and fulfillment. For Merton, what made the monastic community a successful communist community was the vocation itself, especially the will, based upon the example of Christ, to care for others within one's midst. Within this circle of intention, he makes evident throughout his writings, love will come to all in the community or at any rate to all who can accept it. Moreover, as part of this love there would also come a tolerance for the differences in others that might otherwise prove a hindrance, so much so, Merton pointed out, that one could even come to "like" the habits of others that had at first been off-putting (*TMR* 147). Marx's assumption that a classless society would eventually replace the rancor and suffering of one based on suppression and poverty Merton saw as a more ingenuous proposal than anything that the history of monasticism had exhibited. As in Blake's vision, which dominated Merton's spiritual thought throughout his life, social reform had to begin and end with a confession of one's blindness and imperfection and with an awareness of the terrible fragmentation of human consciousness and life of which the sort condemned by Marx was but one example. Poems like Blake's "Holy Thursday," and "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" illustrated a social fragmentation based on the grasping ego and on an invidious class consciousness. Once this kind of awareness was in place, Merton maintained, the capacity for social justice among both capitalists and Marxists would become more promising than would otherwise be the case.

Overall, Merton's attitude in his writings toward Marx and Marxism in the 1940s and 1950s is often difficult to distinguish from that of other Americans at the time. Later, in the 1960s, Merton's became a more nuanced view of Marx following his reading of Herbert Marcuse, Albert Camus and Erich Fromm. Similarly, as has been seen, his view of Marxism became more refined and receptive following his reading of revisionist Marxists like Roger Garaudy. What was crucial in this re-thinking was his changing view of his own vocation. If in the 1940s Merton had entered the monastery as a refuge from the world, as is reflected in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, he changed markedly in the late 1950s and 1960s to a view of monasticism as the taking of a critical stance toward social, economic, and political systems. Such does a perusal of his books and articles in the 1960s make evident. Oddly enough, some might say, Merton was able to use his growing detachment from American capitalism to achieve a fine balance in his perspective of the politics of East and West that distinguished his views sharply at times from those of his Church. Merton's distancing of himself from Western capitalism and from the society that it had created allowed him to see the pitfalls and strengths of both capitalist and Marxist ideologies and practice with an evenness in judgment that was remarkable for his time. Increasingly as a monastic contemplative Merton had become conscious of his connection to the life and culture of all human beings and in this way he felt free to judge them all with an equal eye, as it were. Each possessed, he hastened to point out, a fragment of truth that, however obscured by political and cultural factionalism, all must seek and all must find.<sup>30</sup>

1. Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994) 160-61.
2. Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk's True Life. Journals, vol. 3: 1952-1960*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 125; subsequent references will be cited as "SS" parenthetically in the text.
3. See Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948) 132-36, 141-48; subsequent references will be cited as "SSM" parenthetically in the text.
4. Patrick F. O'Connell, "Communism," in William H. Shannon, Christine M. Bochen and Patrick F. O'Connell, *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002) 71.
5. Karl Marx, *Selected Writings*, ed. Laurence Simon (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1944) 175; subsequent references will be cited as "Marx" parenthetically in the text.
6. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973) 326-43; subsequent references will be cited as "AJ" parenthetically in the text.
7. Thomas Merton, *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation. Journals, vol. 1: 1939-1941*, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995) 132.
8. Thomas Merton, *Monastic Peace* (Trappist, KY: Abbey of Gethsemani, 1958) 44; subsequent references will be cited as "MP" parenthetically in the text.
9. Thomas Merton, *Figures for an Apocalypse* (New York: New Directions, 1947) 19-21.
10. Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989) 348; subsequent references will be cited as "RJ" parenthetically in the text.
11. James T. Baker, *Thomas Merton, Social Critic* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1971) 68.
12. Thomas Merton, *Disputed Questions* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1960) 146-47; subsequent references will be cited as "DQ" parenthetically in the text.
13. Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964); subsequent references will be cited as "Marcuse" parenthetically in the text.
14. Thomas Merton, *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (New York: New Directions, 1963) 75; subsequent references will be cited as "ESF" parenthetically in the text.
15. Thomas Merton, *Cold War Letters*, ed. William H. Shannon and Christine M. Bochen (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006) 4; subsequent references will be cited as "CWL" parenthetically in the text.
16. Thomas Merton, *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. Patrick Hart, OCSO (New York: New Directions, 1981) 234; subsequent references will be cited as "LE" parenthetically in the text.
17. Erich Fromm, *Marx's Concept of Man* (New York: Ungar, 1966); subsequent references will be cited as "Fromm" parenthetically in the text.
18. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 13; subsequent references will be cited as "CGB" parenthetically in the text.
19. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964) xiv.
20. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage. Journals, vol. 5: 1963-1965*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 63.
21. Bernard Lonergan, *The Lonergan Reader*, ed. Mark and Elizabeth Morelli (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997) 583.
22. Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years. Journals, vol. 4: 1960-1963*, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 151.
23. Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1993) 54.
24. Thomas Merton, "Communism vs. Capitalism" (Kansas City, MO: Credence Cassettes, n.d.) [#AA2235].
25. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 315.
26. Thomas Merton, *A Thomas Merton Reader*, ed. Thomas P. McDonnell, rev. ed. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Image, 1974) 146; subsequent references will be cited as "TMR" parenthetically in the text.
27. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007) 641.
28. Thomas Merton, *Thomas Merton in Alaska: The Alaskan Conferences, Journals, and Letters*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: New Directions, 1989) 148-49.

29. Thomas Merton, *Day of a Stranger* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith, 1981) 33.
30. An earlier version of this essay was presented July 8, 2010 at the annual anniversary celebration of the Thomas Merton Reading Room at the Vancouver School of Theology on the campus of the University of British Columbia.