

Out of Solitude: Thomas Merton, John Howard Griffin, and Racial Justice

By William Apel

In a letter to Thomas Merton dated February 6, 1964, Daniel Berrigan expressed the gratitude he and other Catholic social activists felt for Merton's wisdom and his spiritual support for their prophetic witnesses. According to Berrigan: "it is in solitude that you began to speak to us in a way that no noise, and not even the audible wisdom of good men could have reached."¹ Those familiar with Merton's life know that as early as 1958, and his "Louisville epiphany," he had awakened to the realization that he could no longer remain silent with regard to the great social issues of his day. Merton insisted that he could no longer separate himself from the world in a false monastic isolation. In his own words, "we [monastics] are in the same world as everybody else, the world of the bomb, the world of race hatred . . . revolution, and all the rest."² This did not mean Merton had abandoned his vocation and monastic calling. Rather, it represented a further completion of that calling. Contemplation and compassion were joined together. As Berrigan suggested to Merton in his February 6 letter, it was precisely because of his life of solitude, and not in spite of it, that he had a unique word to speak into major social realities of the day.

Another voice which began to speak out of solitude about American injustice in the early 1960s was that of John Howard Griffin. This year 2011 marks the fiftieth anniversary of Griffin's controversial bestseller *Black Like Me* (1961).³ In 1959, Griffin exchanged his privileged life as a Southern white man and lived for six weeks in the Deep South as an unemployed black man. Using chemicals that darkened his skin, tanning under harsh lights, and shaving his head, Griffin traveled incognito as an African American across Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Georgia. As Robert Bonazzi, Griffin's biographer, writes: "By the simple act of darkening his pigment, he encountered a complex reality formerly unknown to him or any other white man. 'My deepest shock,' reflected Griffin, 'came with the gradual realization that this was not a matter of "inconvenience" but rather a total change of living. Everything is different, everything changes'" (Afterword to Griffin, *Black* 196). During the 1960s, *Black Like Me* became a multimillion-copy bestseller and almost overnight was translated into fourteen different languages. Griffin became an instant celebrity, and much like Merton was not comfortable with the fame that was thrust upon him. He

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William Apel

nevertheless became a national public speaker for the cause of racial justice. Also, he acted as a mediator for white and black communities as they encountered rising racial tension and conflicts in numerous American towns and cities. Griffin was careful to say that he represented no one but himself as he told his story and did his mediation. He told audiences on his speaking tours, “I don’t stand up here and represent myself as a speaker for black people.”⁴ The demands upon his time were almost more than he could bear. According to Bonazzi, he became “exhausted by the grind of constant traveling and lecturing” (Griffin, *Black* 199). This was not the life that Griffin would have chosen for himself but the work for racial justice was something he could not ignore or abandon.

How did Merton enter the picture? We know from his journal entry on March 24, 1962 that Merton had finished reading *Black Like Me* the previous day. He recorded, “Yesterday finished the Griffin book *Black Like Me*, moved and disturbed.”⁵ Merton and Griffin met for the first time soon thereafter. Griffin, a convert to Catholicism (like Merton) was on a personal retreat at Gethsemani. When Merton learned of this, he arranged a meeting.⁶

Merton soon learned much about Griffin’s life story. He, like Merton, viewed himself as something of a “marginal man.”⁷ However Griffin’s marginalization, unlike Merton’s, was not self-imposed. Griffin had experienced marginalization as a sightless person. Serving in the South Pacific during World War II, he was blinded by the concussion of a bomb blast. He returned to his native Texas prepared to live out his life in blindness. Unexpectedly, Griffin’s sight returned after a decade of blindness. He was to see his wife and children for the first time. Also, he was to view the world differently. Bonazzi notes, “Without eyesight, he was forced to perceive human beings simply as human beings. The racial divide no longer made sense to this genteel son of the old South. In Griffin’s own words: ‘For the blind man, the whole issue of racism on the basis of inferiority according to color or race is solved axiomatically. He can only see the heart and intelligence of a man and nothing in these things indicates in the slightest whether a man is white or black, but only whether he is good or bad, wise or foolish’” (Bonazzi 22). It is out of his solitude of sightlessness that Griffin was to find his prophetic word. For the Catholic writer John Howard Griffin, *Black Like Me* was above all else an indictment, first and foremost, against his own racism. It was a book for white America: a clarion call to end its racist ways.

Subsequent to their initial meeting, Merton and Griffin carried on a significant correspondence until the time of Merton’s death in 1968. In the first of the Griffin letters to be considered here, on May 31, 1963 he responds to a letter written by Merton just days before. (Unfortunately, this letter is lost). Griffin writes, “Thank you for your letter of May 28, and the most moving poem about the children of Birmingham.”⁸ Griffin then added a word of deep appreciation: “I shall certainly count it among the finest of my poor possessions.” By this time in 1963, Griffin was in the midst of one of his national speaking tours as the author of *Black Like Me*. After a comment related to their mutual love

for photography, Griffin in his letter next offers a revealing statement about how much Merton's friendship had meant to him. He writes, "making and sending your photos has been a godsend to me, a good counterpoint to the meanness that makes up most of my life these days – I mean the constant delving into the devilment of men." Griffin was under a great deal of strain because of numerous threats against his life and his family's well-being (Bonazzi 131). Merton's simple act of sharing his poetry and photography had become a sign of peace and a sacrament of support in his troubled times.

This May 31 letter also demonstrates how Merton gained important information from the "outside world." For example, Merton learned from Griffin about the horrendous case of Clyde Kennard.⁹ Kennard, a little-known pioneer in the civil rights movement, had put his life on the line when, as a black military veteran, he attempted between 1955 and 1958 to enroll at the University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg. Although qualified, he was turned away again and again. In one last attempt in the fall of 1960, Kennard was not only turned away but also arrested on trumped-up charges of theft and sentenced to hard labor of a prison chaingang. The situation was brutal. Kennard was forced to continue this hard labor even after contracting colon cancer and receiving no medical help. Finally, he was released from prison and sent home to Chicago to die.

Merton knew from information shared by Griffin that Kennard was a man of deep faith and had sent Kennard one of the first printings of his *Hagia Sophia*.¹⁰ Griffin reported the cancer had destroyed Kennard's body but not his spirit. In the second-to-last paragraph of the May 31 letter, Griffin wrote of Kennard's condition: "Your prayers are the best you can do for Clyde. It is all over for him now and he may well be gone by the time you receive this. You helped him in the best possible way – with your generous gift of the *Hagia Sophia*; and God only knows what this has meant to him, a man uniquely susceptible to what you wrote. I have no doubt this book will be buried with him." Merton, as he often did, seemed to take on the suffering of the "other," in this case Clyde Kennard. He, like Griffin, defended and affirmed Kennard's most basic humanity and dignity as one created in the image of God. In their witness for racial justice, both Merton and Griffin never lost sight of the individual person and the dehumanizing effects of racism on its victims.

A second Griffin letter to be explored was written to Merton on September 15, 1963 – the very day of the bombing of the Fourteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, which killed four black children attending Sunday School in the church basement. Before the day's end, Griffin had written a quick letter by hand on motel stationery to alert Merton as to what was happening. The Griffin account surpassed anything one could get from the evening news. Griffin, once again on a speaking circuit, quickly made contact with friends in the movement. What he learned was not good. He expressed despair in his letter to Merton. He had a troubled foreboding about what was to come next. He wrote to Merton: "Have been on the phone most of this evening with Alabama and Atlanta. You might know

by now that today alone in Birmingham, six Negro youngsters were murdered: four girls attending Sunday School; the church bombed with dynamite; 3 of the girls were 14, 1 was 11. This evening a 16 year old boy was shot to death by police because he was throwing rocks. And a bit later tonight another young boy (about 14) was shot from his bicycle and killed.”¹¹ As the letter further unfolds, Griffin shared more devastating news. He had learned of a black priest in Louisiana who suffered permanent eye damage because he had not been admitted to a hospital nearby the scene of the automobile accident which had injured the priest. Griffin concluded his letter by “anticipating a sorrowful and violent turn of events.” Indeed, Griffin expressed amazement that “the whole lid had not blown off” already. Griffin expresses it this way to Merton: “After this trip this week, I do not see any chance that we can avoid . . . hideous mass violence. . . . Negroes can take no more; and yet miraculously they are holding on – at least as of midnight tonight.” Griffin closed his letter with a request for Merton’s prayerful support. “Forgive the wretched letter. We [this included Dick Gregory and Martin Luther King, Jr.] are numb with exhaustion and horror. I leave out tomorrow. Please pray for me, that I have the wisdom and the charity to be effective in this nightmare. In Christo, John.” Given this report “from the front,” the conclusion about race in America which Merton himself was soon to express was not surprising.

When *Seeds of Destruction* (1964) reached publication, Merton was accused of being too negative in his assessments. In fact, influenced by information gathered from John Howard Griffin and others, he predicted the coming of a great social upheaval which would involve increased levels of violence. He cautioned that white liberals would soon abandon the cause for racial justice (which they did). In perhaps his most perceptive writing on race, “Letters to a White Liberal,” Merton lamented: “it is one of the characteristics of liberals that they prefer their future to be vaguely predictable (just as the conservative prefers only a future that reproduces the past in all its details), when you see that the future is entirely out of your hands and that you are totally unprepared for it, you are going to fall back on the past, and you are going to end up in the arms of the conservatives.”¹²

Earlier than most whites, Merton and Griffin knew that nothing short of a revolution was in the air. Real political and economic power needed to be realized by blacks and for blacks – and other minorities – if justice was truly to be achieved. Whites must get out of the way so that black leadership can truly lead. This was Merton’s and Griffin’s witness as early as 1963. A new day must emerge when black and white, oppressed and oppressor, must liberate themselves from all that defaced the image of God and dehumanized any group or any individual.

We shall permit Merton the final word, a personal word to his close friend and co-worker for racial justice John Howard Griffin. During the years of Merton’s and Griffin’s friendship, Griffin was to suffer from a series of diseases, which were to rob his body

of the energy necessary for an active apostolate for justice. Merton sensed that his dear friend, greatly restricted by ill health, needed to hear a new word for his life. So in a letter dated December 12, 1966,¹³ Merton noted Griffin's personal sufferings and called for a new purpose in Griffin's life. Merton empathized with the situation in which Griffin found himself. He wrote, "I am going to offer Mass for all your intentions on the 15th. I hope you will have better health or less bad health or whatever one can reasonably hope to have in such a case." Not "sugar coating" anything, Merton told Griffin, "I hope the doctors are merciful and that you do not have to get too cut up: in fact, take a good rest if you can." Merton and Griffin knew there were more operations to come. It was at this point that Merton wrote the words his friend most needed to hear. It would come as a comfort and challenge which Griffin grew to accept. Here, in the words that follow, are signs of the uncommon wisdom which Daniel Berrigan ascribed to Merton in the opening quotation of this article. In genuine, heartfelt affirmation Merton wrote to Griffin, "You are probably doing more for the world by bearing up with your Job-like afflictions than you did when you could get around and give more talks."

Accepting this word of grace, Griffin continued to do what he could as a writer and activist for racial justice. But Merton's words had set Griffin free to explore his more contemplative side, which Griffin good-naturally called "Hermit like Me" (Bonazzi 59). Finally, by the mid-1970s, appearing much older than his 50-plus years, Griffin was content to describe his life like a true contemplative. He noted that for him, "acts of faith and hope no longer lie in writing books [his letting go of the authorized Merton biography], but in keeping contact with a few beloved friends, studying and praying as much as I can, and by growing plants with the incentive of living to see them bloom" (Bonazzi 200). Griffin's life ended in 1980. His wife simply said he died of everything (Bonazzi 168). But like Merton, he was much more fascinated by life than death. He had lived a courageous life, and like Merton he challenged all that dehumanized life – including racism. Speaking out of their solitude, Merton and Griffin encouraged each other to a life of compassion and contemplation. Only then were they able to realize their full humanity, grace upon grace, mercy upon mercy. May we go and do likewise.

1. Daniel Berrigan, SJ to Thomas Merton, February 6, 1964 (unpublished letter, Thomas Merton Center archives, Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY; subsequent references will be cited as "TMC" parenthetically in the text).
2. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 141.
3. John Howard Griffin, *Black Like Me*, Afterword by Robert Bonazzi (New York: New American Library, 2003); subsequent references will be cited as "Griffin, *Black*" parenthetically in the text.
4. See Robert Bonazzi, *Man in the Mirror* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997) xi; subsequent references will be cited as "Bonazzi" parenthetically in the text.
5. Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years. Journals, vol. 4: 1960-1963*, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 213.
6. John Howard Griffin, *Follow the Ecstasy: Thomas Merton, The Hermitage Years, 1965-1968* (Fort Worth, TX: Latitudes Press, 1983) 3.

7. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone, Brother Patrick Hart and James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973) 307. By definition, a monk is marginal to society just as is a sightless person – outside the mainstream.
8. John Howard Griffin to Thomas Merton, May 31, 1963 (unpublished letter, TMC archives); the reference is to Merton's poem "And the Children of Birmingham" (Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* [New York: New Directions, 1977] 335-37; subsequent references will be cited as "CP" parenthetically in the text).
9. See Timothy J. Minchin and John A. Salmond, "'The Saddest Story of the Whole Movement': The Clyde Kennard Case and the Search for Racial Reconciliation in Mississippi, 1955-2007," *The Journal of Mississippi History* 81.3 (Fall 2009) 191-234; available online at: <http://205.144.224.179/pubs/kennard.pdf>.
10. Thomas Merton, *Hagia Sophia* (Lexington, KY: Stamperia del Santuccio, 1962); CP 363-71.
11. John Howard Griffin to Thomas Merton, September 15, 1963 (unpublished letter, TMC archives).
12. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964) 36.
13. Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989) 134 [December 12, 1966]..