

I know that you are all powerful:  
 What you conceive, you can perform.  
 I am the man who obscured your designs  
 With my empty-headed words.  
 I have been holding forth on matters I cannot understand,  
 On marvels beyond me and my knowledge.  
 (Listen, I have more to say,  
 Now it is my turn to ask questions and yours to inform me.)  
 I knew you then only by hearsay;  
 But now, having seen you with my own eyes,  
 I retract all I have said,  
 And in dust and ashes I repent. (Job 42:2-6)

1. Carol Glatz, "Pope: Drop the Melodrama, Pray for Those Truly in Pain," *The Record* 136.39 (October 2, 2014) 2.
2. Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1953) 233.
3. Thomas Merton, *Thomas Merton in Alaska: The Alaskan Conferences, Journals, and Letters*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: New Directions, 1989) 117; subsequent references will be cited as "TMA" parenthetically in the text.
4. Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1958) 42.

## A Voice for Racial Justice

By **Paul M. Pearson**

Eldridge Cleaver wrote in *Soul on Ice* that no white person wrote so feelingly of the teeming vitality of black Harlem as Thomas Merton,<sup>1</sup> and in "Aubade—Harlem," Merton writes of Christ having been nailed "to the walls of Harlem."<sup>2</sup> From within the cloister walls Merton would return to the subject of racism in the sixties with an insight that Martin Marty would describe in 1967 as accurately prophetic writing of Merton's book *Seeds of Destruction*, saying: "it seems to me you were 'telling it as it is' and maybe 'as it will be.'"<sup>3</sup> Yet, at the time and in subsequent years, Merton's writings on racism are all too frequently skirted over if not completely ignored. I have been as guilty of this oversight as the next person. However my own move from cosmopolitan London to a Louisville that remains largely segregated – almost all-white neighborhoods, churches, schools, etc. – brought this aspect of Merton's writing starkly to the fore, and fourteen years of living in the United States have just served to reinforce that perception as time after time the racism bubbling beneath the surface explodes onto the national and international stage.



**Paul M. Pearson**

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Merton's indictment of white Americans in his "Letters to a White Liberal"<sup>24</sup> continues to be ignored as much as when he penned it. The racial problems of the nineteen sixties led Merton to write to Robert Lax: "I am trying to figure out some way I can get nationalized as a Negro as I am tired of belonging to the humiliating white race. One wants at times the comfort of belonging to a race that one can like and respect."<sup>25</sup> And yet, almost fifty years later, 33 percent of African American children live in poverty, compared to 10 percent of white children. On average white families possess ten times more wealth than do families of color and, since 1998 that "wealth gap" has grown with white families seeing a 20 percent boost in their net wealth, while African-American families have seen their wealth decrease. Or, as in the US Justice System, white people have the power and anyone who encroaches on that, or appears as a threat, will be dealt with severely. Similar statistics can be found for country after country around the world and the escalating extremism in numerous countries, the rise of the far right, and the all-too-frequent scapegoating of immigrants and other groups would, I feel certain, be a subject of Merton's pen were he writing today.

In 1964 Merton heard the guns of Fort Knox calling him to "an ever renewed 'decision' and commitment for peace."<sup>26</sup> He would no doubt hear that same call to "an ever renewed 'decision' and commitment for racial justice and racial harmony" in the growing tragic litany of names such as Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown and all too many others.

1. Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968) 34.
2. Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 82.
3. Martin Marty, "To: Thomas Merton. Re: Your Prophecy," *The National Catholic Reporter* 3.43 (30 August 1967) 6.
4. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964) 3-71.
5. Thomas Merton and Robert Lax, *When Prophecy Still Had a Voice: The Letters of Thomas Merton & Robert Lax*, ed. Arthur W. Biddle (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001) 251.
6. 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) 182 [12/22/1964].

## Awakening and Propelling

By **Dan Phillips**

When one meets Thomas Merton for the first time, it is like a pregnant thump in one's heart. For me it was 1969 and I was a seminary student, often reading poetry, and I came upon Merton's poem "Elegy for the Monastery Barn"<sup>27</sup> in Hayden Carruth's anthology *The Voice That Is Great within Us*.<sup>28</sup> For Merton, the burning barn was a sacrament: "The brilliant walls are holy / In their first-last hour of joy" (ll. 34-35). The barn served as an awakening for me and from that moment Merton's writings have served as a propelling venue for my life:



**Dan Phillips**

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