

threatened at the moment to discuss . . . objectively." Merton: "I am really very grateful for your last letter . . . and I am sorry for being such a creep, but it is true that you did make me feel very defensive. . . . So don't give up on me, I will be objective."

Despite their sometimes turbulent character, these letters ultimately reveal an attitude of equality on the part of both Merton and Ruether. In her introduction, Ruether states:

Merton from the beginning addressed me as an equal. (This did not surprise me at the time, since I saw myself as an equal, but it is more impressive in retrospect.) . . . Never did he take the paternalistic stance as the father addressing the child, which is more typical of the cleric, especially in relation to women.

This attitude of respect for those with whom he corresponds is wonderfully evident in other letters as well, as those who have delved into other volumes of Merton's correspondence will recognize.

One final note: the actual correspondence between Ruether and Merton is enhanced by the introductory and concluding sections of the book. Mary Tardiff's preface provides valuable background information, especially in regard to Ruether, as does Christine Bochen's afterword in regard to Merton. And Ruether's introduction adds very helpful contextual information. One image she offers is especially revealing as she states candidly:

I see Thomas Merton and myself somewhat like two ships that happened to pass each other on our respective journeys. For a brief moment we turned our search lights on each other with blazing intensity. Then, when we sensed that we were indeed going in different directions, we began to pass each other by.

Readers will be grateful for the passing of these two ships.

Thomas Merton. *Passion for Peace: The Social Essays*. Edited and with an introduction by William H. Shannon. New York: Crossroads, 1995. 338 pages with index. \$29.95.

Reviewed by Richard D. Parry

This book is a collection of essays written by Thomas Merton between 1961 and 1968. They cover the major social issues of the day—

the threat of nuclear war, the war in Vietnam, the civil rights movement, and nonviolence. Here we see Merton articulate positions that now have lost their revolutionary edge; at the time they were innovative enough to evoke some misgivings by his Cistercian censors, among others. Indeed, as William Shannon points out in his introduction, in 1961 no well-known priest or bishop in the United States had spoken out against war. So the reader must be careful in reading these essays to put them into their proper historical context. In them Merton appears as a prophet, both in the sense of someone who stands against the corrupt moral assumptions of his time and in the sense of someone who looked into the future to the consequences of not correcting these assumptions.

It is reflection on the former role—the prophet who stands against moral corruption—that is an undercurrent of these essays. Clearly Merton sees himself in this role. It is how he saw the role that will help us to frame an appreciation of this collection. The monk of Gethsemani had retired from the world at the beginning of the cataclysmic Second World War to become a contemplative. In his studies of monasticism and essays about contemplation, he fostered a generation of Catholics who idealized “the hidden life.” His occasional attempts to defend the contemplative life from unfavorable comparison to the active seemed to many of his readers beside the point; he had already convinced them of the value of the contemplative life by the beauty of his own eloquence. However, the title of his 1966 book *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* tipped his hand. In the twentieth century, at least, a contemplative is a bystander to the appalling events of the most violent century yet—but a guilty bystander. How can the contemplative life—the hidden life, the nonactive life—be justified in the face of two world wars, the Nazi holocaust of fourteen million humans, a Soviet sacrifice, of similar proportions, to their own version of social planning, and a threatening nuclear war that would put even these preceding events in its shadow for sheer murderous brutality?

Merton’s answer is that a contemplative can be a prophet because, in part, of his or her unique perspective, outside the world (148). Detachment from the world, then, is not a way of ignoring it but a way of seeing its problems by offering a distance that allows proper assessment. One might add that being detached is not just a question of geography; renunciation of power and wealth is the heart of detachment. And it is the embrace of these that most corrupts the perspective of those in the world. Finally, detachment implies a radical reliance on

the will of God; the one who renounces power and wealth becomes most like the lilies of the field and the birds of the air, whose welfare is completely dependent on a benevolent God. If it is this perspective that allows one to be a prophet in the first sense, it too frequently undermines one’s claim to be a prophet in the second sense—one’s claim to foretell the consequences of not following God’s will. It does credit to Merton to see how well he has endured under both senses of prophet. It even does him credit to note that his ability to expose moral corruption is greater than his ability to foresee consequences.

The first section of essays is devoted to the morality of nuclear war. Here especially one needs to remember the context because so much of what Merton urges and argues for has now become Church teaching. However, at the time, before the forthright condemnation of nuclear war by the Vatican Council II, it was still possible for Catholic theologians to argue for the morality of nuclear war. In fact, James Douglass in *Commonweal* (Oct. 11, 1991) relates a fascinating story about moral theologian Austin Fagothey, S.J. In the years before the council, Fagothey was writing a dissertation at the Gregorian University in Rome defending the position that nuclear war is morally acceptable under the just war doctrine. In these days before the council, then, Merton is trying to put together papal pronouncements, and draw out their conclusions, in order to show that authentic Catholic teaching could not countenance such a war. One can feel the urgency—almost desperation—in his writing. The Church simply could not be indifferent or ambivalent about the prospective destruction of civilization, perhaps of humanity itself. Indeed, it is worth noting in this new era of ecclesiastical attempts to stop debate on other issues that the abbot general of the Cistercian Order eventually forbade Merton to write on this topic.

What was Merton urging about nuclear war? First of all, that an aggressive nuclear war is immoral on the face of it (59); that a defensive nuclear war is immoral because it cannot discriminate between combatant and noncombatant (60); that a limited nuclear war of defense is immoral because it cannot be limited (88–89). The first two of these positions were vindicated by the forthright condemnation of the council: “Any act of war aimed indiscriminately at the destruction of entire cities or of extensive areas along with their population is a crime against God and man itself. It merits unequivocal and unhesitating condemnation” (*Gaudium et spes*, no. 80). Not only the council but, more particularly, American Catholicism reflected Merton’s thinking

on this topic. In 1983, the U.S. Bishops' Pastoral *The Challenge of Peace* elaborated on this condemnation to say that it ruled out both offensive and defensive nuclear war, since both are aimed at civilian populations (nos. 147 and 148). The bishops expressed grave doubt about limited nuclear war because it seems unlikely that any nuclear exchange could be limited (nos. 158 and 159).

One is, nevertheless, struck with how cautious in one way Merton's thinking was on the issue of nuclear war. He did not advance beyond the topics mentioned above to the more radical one of calling for immediate nuclear disarmament (89). He did say that we must pursue disarmament, but he did not condemn the possession of a nuclear deterrent force as in itself immoral. Yet, if offensive and defensive nuclear war is morally wrong, the very notion of a policy of nuclear deterrence comes into question. Such a policy is simply the intention to wage a defensive nuclear war under certain conditions. But if it is morally wrong to wage a nuclear war, then it is wrong to intend to wage a nuclear war—provided that it is wrong to intend to do what is morally wrong. Of course, it is a staple of Catholic moral thought that the intention to do an immoral action is also morally wrong. For instance, since murder is morally wrong, it is morally wrong to intend to commit murder. It is, of course, notorious that the bishops did not draw this obvious conclusion about our own policy of nuclear deterrence; in their peace pastoral they did not condemn nuclear deterrence but rather they gave it "a strictly conditioned moral acceptance"—conditioned on the assumption that it is part of a process that leads to real disarmament.

The bishops aside, one can see how radical would be the condemnation of nuclear deterrence. For the United States to renounce nuclear deterrence would be for it to become vulnerable to nuclear aggression and nuclear blackmail. From the theological perspective it would call for a radical declaration of dependence on the will of God. As a nation we would renounce what is contrary to God's will, casting ourselves on divine protection. It is the step that the bishops were not willing to take, although Merton might well have been more favorably inclined because of his perspective as a prophet. His analysis of war and the conditions that justify war required a more radical adjustment of attitude in order to become a peace maker. It required a renunciation of power and wealth. To someone deeply enmeshed in the world and its values, such a renunciation seems impossible; to a contemplative, detached from the world, the renunciation might well seem possible.

This more radical analysis of war begins with Merton's review of the prison meditations of Father Delp, a priest imprisoned and executed by the Nazis. Father Delp, from his prison cell—a place both detached and fraught with the meanings of contemporary social and political life—saw the problem as humanity's refusal to recognize its spiritual crisis, its alienation from God. Modern humans are alienated from God because they believe in their own power and in their material means to exercise that power. Merton quotes with approval:

Either he (man) still hopes in matters (sic) and in the power he acquires by its manipulation, and then his heart is one to which "God himself cannot find access, it is so hedged around with insurance." Or else, in abject self-contempt, alienated man "believes more in his own unworthiness than in the creative power of God" (139).

We must then return to the spiritual springs of faith to overcome the illusions of self-sufficiency and to discover the creative sufficiency of God. However, Merton emphasizes Father Delp's insight that returning to the well springs of faith must not be confused with a "negative, lachrymose, and 'resigned' Christianity" (139). One thinks immediately of the seductive appeal of the contemplative life, uninvolved in the turmoil of the active. Rather, Father Delp says that what is needed "is not simply good will and piety, but 'truly religious men ready to cooperate in all efforts for the betterment of mankind and human order'" (141). Such cooperation is not, however, just enlisting in the cause of human progress, espoused by any self-respecting secular humanist; rather it is "the decision to become *totally engaged in the historical task of the Mystical Body of Christ* for the redemption of man and his world" (146).

It would be hard to imagine a more bold call to the active life. It is also one that is quite familiar to anyone who lived through the heady days of the Vatican Council II, with its stirring calls for activism on behalf of the poor and the oppressed. Merton, however, goes somewhat beyond these moral exhortations. The historical task of the mystical body of Christ is not just a neat way of summing up the liberal Democratic agenda—at least that of the pre-abortion era. There is a good deal more mystery to the mystical body of Christ, and it is war, once again, that uncovers the mystery. In his review of Jacques Cabaud's biography of Simone Weil, Merton meditates on nonviolence. Again he is troubled by the notion that Christianity encourages

passivity. Simone Weil has been associated with nonviolent resistance, yet she decided to join the French Resistance after the invasion of her homeland. The problem is how to resolve this contradiction. Merton notes a distinction between ineffective and effective nonviolence. The former is simply passivity in the face of evil; the latter is a creative attempt to overcome evil without engaging in violence. Gandhi's successful fight for the independence of India is, of course, the outstanding example of the latter. On the other hand, everyone who takes seriously nonviolence as a means for overcoming evil must face the possibility that the most determined nonviolent campaign can fail to overcome the evil at which it was aimed. In Merton's understanding, Weil faced this very situation in her own country and decided "that if this nonviolence had no hope of success, then evil could be resisted by force" (233). Somewhat confusingly, Merton then ends the review by saying that Weil "did not change her principles. She did not commit herself to violent action, but she did seek to expose herself to the greatest danger and sacrifice, nonviolently" (234). Yet surely, she came to approve of the work of an organization that did use violent means to overcome the evil of Nazism. In this passage we can see enshrined the temptation to believe that such undertakings as eradicating Nazism is part of the historical task of the mystical body of Christ and that if violent means are the only way to achieve this goal, perhaps they can be countenanced in some provisional way.

In the essay "Blessed Are the Meek," Merton faces this problem squarely. Nonviolence may mean failure in the face of overwhelming evil. Nevertheless, recourse to violence is not possible for the Christian; the proper response is to trust in the working of God in history:

The Christian can renounce the protection of violence and risk being humble, therefore vulnerable, not because he trusts in the supposed efficacy of a gentle and persuasive tactic that will disarm hatred and tame cruelty, but because he believes that the hidden power of the Gospel is demanding to be manifested in and through his own poor person (251-2).

Merton here approaches the fundamental principle of nonviolence. It seeks not efficiency but truth (325). Even in its failure, Christian nonviolence shows what the truth of the gospel looks like. In his tribute to Gandhi, Merton puts the point this way: "Political action therefore was not a means to acquire security and strength for one's self and one's

party, but a means of witnessing to the truth and the reality of the cosmic structure by making one's own proper contribution to the order willed by God" (205). If witness to the truth is more important than efficacy, then one does not have to value success over nonviolence. What must be meant, then, is that suffering defeat in a nonviolent campaign to end injustice still has value because suffering defeat in a nonviolent way incarnates the vision of the gospel. If truth is more important, then resorting to violence obscures the truth—the truth that God's will is a human order based on love, not on hatred and its manifestations, war and violence.

Here we have an attitude to the world and its values that only a prophet could love. Only someone for whom power and possessions were no longer important could see clearly enough to appreciate that the essential task is witness to the truth of the gospel, not efficiency in carrying it out. It must go hand in hand with another attitude—that no matter what one's own efforts might produce, it is ultimately up to God to fulfill the promises of the kingdom. Finally, one must believe that failure as the world understands it will be overcome by the resurrection. In order to follow this way of living, one must see the things of this world in an entirely different way. Not only must we not be seduced by the power and possessions of the mighty of this world we must also divorce ourselves from those conceptions of success and failure that are integral to the vision of this world. We must give up the very notion of success even for the gospel's vision of peace if that success must be bought at the price of violence. One must believe that there is a reality behind the obvious one of success and failure and that this reality means that the gospel will triumph, but in its own way. To acquire and nourish this view of reality it would be necessary to look at our world from a place different from the place most occupy. This view of reality is God's view, doubtless; but it is one whose acquisition requires humans to be detached from the world and its concerns. Only from the perspective of a Dorothy Day, a Thomas Merton, or a Mother Theresa could this view of reality be strong and clear.

Nevertheless, to many, the difficulty of acquiring and maintaining this perspective is not a sign of its uselessness or of its deficiency. To many, reliance on that perspective is the essence of the gospel. It is hard to grasp and it is harder to live; but that fact does not lessen its hold on one's allegiance. Still, it is a hard truth. It seemed most appealing at the height of the Vietnam war. Here was a war that had all the signs of an excess of fascination with power and wealth.

The gospel vision of nonviolence seemed an appealing alternative to whatever the vision which informed that adventure. Again, the gospel vision of nonviolence seemed more appealing than the vision that saw nuclear holocaust as an acceptable means of defense. In a way it was a more demanding vision because it required some dangerous concessions to the moral claims of disarmament; but we might be able to square these claims with national survival by canny reasoning not unlike that of the bishops. It was altogether then an ennobling vision, and Thomas Merton was certainly one of its proponents in this country.

This position on war and the causes of war is one that goes beyond the just war theory, of course. The just war theory allows violence under certain, supposedly strictly limited, conditions. But the kind of nonviolence Merton was talking about was pacifism; it was the refusal to countenance the use of violence to achieve even—or especially—the kingdom of God. It seemed to be the notion that nothing could be used to establish the kingdom of God which would not be compatible with what that kingdom would look like once it was established. Here is a radical thought. Christianity has never wanted for those who admire and even love the kingdom of God as something to be established in the millennium; then we can live as brothers and sisters, when the lion lies down with the lamb. In the mean time, according to these Christians, it is necessary to live and survive in the world as it is, where the lion eats the lamb. It may even be necessary to kill in order to preserve the Church to whom the promises of the kingdom were given. However, those Christians who have said that the means must be consistent with the end have not been as numerous, especially in the days of violent persecution. Perhaps in our century, then—perhaps the bloodiest in the history of humankind—it was at last time to recapture the nonviolent tradition of Christianity. Perhaps Thomas Merton could be enshrined as one of those who worked to restore this tradition. Indeed, after his death, there was a spring time of nonviolence, from Manila to Eastern Europe. The corrupt Marcos regime was ousted by a massive turnout of street demonstrators who did not carry guns. The crowds in Czechoslovakia held their hands in the air to show that they were not armed. The tired regimes, so long reliant on repression and violence, gave way before such superior moral force.

As always, events have conspired to undermine this view—however inspirational and appealing. As long as we were talking

about Vietnam and nuclear war, the issues were clearer. However, the tribal warfare of Rwanda and the ethnic warfare of Bosnia make the option of nonviolence less certain. It is one thing for those of us living in the United States to attempt to renounce violence, to put power and wealth in its proper perspective. It is another thing to counsel the people of Bosnia to renounce violence and reliance on power and wealth—and another thing still to urge our government to pursue a Bosnian policy not dependent on violence. Even if we try to filter out what the media has added to the reporting about that civil war, there seems to be enough left to outrage any moral person. If we assume that the refugees of Bosnia do not have the superior moral strength required to stop by nonviolent means the murders and rapes, for us to renounce violence as a means to contain those to whom ethnic cleansing seems like a good idea seems only to cooperate in this ethnic cleansing. Nor can we take refuge in the thought that the refugees' suffering is of the sort that reveals the truth of the gospel vision; it simply looks like another chapter in the dreary history of the bloodiest century. The trouble is that the Christian may take nonviolence to be a way to lead his or her own life; we may even urge it on our own country when it seeks to defend itself. We may also counsel nonviolence on our own country when it seeks, for its own goals, to interfere in another country—for instance, in the case of our intervention in Vietnam or in Kuwait. To others who say that our involvement was not entirely self-regarding and that we had an obligation to help the oppressed in these two countries, it might even be possible to say that the oppression suffered by the Vietnamese or by the Kuwaitis was not severe enough to require violence. As morally chancy as such a judgment might be, it seems impossible to make a similar judgment about murders numbering in the hundreds of thousands in Rwanda and in Bosnia. If a U.S. led bombing campaign will stop armed thugs from murdering and raping unarmed civilians, if the unarmed civilians are not engaged in nonviolent resistance—if they are simply pathetic victims—then to oppose the bombing campaign because it is violent seems wrong. If we oppose the bombing, we seem to have lost something in the translation of nonviolence from the gospel to the complexities of the modern age. One feels once again the pull of the just war theory—not the theory that has been used to justify every frightful war ever fought, but the theory that justifies war as the only alternative, in certain highly restricted conditions, to keep from being complicit in the most appalling savagery.

Here the prophetic role has broken down. We are no longer so confident that we know the way to go in these new times. We seem to be closer to the situation faced by Simone Weil as Germany—with its earlier version of ethnic cleansing—invaded France. In an apparent attempt to excuse her siding with the Resistance, Merton says that “her notion of nonviolent resistance was never fully developed. If she had survived . . . she might possibly have written some exciting things on the subject” (233). It is a measure of Merton’s stature as a prophet that we feel the same about what he might have written about post-Cold War violence and the possibility of nonviolent resistance to it.

Thomas Merton. *The Merton Tapes: Sixth Release of Lectures*. Kansas City: Credence Cassettes, 1995. 8 cassettes (60 minutes each). \$8.95 per cassette.

Reviewed by Thomas Collins.

- 1) “Belonging to God” AA 2805
- 2) “The Straight Way” AA 2801
- 3) “T. S. Eliot and Prayer” AA 2808
- 4) “Poetry and Religious Experience” AA 2804
- 5) “The Spirit of Poverty” AA 2807
- 6) “Poverty: The Vocation of Work” AA 2806
- 7) “The Thirst for God” AA 2799
- 8) “True Freedom” AA 2803

These tapes are recordings of Merton’s talks to novices at the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani during the early 1960s. Recorded at the suggestion of the abbot so that the talks would be available to other monks, the tapes constitute a remarkable set of cultural artifacts that document Merton as teacher. Through these talks, insight can be gained into the monastic subculture of the time and into the mind of one of the central figures in American Catholic religious thought.