

Merton and Camus on Christian Dialogue with a Postmodern World

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I start from where I am, not in the twelfth century but in the twentieth. It happens that I have just been reading a very interesting essay of Camus, "Le Desert." From a certain viewpoint Camus, in this essay, is totally anti-Christian and absolutely anti-monastic. But strangely enough his conclusions are very close indeed to monastic conclusions, so close, indeed, that I am tempted to write a study of them from a monastic viewpoint.¹

Thomas Merton wrote a series of seven essays on the literary work of Albert Camus with the intention of eventually publishing a book.² The first phase of these essays³ was specifically written in response to Camus' criticism of the Church as a collaborator with the state in the violent oppression of people around the world. Merton heard in Camus a prophetic voice challenging him to examine critically the Christian faith he professed and the monastic life he lived.⁴

1. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (New York: Doubleday, 1973) 240.

2. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love; The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1985) 430.

3. While Merton, in response to Czeslaw Milosz's advice, began reading Camus during the late 1950's, he did not begin work on the essays until the summer of 1966. His essays on Camus were written in three phases: summer through autumn of 1966, spring through midsummer of 1967, and the early months of 1968.

4. Camus presented a paper at the Dominican Monastery of Latour-Maubourg in 1948 in which he sought to establish common ground with the monks and to encourage them to join with him and others in the resistance to all forms of

While Merton believed that Camus did not fully understand the Christian message,⁵ he accepted Camus' criticism of the Church as valid, believing that the Church contributes to the violence that is in the world whenever the Church fails to communicate openly and honestly with those who are outside the Christian community. Merton, therefore, responded to Camus' criticism and he did so with the hope of discovering in dialogue⁶ with Camus conditions under which communication between Christians and people of other traditions, both religious and secular, may conceivably be more authentic and creative.

In this article, I will sort out those conditions for communication presented in Merton's first phase of essays on Camus. Furthermore, I will note the manner in which Merton entered into conversation with Camus in these essays and find there additional insights into his unfolding line of thought on Christian dialogue with a postmodern world. As we shall see, Merton anticipated, in theory and in practice, our day when Christians could no longer enter conversations with people of other traditions from a position of supposed superiority.⁷ He knew that the postmodern era would require Christians to find new ways not only of talking with, but relating to, the diverse cultures of the world; ways which would inevitably change the manner in which the Church understands itself and the Gospel it proclaims.

human violence. Merton considers this address at length in his essay "Camus and the Church." It clearly established the framework in which Merton approached Camus' work. See "The Unbeliever and Christians" in *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961) 69-74.

5. Camus was not unfamiliar with Christian theology. He wrote a dissertation on Augustine. While he relied heavily on the interpretations of others, for example Etienne Gilson, this early work reflects religious themes that would occupy Camus's thinking. For further discussion, see Patrick McCarthy's *Camus* (New York: Random House, 1982) 71ff.

6. While Merton never met Camus nor corresponded with him, it is appropriate to describe Merton's study of Camus as a dialogue. It was Merton's habit to correspond with authors he was reading. Because of Camus' death in 1960, this was not possible. The tone of Merton's essays on Camus, however, is nonetheless one of an engaging dialogue. Furthermore, one can hear something of this dialogue via a third person, i.e., Czelaw Milosz who introduced Merton to Camus and with whom Merton corresponded regarding his reading of Camus.

7. See David D. Cooper's *Thomas Merton's Art of Denial; The Evolution of a Radical Humanist* (University of Georgia Press, 1989) where the author traces Merton's development as a post-Christian humanist who embraced all the peoples of the world and the major issues that confronted them as they entered their uncertain future together.

Merton's first phase of writing began the summer of 1966 and ended the autumn of the same year. During these months, Merton wrote four of his seven essays: "Terror and the Absurd: Violence and Nonviolence in Albert Camus," "Three Saviors in Camus: Lucidity and the Absurd," "Camus and the Church," and "Prophetic Ambiguities: Milton and Camus." This phase focused on four concerns which framed Merton's thought on Christian dialogue with others: the problem of nihilism in the modern world, the need to develop a language for peacemaking, the significance of Camus to this effort, and the Church's responsibility to participate in this effort in a cooperative manner.

"Terror and the Absurd: Violence and Nonviolence in Albert Camus" was written in August. It sympathetically examined the features of an ethic developed by Camus in *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt* which worked out a synthesis between violence and nonviolence.⁸ In contrast to the revolutionary who will use violence to overthrow a totalitarian government to construct an equally abstract notion of the State and in contrast to the pacifist who will respond to the oppression of a totalitarian State with nonviolent resignation, Camus developed the Rebel. The Rebel protests in the name of humanity, on behalf of each and every individual man, woman, and child, and for the sake of persons who are alive here and now, against the philosophical and socio-economic abstractions constructed by reactionaries and revolutionaries alike who seek to establish and justify their ideologies and institutions of authority and power over people. Consequently, the Rebel is also a person who refuses to be resigned to the oppressive powers of a totalitarian State or to be silent with regard to abstractions on which that power is constructed or to be passive in the face of the violence that power may exercise without respect for the liberty of all persons. The Rebel, however, is unable to take up arms with the executioners of a violent revolution nor is the Rebel able to join hands with victims who choose nonviolent resignation in the face of violent oppression. The Rebel chooses to stand midway between the extremes of revolution and resignation, demanding open and inclusive dialogue, believing that words are the only effective way for

8. For further discussion on Camus' synthesis of violence and nonviolence, see his "Neither Vi Nor Executioners," trans. Dwight Macdonald, with an Introduction by R. Scott Kennedy and Peter Klotz-Chamberlin entitled "An Ethic Superior to Murder" (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1986).

building a world in which humankind can again discover reasons for living that value and nurture life.⁹

Merton saw in Camus' *Rebel* an acceptable model for postmodern Christians; a viable alternative to violent revolution and passive resignation, both of which Merton believed to be unreconcilable to the Gospel. It was obvious to Merton that violent revolution was not an alternative for a person committed to following the example of Jesus. While a related objection is less obvious, nonviolent resignation was no less acceptable to Merton. He agreed with Camus' criticism of nonviolent resignation for two reasons. Nonviolence can result in the illusion that a person who takes up this position is innocent of any participation in the human problem of violence; a participation that both Camus and Merton saw as unavoidable and an innocence that both believed to be impossible. Furthermore, they believed that a position of nonviolence can lead to the equally illusive opinion that a person can be exempt from the obligation to defend oneself and others from injustice and violence; an exemption that is rooted in a denial of the human condition and practical reality; a passivity that inevitably contributes to the violence that it tries to deny. For these two reasons, Merton believed that the Christian cannot retreat into the silence of nonviolent resignation. Rather than understanding the Christian as a person who is ultimately concerned with creating a beautiful soul, Merton was now of the opinion that the ultimate concern of the Christian was in, with, and for the world. Merton came to believe that Camus' ethic of the *Rebel*, while basically atheistic, was nonetheless in accord with the Gospel and offered possibilities too often neglected by Christians, in particular, the option of actively participating in open and inclusive dialogue with all peoples which focuses on human life rather than abstract ideologies, whether they are religious, political or otherwise.¹⁰

9. For further discussion on this point, see Camus' "The Wager of Our Generation" in *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*, 237-48.

10. While Merton agreed with Camus that a position of innocence cannot be held in this world and while he accepted Camus' criticism of the Church as sometimes preaching resignation in the face of oppression and violence in order to maintain an illusion of innocence, he believed that Camus was wrong in assuming that this is what the Gospel requires of Christians. Camus argued that the nonviolent position is constructed on two premises he personally found to be unacceptable: there is a God and those who suffer oppression in this world do so believing that God will reward them with a future life. Merton believed that Camus had not suf-

During September, Merton wrote "Three Saviors in Camus: Lucidity and the Absurd." This essay focuses on the problem of nihilism and the need to develop a language that protects humankind against its tendency toward self-destruction. It begins with a summary of Camus' thought on the ultimate absurdity of life and our futile attempts to make sense of it. This need to make sense of the Absurd emerges from the fear of death and the belief that death can be overcome by the construction of an ideal social order based on intellectual abstractions. Because death cannot be overcome, all attempts are counterproductive, resulting not in life affirming societies but societies which embody death in their abstractions, in the words that are used to construct those abstractions and in the institutions those abstractions undergird. In other words, humankind's struggle against death is in reality an embrace of death. This embrace of death is manifested in the institutionalization of murder in economic poverty, political oppression, capital punishment, holy crusades and war.¹¹ Language, consequently, is distorted in this service to death. It is used to deceive and manipulate humankind to believe that war is peace, poverty is prosperity, oppression is justice and death is life. Camus believed that the only hope for humankind against modern nihilism is in the restitution of language in the service of truth, that is in the lucid consciousness of death and the Absurd. In this way, humankind would be able to protect itself from its tendency toward self-destruction.

Merton was in full agreement on Camus' analysis of the modern world and he recognized in Camus' novels, short stories, and plays artistic expressions of this analysis which had serious implications for the Church. In "Three Saviors in Camus: Lucidity and the Absurd," Merton reviews three of Camus' works: "The Renegade," "The Misunderstanding" and "The Growing Stone." In the first two works, efforts at communication, because essentially deceptive, result in violence. The third work, offers an alternative.

"The Renegade" is a satire on a kind of Christian triumphalism which distorts the Gospel by its hidden resentment of others and its love of power. Consequently, the language of the Church, while proclaiming salvation, in reality prepares the way for a totalitarianism¹²

ficiently come to terms with the problem of God nor had he understood that nonviolence can be a form of active resistance rather than passive resignation.

11. See Thomas Merton's "The Root of War is Fear" in *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 112-20.

12. Merton, in a lecture delivered to the novices at the Abbey of Gethsemani, explains that Joseph Hromadka, a Czech protestant theologian, was of the opinion

which institutionalizes hatred, violence and injustice. In this story, a nameless missionary is sent from Europe to proclaim the Word of God to a primitive tribe of savages for whom he has no respect and only disgust. It is he, however, who is converted by the pagans, discovering within himself an "immortal soul of hatred." The story begins with the missionary, tongue cut out and mind in violent turmoil, waiting to murder the next missionary who is coming to take his place, to settle with him, his teachers and with the whole of Europe for having deceived him. It was the sword and the sword that now alone ruled his life. But as we listen to the missionary's soliloquy, we discover that the sword of brutal power and not the Gospel of peace has always been the tool of his trade. His language, the language of the Church he served, as well as, the language of the continent from which he came, is committed, not to life, but to death.¹³

The second work is a play.¹⁴ In "The Misunderstanding," Jan, a Christian, returns home to a village in Central Europe from North Africa with his new wife. He has come home to announce to his mother and sister that he has made his fortune and wants to take them away to a place where they can be happy. Because he wants to surprise them, he tries to construct an elaborate plan whereby he might enter the inn managed by his mother and sister as a stranger. His wife, to no avail, tries to persuade him to simply present himself without disguise as their son and brother. Merton tells us:

Jan is a savior who observes those he wishes to save, analyses them, studies them as their superior, and without consulting them arranges everything to suit his abstract plan for their salvation. He decides to manipulate their lives (whether they like it or not) and surprise them with the gift of happiness.¹⁵

that Christianity prepared the way for Communism. It is not certain from the context whether Merton was in complete agreement with Hromadka. It is clear, however, that Merton was at least open to this thesis. "Communism vs. Capitalism," cassette AA2235, Credence, 1988.

13. Albert Camus, "The Renegade," in *Exile and the Kingdom* (New York: Vintage Books, 1958) 34-61.

14. Albert Camus, "The Misunderstanding," in *Caligula and Three Other Plays* (New York: Vintage Books, 1958) 77-134.

15. Thomas Merton, "Three Saviors in Camus: Lucidity and the Absurd," in *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. Patrick Hart (New York: New Directions, 1981) 283.

Unknown to Jan his mother and sister have been robbing and murdering their guests in order to steal a small fortune and escape from their dreary existence to a far away country of sea and sunshine.¹⁶ While he is trying to find the right words with which to reveal himself and his surprise, his mother and sister kill him. The root of this tragedy, Merton tells us, is in Jan, in two fatal flaws, his distrust of love and his veneration of abstract reason. Regardless of his good intentions, Jan's assumed position of superiority results in violence and death.

While "The Renegade" and "The Misunderstanding" focus our attention on the nihilistic nature of the Church's use of language, "The Growing Stone"¹⁷ is an effort by Camus to work out an alternative to the Church's approach to communication with the world which may be more effective in building an authentic community between the old established European civilization and the cultures of what was then the emerging Third World; a community in which there is open communication, honest dialogue and clear language.

D'Arrast, a French engineer, travels to South America where he finds himself participating in a local church procession which requires him to move a ceremonial stone. Rather than taking the stone to the designated place in the town's cathedral, D'Arrast, unexpectedly and without explanation, carries the stone deep into the woods of the bordering forest, away from the Church and into the natural environment of the indigenous people. Here, the native people, not fully understanding the meaning of this act, say to him, "Sit down with us." These concluding words suggested to Merton that Camus was implying that where there is openness, humility and the willingness to accept human limitations, to accept the other person as s/he is, to be oneself without pretensions, communication, though never absolutely perfect, may become possible and may lead to the building of authentic community where human life and freedom might flourish.

Reflecting on "The Renegade," "The Misunderstanding" and "The Growing Stone" at the end of "Three Saviors in Camus: Lucidity and the Absurd," Merton concluded:

Here, although Camus is expressly non-Christian we must admit that in practice his ethic seems to tend in the direction pointed out

16. This situation was not apparently uncommon in Europe. Czeslaw Milosz tells about secluded inns with conniving innkeepers who used "the guillotine," a bed whose canopy fell at night, to kill unsuspecting travelers. *The Issa Valley* (New York: Noonday Press, 1981) 67.

17. Albert Camus, "The Growing Stone," in *Exile and the Kingdom*, 159-213.

by authentic Christian charity. Though Camus failed to understand the full import of the Christian message, the failure is for many reasons understandable, and once again it suggests that even for the Christian the moral aspirations of a Camus retain a definite importance. They bear witness to the plight of man in the world with which the Christian still seeks to communicate, and suggests conditions under which the communication may conceivably be more valid.¹⁸

The concluding essays in the first phase of Merton's work on Camus continue where this one ends. "Camus and the Church" and "Prophetic Ambiguities: Milton and Camus," both written in October, emphasize the importance of Camus as a prophetic voice in the modern world. Camus, like Milton, was a poetic thinker who created myths in which are embodied his own struggles to come to terms with the fundamental questions of life. He is to be understood as prophetic in the sense that he anticipated in his solitude¹⁹ the struggles and general consciousness of later generations, in particular the modern world's tension between action and contemplation, its feelings of ambiguity and ambivalence, and its tendency toward nihilism.

Merton sets Camus before the Church as a prophetic voice challenging Christians to examine their participation in modern nihilism, that is, their support of the state in acts of violence against humankind. In "Camus and the Church" the dialogue between a priest and a prisoner at the end of Camus' *The Stranger* is presented for consideration on this point. The priest is attempting to prepare Meursault, a prisoner, for his execution by the state. Meursault, refuses to call the priest "Father," refuses to accept the priest's consolations and, thereby, refuses to willingly participate in the crime of capital punishment²⁰ constructed by the state and supported by the Church. Of such a priest, Camus will later write: "When a Spanish bishop blesses political executions, he ceases to be a bishop or a Christian or even a man; he is a dog just like the one who, backed by an ideology, orders that execution

18. Merton, "Three Saviors," 291.

19. Merton recognized in Camus the development of an asceticism and contemplative life which was very much in line with his own understanding of monastic traditions. He referred to Camus in "Day of a Stranger" as that "Algerian cenobite."

20. Camus was opposed to capital punishment. He saw it as a manifestation of nihilism. See his "Réflexions on the Guillotine" in *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*, 175-234.

without doing the dirty work himself."²¹ Merton accepted as valid Camus' criticism of the Church for not speaking out clearly and without ambiguity against nihilism in the modern world, and, consequently, for becoming a collaborator with the state in the institutionalization of violence by preaching resignation, passivity and conformity. While Merton believes that this is a misunderstanding of the Gospel, he places the responsibility for this misunderstanding on the Church for distorting the Christian message by either preaching resignation to the oppressed peoples of the world or failing to encourage them with the Gospel to resist the injustices imposed upon them.

While Merton presents Camus as a prophet who brings judgment to bear upon the Church, he also sees him as a prophet who opens new ways of being in the world that promise new life for the Church. Now that we have reviewed the first phase of Merton's work on Camus, we are in a position to summarize the primary points and thereby clarify some of these new methods for authentic dialogue.

First, it is clear that Merton accepted Camus' criticism of the Church as a collaborator with the state in the violent oppression of people. The Church collaborates with the State whenever she, like the priest in *The Stranger*, preaches resignation and conformity in the face of oppression. The Church contributes to the violence that is in the world whenever she, like Jan in "Misunderstanding," distrusting love and acting from a position of superiority, constructs intellectual abstractions to manipulate people, regardless of intentions, however good one might believe them to be. The Church inevitably commits violence whenever she, like the missionary in "The Renegade," fails to come to terms with her love of power and her hidden resentment of people outside of her control. Merton believed that Camus' prophetic voice was rightfully challenging the Church to face her participation in the nihilism of the modern world by examining herself in light of the above accusations. The willingness to examine oneself, to be oneself and not what one pretends to be, is the first step in preparing for dialogue. In 1948, Camus had called the Dominican monks of Latour-Maubourg to this task.²² In 1966, Merton reissued this appeal to the Church.²³

21. "The Unbeliever and Christians" in *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*, 71-2.

22. *Ibid.*, 69-74.

23. "Camus and the Church" originally published in the December 1966, *The Catholic Worker*.

It is also clear that Merton believed Camus had suggested viable conditions under which communication may conceivably be more authentic and potentially creative. He accepted Camus' notion of revolt against death and the Absurd in contrast to violent political revolution or passive resignation as a position valid for Christians seeking to bring about change in the world. This position of revolt requires three things: lucidity, solidarity, and resistance. That is to say, the Christian, as a kind of Camusian Rebel, must maintain a clear mind on the problem of nihilism and be willing to join with others in continuous resistance to any and all acts of violence against humankind and intellectual abstractions on which those acts are based. As Camus suggested in the "Growing Stone," the Church's willingness to find common ground with people from other traditions will eventually present the possibility for open and honest dialogue. In order to "sit down" with others, however, the Church, like D'Arrast, must be open to the traditions valued by other peoples. This is not to say that the Church is to abandon the Christian faith. On the contrary, as Camus explained to the Dominican monks of Latour-Maubourg:

. . . what I feel like telling you today is that the world needs real dialogue, that falsehood is just as much the opposite of dialogue as is silence, and that the only possible dialogue is the kind between people who remain what they are and speak their minds. This is tantamount to saying that the world of today needs Christians who remain Christians.²⁴

It is to say, however, that the Church must think and speak in terms of real human life rather than in theological abstractions which often leave people confused and the problems they face unresolved:

What the world expects of Christians is that Christians should speak out, loud and clear, and that they should voice their condemnation in such a way that never a doubt, never the slightest doubt, could rise in the heart of the simplest man. That they should get away from abstraction and confront the blood-stained face history has taken on today.²⁵

It is in this resistance to the common problem of death and self-destruction, that the different traditions of the world, including

Christianity, can find solidarity. And, it is from this common ground, this solidarity, that a shared language can emerge that will facilitate peace and justice; a language in service to human life, not abstract ideologies.

While Merton accepted Camus' criticism of the Church and his conditions for authentic dialogue, he consistently maintained one reservation with regard to Camus. Repeatedly, Merton states that Camus failed to understand fully the Christian message. He does not fault Camus for this failure, but rather the Church for failing to communicate the Gospel clearly. But whatever the cause or nature of the misunderstanding, it is at this point Merton and Camus part ways. Even though Merton became a Rebel with Camus, he did so on very different grounds. For Camus, the position of revolt taken by the Rebel is grounded in humankind's resistance to death.²⁶ For Merton, it is humankind's response to the hidden ground of Love.²⁷

It should be noted, that this difference is not articulated by Merton until he has given undivided attention to what Camus is saying. Throughout Merton's seven essays on Camus, the reader will find the following pattern: a statement of respect for Camus, an affirmation of Camus' general message, and, then, and only then, a comment by Merton on Camus' ideas in light of the Gospel.²⁸ Furthermore, as we have repeatedly observed, Merton never holds Camus responsible for misunderstanding the Christian message but always accepts responsibility, as a representative of the Church, for the misunderstanding. Consequently, Merton continually rethinks what he has to say as a Christian monk in the context of the ever widening circle of men and women interested in gathering with others to discover a common ground for people from diverse traditions. Respect for the other person, affirmation of what they have to share, and the willingness to struggle with his own message in light of the other person's thought, became characteristic of the way in which Merton entered into dialogue with the postmodern world in which he lived.

26. Camus' later thought moves beyond the Absurd and the Rebel. Consequently, any discussion of his grounding must be done in light of this change. While his death prevented him from fully developing his thought on this matter, the recent publication of an unfinished novel, *The First Man* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), provides an opportunity to reconsider this subject.

27. Merton, *Hidden Ground of Love*, 115.

28. We find a similar pattern in Clement of Alexandria's interaction with Stoic philosophy. Because of Merton's work on Clement, a comparative study could be of value.

24. "The Unbeliever and Christians" in *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death*, 70.

25. *Ibid.*, 71.