

Thomas Merton and Dorothy Day on Prayer, Conscience and Christian Social Responsibility: A Comparative Study

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Thomas Merton and Dorothy Day are contemporary icons of the spiritual pilgrim. During their lives, Merton and Day never ceased searching for a deeper understanding of truth. Both possessed a great ability to sound the depths of reality and share their discoveries. Like Thoreau, Merton and Day sought to suck the marrow out of life.

During his final years, Thomas Merton relished being a hermit. In his simple cinder block dwelling on the grounds of the Abbey of Gethsemani, he experienced the presence of God in a profound way. Paradoxically, during this time of radical contemplative living, Merton's writings became a vehicle for expressing his deeply felt religious ethic regarding such issues as racial prejudice, the Vietnam War and the use of nuclear weapons.

Dorothy Day rooted and grounded her life of service in a vision of improving the social conditions of her time. She offered bread to the hungry and shelter to the homeless and she labored to provide employment for women and men without jobs and community life for those in search of it. Through writing and activities such as picketing and engaging in civil acts of disobedience, Day addressed the issues of racism and war.

Throughout her busy life, Dorothy Day remained a contemplative at heart who experienced moments of deep intimacy with God. She considered private and community prayer times integral to her life of serving others. Day looked upon each new day as a living prayer replete with opportunities to encounter God in and through the varied people and tasks woven into the tapestry of her everyday experiences.

Though Thomas Merton and Dorothy Day often seem to have experienced life from the opposite ends of the spectrum, they held in common their strong desire to integrate contemplation and action. Merton was a contemplative whose active service took the form of writing, whereas Day's predominately active life was born out of a constant return to her contemplative center. Day's life of prayer sustained her in her active ministry to poor and needy persons. It enabled her prophetically and perseveringly to seek peace, nonviolence and justice in a society bent on war, violent action and injustice.

This essay focuses on prayer, conscience and Christian social responsibility in the lives and writings of Thomas Merton and Dorothy Day. It examines, in a comparative way, what Merton and Day have contributed to an understanding of the role of prayer and conscience in the commitment to Christian social responsibility.

Prayer

In his writings, Thomas Merton grounds his theology of prayer¹ in the principle that, in and through prayer, a person seeks communion with God present in his or her inmost depths. For Merton, prayer enhances a person's awareness that human identity is rooted in God. Attentiveness to God's presence enables the pray-er to recognize that God is both the source and the end of all being and life.²

Merton's theology of prayer is holistic. According to Merton, prayer orients a person's 'whole body, mind, and spirit to God in silence, attention, and adoration'.³ By turning his or her entire self to God in prayer, a person acknowledges complete dependence on God in both life and death.⁴

Merton stresses that in authentic prayer a person faces the illusory self through undergoing inner death to self-centeredness and self-sufficiency. The true self who emerges from this transformative process is committed to liberative loving in the power of the Spirit. The passage from the false to the true self involves the paradox of losing and, at the same time, finding one's deepest, most intimate self

1. See John J. Higgins, *Merton's Theology of Prayer* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1972) for an extensive treatment of Merton's teaching on prayer.

2. Thomas Merton, *The Climate of Monastic Prayer* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1969), p. 96.

3. Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1958), p. 48.

4. *Thoughts in Solitude*, p. 52.

hidden with Christ in God.⁵ Fulfillment of the self in Christ includes inseparability from all who live and dwell in Christ.⁶

For Merton, the kenotic process of the journey from the false to the true self is a process of divinization which entails kindling the Sacred Fire within. This process involves a movement to self-transcendence which results in a person's becoming aware that he or she is to 'burn as a flame within the flame of God'.⁷ According to Merton, those who traverse the terrain leading to the true self realize that only by embracing their nothingness can they bathe in the fulness of God. True selves radiate the light of God's Being which is Love. As Merton declares, they 'hang on to clear light'.⁸ This is so because true selves become as mirrors reflecting the light of God. Hence, there is, in reality, only Godself.

Early in her life, Dorothy Day described prayer as the opiate of the people. Later, she radically changed this view when she insisted that, just as breathing is necessary for physical life, so, too, is prayer an essential ingredient in the spiritual life. Day stressed that life devoid of prayer would be unbearable for her. She stated: 'With prayer, I am going on cheerfully and even happily. Without prayer, how grim a journey.'⁹

Day both endorsed the power of prayer and stressed that prayer is always answered in some way. She maintained that a person can pray for the whole world, past, present and to come.¹⁰ Day prayed daily for a long list of people, both living and dead. Furthermore, she held that prayer enables a person to integrate faith and social action in the search for justice in this world.

Dorothy Day's own ministry of Christian social responsibility began with prayer. At the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, DC, in 1932, Dorothy prayed to God to reveal to her how she could employ her talents to serve poor persons and her fellow

workers.¹¹ Day's co-founding of the Catholic Worker movement with Peter Maurin was the answer to her prayer. The Catholic Worker ministry provided Day with the opportunity to experience the nexus of prayer and Christian social responsibility. Regarding this connection, she wrote:

We try to shelter the homeless and give them clothes, but there is a strong faith at work; we pray. If outsiders who come to visit us do not pay attention to our praying and what that means, they are missing the whole point.¹²

Like Thomas Merton, Dorothy Day experienced an unquenchable thirst for prayer. Reflecting on her need to devote more time to prayer, Day wrote: 'We can manage better; we can have more time to pray, meditate, study'.¹³ She expressed her desire to pray throughout the day when she wrote:

... because I am a woman involved in practical cases, I must meditate when I can, early in the morning and on the fly during the day. Not in the privacy of a study, but here, there and everywhere— at the kitchen table, on the train, on the ferry, on my way to and from appointments and when I am making supper or putting Teresa to bed.¹⁴

Throughout her life, the Bible was Day's constant companion. She read and meditated on Scripture passages for several hours each day. Oftentimes, Day would 'pick up the Bible and read and read, sometimes spend hours on one page, going over and over a passage'.¹⁵

In times of consolation as well as desolation, Day was faithful to the Scriptures. She reflected: 'The Bible helps me get through the painful times of this life, reminds me of what I am doing here'.¹⁶ When imprisoned at various times throughout her life for acts of civil disobedience, Day took comfort in meditating on passages in the Bible.

Both Thomas Merton and Dorothy Day had a great love of the Psalms and prayed them privately. Likewise, Merton recited and sang

5. Thomas Merton, *The Living Bread* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudaly, 1956), p. 68.

6. Thomas Merton, 'The Inner Experience: Society and the Inner Self (III)', *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 18 (1983), p. 17.

7. Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1978), p. 53.

8. Thomas Merton, *Woods, Shore, Desert* (Santa Fe, NM: Museum of New Mexico Press, 1983), p. 48.

9. Dorothy Day, *Loaves and Fishes* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1963), p. 206.

10. See Judith Gregory, 'Remembering Dorothy Day', *America* (25 April 1981), p. 347.

11. See Dorothy Day, *The Long Loneliness* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), p. 166.

12. Quoted in Jim Forest, 'What I Learned about Justice from Dorothy Day', <http://www.catholicworker.org/roundtable/forday.html>.

13. Dorothy Day, *Dorothy Day* (ed. Michael Garvey; Springfield, IL: Templegate Publishers, 1996), p. 27.

14. Quoted in Dorothy Day, *Meditations* (Springfield, IL: Templegate Publishers, 1997), p. 13.

15. Quoted in Robert Coles, *Dorothy Day: A Radical Devotion* (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1987), p. 122.

16. Quoted in Coles, *Dorothy Day*, p. 129.

the Psalms in the company of his brother monks at the Abbey of Gethsemani while Day did so with members of her Catholic Worker community. Merton described praying the Psalms as an experience of drinking 'divine praise at its pure and stainless source, in all its primitive sincerity and perfection'.¹⁷ According to Merton, praying the psalms sanctifies the day.¹⁸ Merton instructed that 'one of the best ways to learn to appreciate the Psalms is to acquire a habit of reciting them slowly and well'.¹⁹ Savoring the Psalms, Merton maintained, promotes inner peace in the pray-er who becomes more confident in God's gracious will for his or her life.

Dorothy Day's life bore witness to Merton's teaching concerning the Psalms. Day prayed the Psalms daily as a way of growing in confidence in the providence of God.²⁰ Reflecting on the comfort praying the psalms brought to her, Day declared: 'In these days of almost hysterical fear of war and annihilation, it is good to read the psalms morning and evening'.²¹

Praying the Psalms on a regular basis provided Day with the solace and strength she needed to endure the trials in life she faced as a prophetic woman. With Merton, she concurred that praying the Psalms sanctifies one's days.

Just as the Psalms drew Dorothy Day to God, so, too, did the natural beauty of creation. Lake shores and oceans attracted her as environments conducive to prayer. Concerning the glories of creation, Day exclaimed:

the tender beauty of flowers and shells, the song of birds, the smile of a baby, these things brought such exultation, such joy to my heart that I could not but cry out in praise of God.²²

Like Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton reveled in the glory of creation. He frequently roamed the knobs at the Abbey of Gethsemani. He explored the woods and towards the end of his life sought to capture his surroundings in black-and-white photographs that visually embodied his prayers of thanksgiving for some of the wonders of life.

17. Thomas Merton, *Praying the Psalms* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1956), p. 7.

18. Merton, *Praying the Psalms* p. 17.

19. Merton, *Praying the Psalms*, p. 22.

20. See Dorothy Day, 'On Prayer', *The Catholic Worker* (November 1972), p. 2.

21. Quoted in William O. Paulsell, *Tough Minds, Tender Hearts: Six Prophets of Social Justice* (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), p. 98.

22. Quoted in William Miller, 'Dorothy Day, 1897-1980: "All Was Grace"', *America* 143 (13 December 1980), p. 383.

In his journal, *Woods, Shore, Desert*, by means of jottings and photography, Merton expressed a canticle of praise for the California coast and the New Mexico desert. Merton's camera served as a contemplative lens through which he prayerfully observed and enjoyed the beauty of canyons, cliffs, mountains, trees and ocean. He captured the simple splendor of nature in such journal entries as the one that follows:

The calm ocean... very blue through the trees. Calla lilies growing wild. A very active flycatcher. The sun shines through his wings as through a Japanese fan.²³

Like Thomas Merton, Dorothy Day viewed the Eucharist as the heart of life. She reflected that the Mass offers those who participate in it an opportunity to encounter Christ intimately.²⁴ According to Day, to be so incorporated into Christ is, at the same time, to be united with all the members of Christ's Mystical Body.²⁵ Hence, for Day, encountering Christ in the Eucharist implies recognizing Christ in one's brothers and sisters in need. The following statement captures Day's sense of this nexus: 'It is impossible to forget the hungry at Mass'.²⁶

As previously noted, Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton both embraced lives of contemplation and action. Like Merton, Day longed for experiences of solitude in God's presence. While Merton fulfilled this desire by living as a monk and eventually as a hermit during the final years of his life, Day enjoyed momentary hermitage-like experiences throughout her life. She participated in many retreats and often disappeared into churches where she would 'sit alone, pray, meditate, and find herself yet again'.²⁷ A statement that captures Dorothy Day's great desire to integrate contemplation and action in her life follows:

[N]o matter how crowded life was with activity and joy, family and work, the human heart was never satisfied until it rested in God, the absolute Good, absolute Beauty, absolute Love.²⁸

23. Merton, *Woods, Shore, Desert*, p. 17.

24. See Dorothy Day, 'The Council and the Mass', *The Catholic Worker* (September 1962), p. 2.

25. See Belden C. Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred: Geography and Narrative in American Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), p. 182.

26. Day, *Loaves and Fishes*, p. 36.

27. Coles, *Dorothy Day: A Radical Devotion*, p. 158.

28. Dorothy Day, 'Month of the Dead', *The Catholic Worker* (November 1949), p. 3.

Conscience

A good way to initiate a discussion of Merton's understanding of conscience is through a consideration of Walter Conn's keen insight into the meaning of conscience. According to Conn, conscience formation entails a 'shift from the ... egocentrism of self-absorption to the personal, reflective caring for others of self-giving love'.²⁹ Conn's definition of conscience as the person's 'radical drive for self-transcendence'³⁰ aligns itself with Merton's notion of the experience of the true self being in union with God and others. According to both Conn and Merton, the true self appreciates the value of both self and others. Likewise, the true self develops a conscience committed to 'critical judgment, responsible decision, and genuine love'.³¹

In his writings, Merton describes conscience in terms of consciousness that enables a person to make choices that fulfill the deepest capacities of the self.³² Human beings employ conscience to make decisions for life, love, truth and justice, and, hence, discover their true selves through the development and activity of conscience.³³

Merton insists that prayer is essential to the development of conscience. In prayer, at the deepest level of consciousness, human beings listen to God who communicates with them. They experience the conscience of God within themselves at the most profound level of human conscience. For Merton, those whose consciences are directed by God become true selves in Christ. Christ dwells in them by his Spirit who effects union of the self with the mind and heart of Christ.

By means of the presence and inspiration of the Spirit, those who are in Christ share his love with the world. They prolong the miracle of his Incarnation in and through their lives.³⁴ Through their gradual transformation in Christ according to his law of love, they become

more and more divinely human.

Prayer enables those who are in Christ to keep alive the consciousness that is conscience. According to Merton, such persons experience a profound level of conscience, since their consciousness is transformed through prayer.³⁵ At the deepest level of conscience, praying persons who recognize the unity of all in Christ employ conscience to fulfill Christ's law of love in the world in the power of the Spirit.

Like Merton, Dorothy Day views conscience as a call deep within each person to live out the law of love. For Day, conscience challenges a person to love others radically, enemies as well as friends. Hence, Day concurs with Merton that conscience effects a revolution of the heart.

Thomas Merton and Dorothy Day agree that the ethics that conscience embraces is built upon such principles as care and justice. For both Merton and Day, the Christian doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ undergirds the ethics of caring.³⁶ Regarding this, Day asserts: 'We are all members one of another, so we are obliged in conscience to help each other'.³⁷

In her writings, Dorothy Day insists that conscience is sovereign. Though she was an absolute pacifist, Day maintained that a person should always follow his or her conscience, even if it could result in one's either engaging in war or disobeying laws deemed unjust.

Dorothy Day also emphasized that a person always has the responsibility to form his or her conscience through 'study, listening and being ready to hear his opponent's point of view'.³⁸ One way that Day practiced her own responsibility of ongoing conscience formation was by studying the literary masterpieces of authors such as Dostoevski and Tolstoy. Day's exploration of the works of these novelists, whose writings address ethical issues from both personal and societal perspectives, contributed a great deal to her own growth in matters of conscience.

Unlike Thomas Merton, Dorothy Day did not describe growth in conscience as a journey from the false to the true self. Nevertheless, she comprehended that the development of authentic conscience requires undergoing such a transformative process. In their writings,

35. Merton, *Thomas Merton in Alaska*, p. 141.

36. See June O'Connor, *The Moral Vision of Dorothy Day: A Feminist Perspective* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), p. 61.

37. Dorothy Day, 'More about Holy Poverty Which Is Voluntary Poverty', *The Catholic Worker* (February 1945), p. 2.

38. Dorothy Day, *On Pilgrimage: The Sixties* (New York: Curtis Books, 1972), p. 254.

29. Walter E. Conn, *Christian Conversion: A Developmental Interpretation of Autonomy and Surrender* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), p. 180.

30. Walter E. Conn, 'Merton's "True Self": Moral Autonomy and Religious Conversion', *The Journal of Religion* (October 1985), pp. 513-29 (525).

31. Walter E. Conn, *Conscience: Development and Self-Transcendence* (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1981), p. 3. See also George Kilcourse, Jr, *Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton's Christ* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), pp. 14-15. Here, Kilcourse refers to Conn's analysis of Merton's own conscience formation in terms of Christian moral, religious and affective conversion.

32. See Thomas Merton, *Thomas Merton in Alaska* (New York: New Directions, 1989), p. 134 and *idem*, *No Man Is an Island*, p. 25.

33. Merton, *No Man Is an Island*, p. 130.

34. Merton, 'The Inner Experience: Christian Contemplation (III)', pp. 201-16 (204).

both Day and Merton stressed that, at the deepest level of conscience, human beings recognize their calls to transcend self in loving others authentically.

Christian Social Responsibility

In the life and writings of Thomas Merton and Dorothy Day, prayer, conscience and Christian social responsibility are inherently related. Merton and Day agree that the prayerful person of conscience is socially responsible, that is, that ongoing prayerful reflection on ways of thinking and acting enables a person to fine-tune conscience and, hence, deepen the commitment to live out the demands of Christian social responsibility.

Day and Merton maintain that respect for human dignity is a fundamental principle of conscience. Such respect includes protection of the economic, cultural, political and spiritual rights of every person and group. According to Merton, conscience points to the fact that

there are certain things ... clearly forbidden to all ... such as the use of torture, the killing of hostages, and genocide or the mass extermination of racial, national or other groups for no reason than that they belong to an undesirable category.³⁹

In the face of such blatant violations of Christian norms of behavior, conscience calls human beings to responsible action. Conscience brings human beliefs and actions under the judgment of a God-inspired consciousness.⁴⁰

Merton stresses that Christians of mature conscience are able to apply moral norms to complex situations in life.⁴¹ They deliberate, decide and commit themselves to courses of action consonant with such values held by Jesus Christ as love, justice and peace. Conscience binds Christians together in laboring to establish real and lasting peace in the world through the exercise of fidelity to the truth.⁴²

According to Merton, socially responsible persons seek to

39. Thomas Merton, *Passion for Peace* (ed. William H. Shannon; New York: Crossroad, 1995), p. 47.

40. Merton, 'The Inner Experience: Society and the Inner Self (II)', p. 125.

41. Thomas Merton, *Love and Living* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1985), p. 126.

42. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1965), p. 124.

... recognize and satisfy the right of all to a human and social culture in conformity with the dignity of the human person without any discrimination of race, sex, nation, religion or social condition.⁴³

Thus, for Merton, the essence of being socially responsible is working to make the conditions of life more favorable for all.⁴⁴

Like Thomas Merton, Dorothy Day committed her time and energies to transforming society according to such Christian values as justice, peace, freedom and love. Day's personalist philosophy of life included her stance of solidarity with poor and needy persons in their struggle for justice. She asserted:

And it is to reconstruct the social order that we are throwing ourselves in with the workers, whether in factories or shipyards or on the sea.⁴⁵

Through her commitment to caring, Dorothy Day modeled Christian social responsibility. With Merton, she affirmed each person's dignity, regardless of gender, class, religion or race. Day labored among the hungry and the hurt. She reached out to others with food, clothing and hope. She sought employment for the jobless. To enable the homeless to reclaim their dignity, she invited them to affiliate with her houses of hospitality.

Responding directly to human need was of utmost importance to Dorothy Day. Concerning this, she emphasized:

For this reason, we never asked any questions of these wounded ones ... We only tried to fulfill their immediate needs without probing, and to make them feel at home, and try to help them in regaining some measure of self-respect.⁴⁶

Dorothy Day engaged in many actions that demonstrated her deep commitment to Christian social responsibility. For example, in November 1917, she was imprisoned as one of 40 women who stood in front of the White House to protest women's exclusion from the electorate. Likewise, in June 1955, Day refused to participate in a civil defense drill, since she believed that to do so would signal her agreement with those who claimed that it was ethical to spend billions on the military and/or that a nuclear war would be survivable.

Dorothy Day supported the farmworkers' campaign, the anti-Vietnam Movement, and Civil Rights efforts. Given her passion for justice, Day 'frequently marched, picketed, civilly disobeyed, and

43. Merton, *Love and Living*, p. 158.

44. Merton, *Love and Living*, pp. 141-42.

45. Dorothy Day, 'Our Stand On Strikes', in <http://www.cais.com/agf/ddcw3607.htm>.

46. Day, *Loaves and Fishes*, pp. 64-65.

endured imprisonment on behalf of these movements'.⁴⁷ In matters concerning justice, Day believed that it was important to 'lay one brick at a time, take one step at a time'.⁴⁸ She maintained that a person is responsible only for the action required by the present moment.⁴⁹

Principle of Nonviolence

In their lives and writings both Thomas Merton and Dorothy Day rooted their ethic of social responsibility in the gospel principle of nonviolence which is based on the conviction that love is the deepest human power. As a student at Columbia University, Merton demonstrated his spirit of nonviolence by signing the Oxford Peace Pledge and becoming a noncombatant objector to war. About this, he wrote:

And therefore I made out my papers with an application to be considered as a noncombatant objector; that is, one who would willingly enter the army and serve in the medical corps ... so long as I did not have to drop bombs on open cities or shoot at other men.⁵⁰

Also, 20 years after World War II, Merton established a connection with such pacifist groups as the Catholic Worker, the Fellowship of Reconciliation and the Catholic Peace Fellowship.⁵¹

Merton viewed his monastic vocation as a witness of nonviolence in a violent society. Regarding this, Merton declared:

[B]y being in the monastery I take my true part in all the struggles and sufferings of the world. To adopt a life that is essentially non-assertive, non-violent, a life of humility and peace is in itself a statement of one's position ... It is my intention to make my entire life a rejection of, a protest against the crimes and injustices of war and political tyranny which threaten to destroy the whole race of man and the world with him.⁵²

Though personally committed to nonviolence, Merton never condemned those who acted violently in self-defense.

47. June O'Connor, 'Dorothy Day's Christian Conversion', *Journal of Religious Ethics* 8 (Spring 1990), pp. 159-80 (174).

48. Day, *Loaves and Fishes*, p. 176.

49. Day, *Loaves and Fishes*, p. 176.

50. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1948), p. 306.

51. See James H. Forest, 'Thomas Merton's Struggle with Peacemaking', in Gerald Twomey (ed.), *Thomas Merton: Prophet in the Belly of a Paradox* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), pp. 15-54 (16).

52. Thomas Merton, Preface to the Japanese Edition of *The Seven Storey Mountain* (trans. Tadishi Kudo; Tokyo: Chou Shuppanasha, 1966).

According to Merton, nonviolence grounds itself in humility and engages the whole person in self control.⁵³ A nonviolent lifestyle faithful to the truth and purity of conscience⁵⁴ offers positive, active and 'effective resistance to injustice and evil'.⁵⁵ Such a lifestyle testifies to the truth that love is the only real nonviolent power of resistance against the forces of violence and deception.⁵⁶

Merton discovered a philosophy of nonviolence in the life and writings of Gandhi who found it in the teachings of Jesus, especially in the Sermon on the Mount. In the spirit of Jesus, Gandhi embraced Satyagraha, that is, the practice of nonviolent and unconditional dedication to the truth⁵⁷ whereby one seeks to overcome one's enemies by loving them.

Gandhi identified himself with 'the starving masses and, in particular, with the outcaste "untouchables", or Harijan'⁵⁸ of India. By seeking liberty for all Indians, Gandhi sought to free the truth in himself.⁵⁹ Merton agreed with Gandhi that nonviolence insists on the truth that human rights, including those of one's oppressor, deserve the utmost respect.⁶⁰ Nonviolence seeks the good of the oppressed as well as the oppressor.⁶¹

Merton adopted Gandhi's philosophy that social responsibility requires the use of nonviolent methods to promote a reasonable standard of living for all, universal opportunity for education, decent work, and participation in the political and cultural life of society. Furthermore, Merton insisted that it is imperative that issues such as racism, the Vietnam War and nuclear warfare be viewed from the perspective of the solemn obligation of conscience grounded in the principle of nonviolence.

As previously noted, Dorothy Day joined Merton in embracing the gospel principle of nonviolence. Taking seriously Jesus' command to

53. Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), p. 22.

54. Merton, *Seeds of Destruction*, p. 125.

55. Thomas Merton, *The Nonviolent Alternative* (ed. Gordon C. Zahn; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1983), p. 233.

56. See David W. Givney, *The Social Thought of Thomas Merton: The Way of Non-violence and Peace for the Future* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1983), pp. 45-82, for a full treatment of Merton's commitment to an ideology of nonviolence.

57. See Merton, *Seeds of Destruction*, p. 229.

58. Thomas Merton, 'Gandhi and the One-Eyed Giant', in *idem* (ed.), *Gandhi on Non-Violence* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1996), p. 16.

59. Merton, 'Gandhi', p. 21.

60. See Merton, *Faith and Violence*, p. 27.

61. Merton, *Faith and Violence*, p. 37.

love one's enemies led Day to adopt a position of absolute pacifism whereby she maintained that passive resistance is the only way to oppose one's enemies.⁶² According to Day, nonviolent revolution involves 'prayer and austerity, prayer and self-sacrifice, prayer and fasting, prayer vigils, and prayer and marches'.⁶³ In effect, for Day the only ethical response to violence is peaceful non-retaliation which is an exercise of both freedom and love.

War

In his prose poem, *Original Child Bomb*,⁶⁴ in a starkly factual way, Thomas Merton narrates the brutal bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the consequent wholesale decimation of the people who inhabited these cities. According to Merton, the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki violated the just war theory, since civilians were the primary victims of this atrocity.⁶⁵ Merton notes that the 'idea was to unleash the maximum destructive power on a civilian center, to obliterate that center and destroy all other will to resist in the Japanese nation'.⁶⁶ After the bombing, in a letter to Hon, Shinzo Hamai, Mayor of Hiroshima, Merton wrote:

I never cease to face the truth which is symbolized in the names Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Each day I pray humbly and with love for the victims of the atomic bombardments which took place there. All the holy spirits of those who lost their lives there, I regard as my dear and real friends. I express my fraternal and humble love for all the citizens of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.⁶⁷

Like Merton, Dorothy Day raised her voice in protest against the

62. Dorothy Day, 'Christmas', *The Catholic Worker* (December 1934), p. 4.

63. Ann Klejment, 'War Resistance and Property Destruction', in Patrick G. Coy (ed.), *Revolution of the Heart* (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1988), pp. 272-309 (295).

64. See Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), pp. 291-302. For a discussion of Merton's *Original Child Bomb* see Robert Inchausti, *Thomas Merton's American Prophecy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), pp. 97-98; Jim Forest, *Living with Wisdom* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), p. 134; and Anthony T. Padovano, *The Human Journey: Thomas Merton: Symbol of a Century* (New York: Doubleday, 1982), pp. 120-23.

65. See Ronald E. Powaski, 'Thomas Merton and Hiroshima', *America* 159.11 (22 October 1988), pp. 277-79 (278).

66. Merton, *The Nonviolent Alternative*, p. 99.

67. Merton, *Seeds of Destruction*, p. 297.

United States' bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki when she proclaimed:

We have killed 318,000 Japanese. They died vaporized, our Japanese brothers scattered, man, woman and children, to the four winds, over the seven seas. Perhaps we will breathe their dust into our nostrils, feel them in the fog of New York on our faces, feel them in the rain on the hills of Easton.⁶⁸

In effect, both Day and Merton decried the decision of United States' officials to employ the atom bomb to end World War II.

For Thomas Merton, conscience obligates the human community to cease employing such violent means to resolve situations of alienation between and among nations. According to Merton, it is imperative that the human community dismantle existing weapons of mass destruction and cease building new ones. Merton insists that:

To allow governments to pour more and more billions into weapons that almost immediately become obsolete, thereby necessitating more billions for new and bigger weapons, is one of the most colossal injustices in the long history of man. While we are doing this, two thirds of the world are starving, or living in conditions of subhuman destitution.⁶⁹

In the case of nuclear war, Merton wholeheartedly concurred with Day that the conditions agreed upon for a just war are inapplicable. Regarding this, Merton wrote: 'A war of total annihilation simply cannot be considered a "just war", no matter how good the cause for which it is undertaken.'⁷⁰

Merton agreed with Day that nuclear war can never in conscience be justified. For Merton, nuclear war would be a moral evil second only to the crucifixion.⁷¹ Convinced that one can, in good conscience, refuse to support any measure that leads to nuclear war,⁷² Merton encouraged Catholics to refuse any job that contributed to the making of nuclear weapons.⁷³ Furthermore, he held that the most conscien-

68. Dorothy Day, 'We Go on Record', *The Catholic Worker* (September 1945), p. 1.

69. Merton, *The Nonviolent Alternative*, p. 118.

70. Merton, *The Nonviolent Alternative*, pp. 85, 86; see also p. 90.

71. Merton, *Passion for Peace*, p. 46. See also Merton, *The Nonviolent Alternative*, p. 93, where he declares: 'We have got to get people to face the moral evil of nuclear war'. See also Elena Malits, *The Solitary Explorer* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), p. 81.

72. See Thomas Merton, *Cold War Letters* (unpublished, mimeographed copy, 1962), pp. 26-27.

73. See George Woodcock, *Thomas Merton: Monk and Poet* (New York: Farrar,

tious response to the possibility of nuclear war would be for sane people 'everywhere in the world to lay down their weapons and their tools and starve and be shot rather than cooperate in the war effort'.⁷⁴

Merton maintained that nuclear war would lead to the 'suicide of nations and of cultures, indeed to the destruction of human society itself'.⁷⁵ And so Merton challenged the human community to use its scientific know-how to effect peace rather than worldwide destruction.

The lack of anti-nuclear sentiment evidenced from Church leaders deeply disturbed Merton. In a letter to Dorothy Day dated 23 August 1961, Merton queried: 'But why this awful silence and apathy on the part of Catholics, clergy, hierarchy, lay people on this terrible issue on which the very continued existence of the human race depends?'⁷⁶ Similarly, in a letter to Ernesto Cardenal, Merton stated:

I do not criticize; but I observe with a kind of numb silence the inaction, the passivity, the apparent indifference and incomprehension with which most Catholics, clergy and laity, at least in this country, watch the development of pressure that builds up to a nuclear war.⁷⁷

Like Day, Merton considered nuclear disarmament an absolute moral obligation of the human community.⁷⁸ Regarding this, Merton reflected in one of his Cold War letters:

I think that the issue is to get down to some real sincere and practical negotiation in regard to disarmament. And this means first of all a more general willingness on the part of responsible parties, especially in this country, to believe that negotiation can and will work.⁷⁹

In essence, Merton and Day agreed that the only ethical armament against nuclear war and, for that matter, any war, is love. Love alone possesses the power to effect real peace in the human community.

Just as Merton opposed nuclear war, so, too, he utterly deplored the

Straus & Giroux, 1978), p. 137.

74. Merton, *Passion for Peace*, p. 46.

75. Merton, *The Nonviolent Alternative*, p. 190.

76. 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 & Giroux, 1985), pp. 139-40.

77. Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: The Letters of Thomas Merton to Writers* (ed. Christine M. Bochen; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1993), pp. 129-30.

78. See Ronald E. Powaski, *Thomas Merton on Nuclear Weapons* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1988), p. 45.

79. Merton, *Cold War Letters*, p. 159.

Vietnam War⁸⁰ which he considered to be one of the worst blunders in United States history.⁸¹ For Merton, the Vietnam War was an atrocity involving the 'callous ravaging of human life and the rape of the culture'.⁸² Merton asserted that

What is most significant is that Vietnam seems to have become an extension of our old Western frontier, complete with enemies of another, 'inferior' race. This is a real 'new frontier' that enables us to continue the cowboys-and-Indians game which seems to be part and parcel of our national identity. What a pity that so many innocent people have to pay with their lives for our obsessive fantasies!⁸³

Merton noted that the United States dropped more bombs on Vietnam than it exploded during World War II in its entirety.⁸⁴ Merton emphatically declared that he was on the side of all those who were 'burned, cut to pieces, tortured, held as hostages, gassed, ruined, destroyed'⁸⁵ in Vietnam.

Merton wrote that both he and his brother monk, Thich Nhat Hanh of Vietnam, were repulsed by the needless destruction of human life and culture in Vietnam. Finally, in a letter to President Lyndon Johnson, Merton declared:

As a priest and monk of the Catholic Church, I would like to add my voice to the voices of all those who have pleaded for a peaceful settlement in Vietnam. A neutralized and united Vietnam protected by secure guarantees would certainly do more for the interests of freedom and of the people of Southeast Asia, as well as for our own interests, than a useless and stupid war.⁸⁶

Like Merton, Day also protested the Vietnam War. She insisted that Christ was crucified in the death of each person in the Vietnam War.⁸⁷ Day was a strong advocate for nonviolent protest to the Vietnam War,

80. Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy* (ed. Robert E. Daggy; New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989), p. 91.

81. Merton, *The Road to Joy*, p. 107.

82. Merton, *Faith and Violence*, p. 106. See also Merton's letter to Michael J. Looby in *The Road to Joy*, p. 360. Here Merton emphatically declares: 'I am afraid God will judge this nation severely for its callousness... I am very concerned about all those dead people'.

83. Merton, *The Nonviolent Alternative*, p. 253; see also James T. Baker, *Thomas Merton: Social Critic* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1971), p. 112.

84. Merton, *Faith and Violence*, p. 3.

85. Merton, *Faith and Violence*, pp. 109-10.

86. Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love*, p. 439.

87. See Dorothy Day, 'On Pilgrimage', *The Catholic Worker* (September 1965), p. 6.

which included her refusal to 'work in any industry pertaining to war or to pay taxes for war'.⁸⁸ Day insisted that conscientious objection was an ethically appropriate response to the Vietnam War.

In her writings and actions, Dorothy Day consistently urged peacemaking, not warmaking. She believed that peace begins in each person's heart, family, office, neighborhood, and so on,⁸⁹ and that it is a sad commentary on the contemporary United States culture that most fail to view war as a problem.⁹⁰

Day deeply regretted the use of exorbitant amounts of the American national budget to develop weapons of destruction rather than, for example, to construct new schools and hospitals. As an absolute pacifist, she maintained that war is wrong under any and all conditions because it renders people homeless and hungry, destroys land and separates families. In essence, Day insisted that all weapons of war and destruction be eliminated.

Racism

Thomas Merton and Dorothy Day both vehemently opposed racism. Merton's sensitivity to the situation of blacks in the United States grew out of his experience in 1940 of working at Catherine de Hueck Doherty's Friendship House in Harlem. There Merton gained keen 'insight into the patience with which at that time the Negroes still endured a deprived and exploited existence'.⁹¹

In his writings on racism, Merton stressed that in America whites have historically enslaved blacks in inferiority and powerlessness by imposing economic and social degradation upon them. In various periods of American history, whites have conceived blacks as subservient and subhuman.⁹²

According to Merton, whites' dehumanization of blacks is a deep-seated sin of racial prejudice that has eaten away at white society like a cancer.⁹³ Within this disgraceful situation, blacks have offered

the message of salvation to their white oppressors by refusing to accept the evil of white iniquity and injustice against them.⁹⁴ Blacks have sought to awaken white consciences to the need to reform society along the lines of racial justice.

According to Merton, the elimination of racism in the United States requires that whites experience a 'profound change of heart'.⁹⁵ Whites need to repent of their sins against Christ in the form of their injustices and cruelties to blacks.⁹⁶ Whites need to look upon blacks as their brothers and sisters in Christ. According to Merton, only by doing so can the American racial crisis be resolved.⁹⁷

Merton viewed the Black Power movement as a response to blacks' conclusion that white liberal Americans were not interested in non-violence.⁹⁸ Blacks became skeptical of peaceful, nonviolent methods of protest against racial discrimination because they continued to experience being despised and rejected by whites after years of struggle for equality.⁹⁹ In a letter to Ping Ferry, Merton wrote:

The terrible thing about white liberalism has been its awful benevolence, the benevolence that assumes without possibility of appeal, that the Negro is utterly incapable of doing anything really significant for himself, and therefore that he is not fully human.¹⁰⁰

The goal of the Black Power movement was to acquire political power that would enable blacks to participate on an equal basis with whites in the economic life of the United States.¹⁰¹ According to Merton, the black struggle for liberation, which is a struggle for truth, will ultimately win the day.¹⁰²

Both Thomas Merton and Dorothy Day admired Dr Martin Luther King, Jr as a model of Christian opposition to racism. Merton and Day

93. See Merton, *Passion for Peace*, p. 175 and also Kilcourse, *Ace of Freedoms*, p. 119.

94. Merton, *Passion for Peace*, pp. 184, 186.

95. Merton, *Seeds of Destruction*, p. 310.

96. Merton, *Seeds of Destruction*, p. 66.

97. Merton, *Faith and Violence*, p. 143.

98. Merton, *Faith and Violence*, p. 122.

99. Merton, *Faith and Violence*, p. 134.

100. Thomas Merton, *Letters from Tom* (Scarsdale, NY: The Fort Hill Press, 1984), p. 35.

101. Merton, *Faith and Violence*, p. 126.

102. See George Kilcourse, Jr, 'Thomas Merton and Racism: "Letters to a White Liberal" Reconsidered', in Danny Sullivan and Ian Thomson (eds.), *Your Heart is My Heritage* (London: The Thomas Merton Society of Great Britain and Ireland, 1996), pp. 155-63.

88. Day, *On Pilgrimage: The Sixties*, p. 344.

89. See Dorothy Day, 'On Pilgrimage—December 1965', *The Catholic Worker* (December 1965), reprinted in the Dorothy Day Library on the Web at <http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/daytest.dfm>.

90. See Nancy Roberts, *Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1984), p. 141.

91. Woodcock, *Thomas Merton*, p. 130.

92. See Merton, *Faith and Violence*, p. 121 and *idem*, *Seeds of Destruction*, pp. 66-67.

applauded Dr King's spirit of nonviolence in the struggle against racial prejudice in the United States. Merton described Dr King as a courageous and edifying Christian¹⁰³ who grounded his thinking and actions in Christ's law of love which he believed could unite people, even enemies, in truth.

Merton deemed it magnificent that Dr King was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. In a letter to James Forest, he said that he thought this award would restore the confidence of blacks in King's leadership.¹⁰⁴ Additionally, in his correspondence to Ping Ferry, Merton described King's receiving the peace award as 'one of the greatest things that has happened in recent years'.¹⁰⁵

When Dr King was assassinated, Merton indicated his deep hope that King's death would stir the conscience of the United States in a profound way.¹⁰⁶ In a most touching letter to Dr King's wife, Merton praised her slain husband:

He has done the greatest thing anyone can do. In imitation of his Master he has laid down his life for his friends and enemies. He knew the nation was under judgment and he tried everything to stay the hand of God and man. He will go down in history as one of our greatest citizens. My prayers are with you and with him. May he find the rest and reward which God has promised to all who trust in his mercy.¹⁰⁷

Day, like Merton, penned a tribute to Dr King. What follows is her exaltation of this greatest of American heroes:

Dr. King was a man of the deepest and most profound spiritual insights ... Martin Luther King died daily ... He faced death daily, and said a number of times that he knew he would be killed for the faith that was in him. The faith that men could live together as brothers. The faith in the Gospel teaching of non-violence. The faith that man is capable of change, of growth, of growing in love.¹⁰⁸

103. Thomas Merton, *The School of Charity: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Renewal* (ed. Patrick Hart; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1990), p. 182.

104. Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love*, p. 282.

105. Merton, *Letters from Tom*, p. 42.

106. Merton, *The Road to Joy*, p. 365.

107. Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love*, p. 451.

108. Dorothy Day, 'On Pilgrimage—April 1968', *The Catholic Worker* (April 1968), p. 1.

Conclusion

In the course of their lives, Thomas Merton and Dorothy Day developed a lasting friendship. They first encountered each other when Day came to speak at St Bonaventure University while Merton was on the faculty there.¹⁰⁹ Over the years, Merton and Day's correspondence served to strengthen their relationship. In one of his letters to Dorothy, Merton demonstrated the great respect and reverence he had for her when he wrote: 'I am touched deeply by your witness for peace. You are very right in going at it along the lines of Satyagraha.'¹¹⁰

Merton characterized Dorothy as 'an example of what it means to take Christianity seriously in the twentieth century'.¹¹¹ To Abbot General Dom Gabriel Sortais, Merton described Dorothy as one of the 'holiest persons among us'.¹¹² In a letter to his friend, Jim Forest, Merton characterized her as unfailingly wise.¹¹³

Dorothy's total commitment to nonviolence and pacifism were a source of profound inspiration for Merton. Regarding this, Merton wrote:

There are many reasons to believe that the social action of someone like Dorothy Day, who is willing to refuse cooperation even in civil defense drills and ready to go to jail for her belief in peace, is far more significantly Christian than the rather subtle and comfy positions of certain casuists. When I consider that Dorothy Day was confined to a jail cell in nothing but a light wrap (her clothes having been taken from her) and that she could only get to Mass and Communion in the prison by dressing in clothes borrowed from prostitutes and thieves in the neighboring cells, then I lose all inclination to take seriously the self-complacent nonsense of those who consider her kind of pacifism sentimental.¹¹⁴

Merton and Day prayed for each other on a regular basis. In a letter to Dorothy, Merton wrote: 'I think often of you and pray often for you and the Catholic Worker'.¹¹⁵ Again, he wrote to her: 'Let us be united in prayer and trust and work for the abolition of war in any way that we can'.¹¹⁶

109. Forest, *Living with Wisdom*, p. 123.

110. Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love*, p. 136.

111. Merton, *The School of Charity*, p. 329.

112. Merton, *The School of Charity*, p. 144.

113. Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love*, p. 298.

114. Merton, *The Nonviolent Alternative*, p. 26.

115. Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love*, p. 148.

116. Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love*, p. 140. See also Brigid Merriman,

Day's letters to Merton demonstrate that she repeatedly offered encouragement to him in the form of thanking him for the inspiration that his writings provided her and countless others. Likewise, in her 4 June 1962 letter to Merton, Dorothy praised his efforts on behalf of peace.¹¹⁷ Immediately after attending a performance which included four of Merton's freedom songs, Dorothy corresponded to him: 'It is one a.m. and I had to write to you at once; I have been so entranced by the music and the words... You have enriched our lives so many times.'¹¹⁸

When Merton died, Day eulogized him in the following way: 'All of us at Tivoli and at St. Joseph's House of Hospitality on First Street in New York were shocked and saddened by the loss of this friend of the *Catholic Worker* and of the peace movement'.¹¹⁹

To conclude, it seems quite appropriate to describe Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton as soul friends who were both convinced that love is the force that binds together prayer, conscience and Christian social responsibility. They held that prayer is the experience of encountering God who is the All, Freedom and Love and that communion with God in prayer develops the bedrock principle of conscience that love is truly the law of all being. Finally, Thomas Merton and Dorothy Day were convinced that Christians who develop mature conscience must employ it in determining the most ethical response to issues such as racism and warfare.

Searching for Christ (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), p. 13.

117. Merriman, *Searching for Christ*, p. 114.

118. Day letter to Merton, 19 August 1968 (Dorothy Day-Thomas Merton Correspondence, Bellarmine College, Louisville, KY: D-220).

119. Dorothy Day, 'Thomas Merton, Trappist', *The Catholic Worker* (December 1968), p. 1.