

Comrades for Peace: Thomas Merton, The Dalai Lama and the Preferential Option for Nonviolence

Joseph Quinn Raab

1. Introduction:

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, in its 1993 document *The Harvest of Justice is Sown in Peace*, asserted that the Christian tradition "possesses two ways to address conflict: nonviolence and just war. Both share [a presumption against the use of force and] the common goal to diminish violence in this world."¹ The defense of peace, it said, is a moral obligation, but the how of defending peace offers moral options. One finds these two ways affirmed as well in Buddhist traditions. A recent essay by Tessa Bartholomeusz convincingly demonstrates that even Buddhism, widely regarded as a pacifistic tradition, does not *de facto* reject the use of violent force and possesses a more muted but active just-war tradition.² Both Thomas Merton and the Dalai Lama advocate strongly for the nonviolent option, even with deference to the possibility of justifying the use of violent force from an orthodox Christian or Buddhist perspective. The powerful polemical writings of Merton on peace are complemented by the practical proposals of His Holiness the Dalai Lama³ and together they strengthen the tendency in Catholic social teaching to make normative the preference for the nonviolent option over the use of armed force to achieve conflict resolution in our atomic age.

In this article I recall the encounters between the two most famous monks of the twentieth century and then seek to explicate succinctly the religious sources of their common commitment to nonviolence, with a special emphasis on its monastic character. Finally, I will offer some reflections on the contribution of their legacy to the growing momentum of the nonviolent option in Christian theology and practice. I am especially indebted here to Scott Appleby who convincingly demonstrates this growing momentum,⁴ even while a popular image of the "Christian right" sug-

gests a more jingoistic trend in mainstream Christian thought and practice.⁵

2. The Encounter:

It was only weeks before his death that Thomas Merton met the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala, India on November 4, 1968. Initially Merton was surprised by the impressive physical stature of the Dalai Lama, apparently expecting to meet someone more like the diminutive Tibetan rimpoches that dotted the Himalayan landscape.⁶ The Dalai Lama was struck by Merton's spiritual depth and humility but more directly by the bulk and width and practicality of Merton's fat leather belt. They immediately enjoyed each other and laughter and levity permeated their weighty religious discourse.⁷ They met twice again over the next four days and in this brief time they forged a genuine friendship by discovering a profound spiritual bond. The Dalai Lama would later recall: "although we did not know each other very long, in his large hearted faith and burning desire to know, I felt the inspiration of a kindred spirit."⁸

Throughout their dialogues Merton sought clarification from His Holiness Tenzin Gyatso on the doctrines of *dzogchen*, *samadhi*, and *boddhicitta* and the practical methods of meditation cultivated in the Vajrayana tradition. In turn, the Dalai Lama probed Merton with questions concerning the details of Cistercian monastic life, initiation practices and vows, the Christian conception of the spiritual journey and its stages of illumination. Only at their third and final meeting did Merton breach a more political topic with the question of correlations between Marxism and Monasticism. To one looking back on Merton's account of their dialogue from a twenty-first century perspective, perhaps the most fascinating element is the conspicuous absence of any mention of the issue of nonviolence, an issue that has now come to represent a central component of their legacy. The Dalai Lama, however, did recall that they spoke about spiritual beliefs as important factors in the pursuit of world peace.⁹ But their mutual attraction and connection was only derivatively based on a shared ethic concerning conflict resolution; it was based primarily on the similar structure and aims of their monastic lives of prayer and contemplation and on what the Dalai Lama characterized as their quest for "mental peace." The contemplative ground of their dialogue nourished

their common purpose, as the Dalai Lama later identified it, as “comrades” in that struggle for peace and social transformation.¹⁰

3. The Source of an Ethic: Merton’s Apocalyptic Christianity

For as much as Merton readers like to celebrate his ‘embrace of the world’ and his being “at home in the world” after his Louisville experience, we must recognize that Thomas Merton remained at his core a radically eschatological Christian. John Dominic Crossan, in describing the eschatological nature of Q and of the early Jesus movement, defines eschatology as “one of the great and fundamental options of the human spirit. It is a profoundly explicit ‘no’ to the profoundly implicit ‘yes’ by which we usually accept life’s norms, culture’s presuppositions, and civilization’s discontents.”¹¹ Likewise, John Kloppenborg describes the eschatological form of early Christian discipleship as marked by one’s “separation from family and rejection of the norms of macro-society, [by one’s embrace of] poverty, homelessness, and even martyrdom. More positively, it is understood as imitation of the merciful and generous God.”¹² It is in this apocalyptic Christian tradition that dates from the earliest Jesus movement that Merton stands and within which his attitude toward the world must be understood.

Less than five years before his death Merton wrote:

It is my intention to make my entire life a rejection of, a protest against the crimes and injustices of war and political tyranny By my monastic life and vows I am saying *NO* to all the concentration camps, the aerial bombardments, the staged political trials, the judicial murders, the racial injustices, the economic tyrannies, and the whole socio-economic apparatus which seems geared for nothing but global destruction in spite of all its fair words in favor of peace.¹³

Merton’s eschatological voice did not project the apocalypse into the indeterminate future, but proclaimed the kingdom already present as a transforming leaven in the post-lapsarian human world. This realized eschatology would inform the way Merton looked at everything, from monasticism and mysticism to modernity, from the patristic period to the peace movement of the 1960s. Thus he could write in *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*:

[T]he Christian attitude to war and peace is fundamentally eschatological. The Christian does not need to fight and indeed it is better that he should not fight, for insofar as he imitates his Lord and master, he proclaims that the messianic kingdom has come and bears witness to the presence of the *Kyrios Pantocrator* in mystery even in the midst of the conflicts and turmoil of the world.¹⁴

The imitation of Christ, for Thomas Merton, should include not only his monastic vows but, if necessary, imitating the way Christ responded to the violence committed against him. The Christian, he writes, "is bound to imitate the Savior who, instead of defending himself with twelve legions of angels (Matt. 26:25), allowed himself to be nailed to the Cross and died praying for his executioners."¹⁵

Merton supports his view that not only Christ but Christ's disciples should respond to violence with patient endurance and forgiveness by making a point that scandalizes many literal-minded Christians who read the Apocalypse (Revelation) as justifying the use of force on behalf of so-called Christian nations for the defense or advancement of national interests: He writes: "The book of the New Testament that definitely canonizes this eschatological view of peace in the midst of spiritual combat is the Apocalypse, which sets forth in mysterious and symbolic language the critical struggle of the nascent Church with the powers of the world, as typified by the Roman Empire."¹⁶

Christianity, however, has a dual tradition of both a realized and a futurist eschatology. The Kingdom is both already and not yet fully present in this world. As much as we are redeemed and living in the Spirit we are also pilgrims preparing for death, in need of fuller conversion and greater transformation. The non-violent option in the face of conflict and the willing embrace of martyrdom, as Merton presents it, belongs to the tradition of realized eschatology, while the just war option, I would suggest, belongs more appropriately to the futurist tradition that permits lesser evils for the avoidance or elimination of greater ones and for the perceived promotion of the common good. This dual eschatological tradition runs through monasticism as well, and through every believer, including Thomas Merton.

Merton takes care in his writings to explicitly affirm Catholic just war tradition by recognizing its rational merits. But he tries

to show how modern warfare and what we now call “weapons of mass destruction” make the practical application of this logically viable theory virtually impossible.¹⁷ This alerts him to the need to argue against modern warfare akin to the way the Magisterium has consistently argued its case against abortion; namely that affirming a moral prohibition against it need not rest on faith alone or strictly religious principles, but can be supported by logical argument in the dialectical fashion accessible to reasonable people, religious and non-religious alike. To show this Merton adeptly addresses the perennial problem of conflating the ten just war principles to the single one of just cause (only one of seven criteria that need to be met in order to justify entering a war; there are three more for carrying out military campaigns justly). Once a nation has justified its causes for war, he argues, the means employed in the service of victory, regardless of their moral merit, are all too easily justified as necessary for obtaining the desired result.¹⁸ The consistent violation of just war principles during war-time, such as prisoner abuses, countless civilian casualties, disproportionate measures of retaliation employed in the service of victory and disproportionate damage, confront us with the realization that while just causes for entering a war can be logically supported, we may never have seen a just war carried through to term. In short, Merton’s position is largely apocalyptic, but it is also a critically sound engagement of just war thinking and explicates a persuasive and overwhelming preference for the nonviolent option, while refraining from an unconditional pacifism or condemnation of the just war principles.

4. The Source of an Ethic:

The Dalai Lama’s Universal Compassion:

Tenzin Gyatso, the current Dalai Lama, tells us in his autobiography that his predecessor, Thupten Gyatso the 13th Dalai Lama, forcibly expelled an invading Manchu army in 1911-1912 and later undertook an ambitious campaign to modernize Tibet, one that included strengthening its military defenses.¹⁹ The 13th Dalai Lama, in his last written testament, had also warned of the future destruction of Tibet and the repression of Vajrayana Buddhism. By the time Tenzin Gyatso came of age the Tibetan world had changed dramatically and the prophecy of his predecessor had come to fruition. On November 17, 1950, at the age of fifteen, the

current Dalai Lama assumed temporal leadership of a nation of six million people on the brink of war with China.

Nonviolent resistance was not the Dalai Lama's initial plan. He knew the Tibetan army numbering 8,500 was no match for the 80,000 soldiers of the Chinese People's Liberation Army that had invaded the Chamdo district of Tibet a month earlier, and at this early stage of occupation he had taken no official position and armed resistance had not been entirely ruled out. Some of his closest advisers, including his elder brother Taktser Rinpoche, abbot of Kumbum Monastery, advised him to enlist the military support of Britain and the United States. His Holiness was aware that "although the Buddha forbade killing, he had indicated that under certain circumstances it could be justified"²⁰ and this may have assuaged his conscience as he began to look outside Tibet for support against the Chinese. He sent delegations to Nepal, India, Britain and the United States appealing for assistance, only to receive none. But his brother's talks with the U.S. consulate in India continued and seemed to keep the possibility of U.S. military support alive. His Holiness then began to weigh the ethics, practicality and possible results of such a U.S.-Tibet alliance in war against the Chinese, and he backed away from what seemed to him to be an ill-fated and bloody course of action.

The Dalai Lama's own account of these events suggests that his embrace of the nonviolent response to Chinese occupation was arrived at by a careful consideration of traditional just war principles. That is to say, the Dalai Lama's initial option for nonviolent resistance was based on his belief that the necessary conditions for overriding the strong Buddhist presumption against the use of violent force could not be met in this situation. He had just cause and legitimate authority to invoke war, but he was not convinced of the probability of success, or that the destruction caused by the war would be outweighed by the good it could achieve (proportionality), or that he had exhausted all peaceful alternatives (last resort).²¹ Given these serious doubts he opted for continued negotiation and nonviolent resistance. However, since he made that initial choice his preference for a more universal nonviolent ethic has been strengthened over the past several decades, largely by his further appropriation of his monastic aim of realizing in himself the *mahakaruna* (the great or universal compassion).

The Buddhist monastic aim of realizing the great compassion of the Buddha is in many respects correlative with the Christian

monastic aim of a realized eschatology. In his interview with Paul Wilkes, the Dalai Lama speaks of Buddhism in terms reminiscent of Merton's apocalyptic voice when he says "true religion must be a sort of destroyer. Compassion and tolerance, these we can call destroyers of anger. Destroyers of hatred."²² The cultivation of the virtue of humility or patience (what the Buddhist calls *ksanti*) is essential to the realization of the eschatological fullness of wisdom and compassion (*prajna* and *karuna*). *Prajna* is born of the recognition that everything that exists is radically interdependent and each person who exists shares responsibility both for what is and for what ought to be. This radical interdependence of identity makes impossible the purging of evil through a sacrificial scapegoat or the objectifying of an enemy as purely evil while we perceive ourselves as good. Hence the major religious justifications for violence dissolve.²³ The recognition of the complex multiple causality of self-constitution leads to compassion for the enemy out of a shared guilt and shared responsibility for the evil of unnecessary violence in the world. Illustrating this point, the Catholic philosopher Charles Taylor suggests that while there is no simple remedy for the cycle of violence:

There can be moves, always within a context, whereby someone renounces the right conferred by suffering, the right of the innocent to punish the guilty, of the victim to purge the victimizer. The move is the very opposite of the instinctive defense of our righteousness. It is a move that can be called forgiveness, but at a deeper level, it is based on a recognition of common, flawed humanity.... It opens a new footing of co-responsibility to the erstwhile enemy.²⁴

The Dalai Lama speaks of this same renunciation in terms of detachment. After recalling the story of a Tibetan nun who in 2002 reported her experience of brutal torture under the Chinese, and after goading the Dalai Lama with a pessimistic account of the progress he had made with China since 1951, Evan Solomon in a recent CBC interview asks His Holiness, isn't it time for a different way: "Is this not a perfect case for a just war?"²⁵ But the Dalai Lama did not waver from his nonviolent ethic in his response, urging continued dialogue and putting a more hopeful spin on recent events concerning the question of Tibet. Evan Solomon then personalized the question and asked whether if Mr. Solomon's

daughter were attacked, he would not be justified in a violent response against that attacker: after thoughtful consideration the Dalai Lama answered that with the motivation of protecting one's child one may intervene "with a stick or even gun. But, not kill that person, preferably...not shoot the person in the head, but something like in the leg. That, I think, is the proper way." Then the Dalai Lama took the opportunity to speak about detachment and universal compassion.

Attachments based on biological impulse or the attachment to country, or the attachment to matters, or possessions, or the attachment to one's name—these are narrow minded—focused on one particular sort of object.... Now, the other kind of feeling of intimacy or closeness, that we call compassion, it's not biased, even towards your own enemy or neutral people, see even towards your enemy, through discipline and reasoning, you can develop...that compassion. So, the practitioner tries to increase...to widen that understanding of compassion and love, and that automatically reduces that narrow, single-pointed, biased sort of love or compassion. So, that's the way. Of course, it's not easy.²⁶

5. Reflections on the Legacy of Friendship:

In a recent essay Scott Appleby argues that momentum has been developing within both Christian theology and praxis toward a normative nonviolent ethic of peace-building. He states, "today nonviolence is seen by significant numbers of Christians not merely as an option, but as a non-negotiable dimension of Christian discipleship."²⁷ The legacy of Thomas Merton and the Dalai Lama contributes significantly to this growing trajectory.

In 1974 the Benedictine Confederation founded the organization called Monastic Interreligious Dialogue (MID) as a response to a request from the Vatican to pursue mutual understanding among spiritual traditions. Following the MID's conference at the Parliament of World Religions in Chicago in 1993, the Dalai Lama suggested that a more extensive and in-depth encounter between Buddhist and Christian monks ought to take place and he proposed the Abbey of Gethsemani as the location for this meeting, in honor of his friend the late Thomas Merton. Since the historic meeting in 1996 at Gethsemani, the work of the MID has been

largely a continuation of the friendship between Thomas Merton and the Dalai Lama, and peacebuilding, both personally and socially, is integral to the work of the MID.²⁸ The fruits of these labors are collected in the published talks from these gatherings in *The Gethsemani Encounter: A Dialogue on the Spiritual Life by Buddhist and Christian Monastics* and in *Transforming Suffering: Reflections on Finding Peace in Troubled Times*, and in an audio compact disc entitled "Compassion." The immediate aim of the MID is to foster understanding between Buddhist and Christian monks and nuns but a residual effect of this enterprise has been a broader consciousness—raising concerning the importance of the traditional spiritual resources, Buddhist and Christian, for cultivating both personal and social peace and transformation. Indeed, Donald Mitchell reminds us that *The Gethsemani Encounter* was "chosen as a selection for the Book of the Month Club, received the 2002 Frederick J. Steng Book Award, and was even touted on *Sports Center* by Phil Jackson."²⁹ Obviously, the work of the MID is reaching the wider public and contributing to a broader consideration of the potential of these wisdom traditions for offering guidance for social change in troubled times.

But the question remains, if nonviolence is increasingly understood as a non-negotiable dimension of discipleship (whether Buddhist or Christian) does this mean that the just war principles are obsolete for seriously devoted practitioners? Both Thomas Merton and the Dalai Lama, largely because of the degree to which each has realized in himself the aims of his monastic practice, find that fewer and fewer conditions or exceptions could apply to the normative ethic of nonviolence. This is not to say, however, that they deny absolutely the possibility of justifiably using violent force. Neither Thomas Merton nor The Dalai Lama go as far as their mentor Mahatma Gandhi, who hoped he would not even defend himself against the aggressive advances of a venomous snake.³⁰

The American Catholic Bishops' 1983 and 1993³¹ documents on war and peace reaffirmed the legitimacy of the nonviolent option, and conscientious objection, for Catholics. Furthermore, they emphasized that the strong presumption against the use of violent force is built in to the just war principles themselves, and the principles ought to be understood in this light. The teaching of the USCCB on war and peace is strictly in accord with the trajectory initiated by the Second Vatican Council, which hurled no

anathemas but issued one condemnation. It condemned genocide, ethnic cleansing and "every act of war directed to the indiscriminate destruction of whole cities and vast areas with their inhabitants" as crimes against God and humanity (*Gaudium et spes*, pp. 79-80).

Merton would have been delighted by Pope John Paul II's consistent refusal to endorse war as a means to peace; though not an unqualified pacifist, he refused to deem just any military operation undertaken by the U.S. government during his Papacy. The late Pope's insistence on "saying no to war" suggests that in the overwhelming majority of cases the faithful and prayerful application of just war principles ought to lead us to opt for nonviolence.³² In this way the just war principles are not at odds with but support a preference for the nonviolent option. The more explicit we make this preferential option for nonviolence and the more we emphasize it, the more difficult it should be for us to justify the use of violent military force. Indeed it was the presumption against war built in to the just war principles that initially helped lead the Dalai Lama himself to opt for nonviolent resistance against the Chinese occupation.

As long as Christianity is both a community of pilgrims in formation seeking the Kingdom, and a community of the transformed who embody the message and person of Christ, as long as the Eschaton is both beyond us and realized within us, the dual tradition of just war and nonviolence rightly remains. Merton's serious consideration of Catholic just war tradition does not lead him to a position of unqualified pacifism. The Dalai Lama concedes that violent force may be justified in the case of defending the helpless child. They both leave room for the just war option. The just war principles, however, are meant to establish strict parameters regarding the use of force. The effectiveness of the principles, however, is strictly dependent upon the personal authenticity of the one who makes the determinations as to whether their conditions have been fulfilled, and therein lies the difficulty. The problem is not with the just war principles themselves but with their vulnerability to cooption and to ideological corruption when used by the powerful to advance interests that are dubiously equated with the common good. How many Christians saw Desert Storm and Iraqi Freedom as just and necessary wars? The Dalai Lama has not, Pope John Paul II did not, and, we can be sure, Thomas Merton would not have either.

Notes

1. National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Harvest of Justice is Sown in Peace* (Washington, D.C.: USCC Office for Publication and Promotion Services, 1993), p. 7.

2. Tessa Bartholomeusz, "In Defense of Dharma: Just War Ideology in Buddhist Sri Lanka," available at <http://jbe.gold.ac.uk/6/bartho991.htm>

3. For example, see the Dalai Lama's Five Point Plan for Tibetan-Chinese relations laid out in his Nobel Lecture from 1989.

4. R. Scott Appleby traces this growing momentum from the World Wars to the present in "Disciples of the Prince of Peace? Christian Resources for Nonviolent Peacebuilding," in *Beyond Violence: Religious Sources of Social Transformation*, edited by James L. Heft, S.M. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2003), pp. 113-145.

5. See for example, Jim Wallis, "Dangerous Religion: George W. Bush's Theology of Empire," *Sojourners* (September-October 2003), pp 21-26.

6. Thomas Merton, ed. Patrick Hart, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The Journals of Thomas Merton*, Vol. 7, 1967-1968. (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1998), p. 251.

7. *Merton: By Those Who Knew Him Best*, edited by Paul Wilkes (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), pp. 145, 147.

8. *The Gethsemani Encounter: A Dialogue on the Spiritual Life by Buddhist and Christian Monastics*, edited by Donald W. Mitchell and James Wiseman, O.S.B. (New York: Continuum, 1997), p. ix.

9. *Merton: By Those Who Knew Him Best*, pp. 146-147.

10. *Merton: By Those Who Knew Him Best*, p. 147.

11. John Dominic Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity: Discovering What Happened in the Years Immediately After the Execution of Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), p. 259.

12. John S. Kloppenborg, *The Formation of Q: Trajectories in Ancient Wisdom Collections. Studies in Antiquity and Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), p.241

13. Thomas Merton, "Honorable Reader": *Reflections on My Work*, ed. Robert Daggy (New York: Crossroad, 1989), p. 65.

14. Thomas Merton, *Peace in the Post-Christian Era* (New York: Orbis Books, 2004), p. 29.

15. Merton, *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*, p. 29.

16. Merton, *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*, p. 29.

17. See *Peace in the Post Christian Era*, Chapter 7, entitled "Justice in Modern War" (pp. 58-67).

18. Merton, *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*, p. 59.
19. The Dalai Lama, *Freedom in Exile: The Autobiography of The Dalai Lama* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1990), pp. 31-33.
20. *Freedom in Exile, The Autobiography of The Dalai Lama*, p. 55.
21. *Freedom in Exile, The Autobiography of The Dalai Lama*, pp. 55-56.
22. *Merton: By Those Who Knew Him Best*, p. 147.
23. Charles Taylor demonstrates the correlation between physical violence and the Judeo-Christian conception of sacrificial purification or purgation in his essay, "Notes on the Sources of Violence: Perennial and Modern," *Beyond Violence: Religious Sources of Social Transformation*, ed. James L. Heft, S.M. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2003), pp. 15-42.
24. "Notes on the Sources of Violence," p. 39.
25. The CBC interview of the Dalai Lama by the journalist Evan Solomon is available at: <http://www.cbc.ca/sunday/dalailama.html>.
26. CBC interview.
27. "Disciples of the Prince of Peace," p. 113.
28. See *Transforming Suffering: Reflections on Finding Peace in Troubled Times*, eds. Donald W. Mitchell and James Wiseman, OSB (New York: Doubleday, 2003), pp. vii-xiii.
29. *Transforming Suffering*, p. x.
30. Mahatma Gandhi, *All Men Are Brothers: Autobiographical Reflections*, compiled and edited by Krishna Kripalani (New York: Continuum, 1999), p. 89.
31. These are The National Conference of Catholic Bishops' documents: *The Challenge of Peace* (Washington, D.C.: USCC Office for Publication and Promotion Services, 1983) and *The Harvest of Justice is Sown in Peace* (Washington, D.C.: USCC Office for Publication and Promotion Services, 1993).
32. For a sampling of John Paul II's teaching concerning the problem of war and preference for nonviolence see: http://sao.clriq.org.au/peace/jp2_peace.html#top.