

indication indeed, if an indication is needed, of the foibles of our present condition and what it means to be "human."

---

Ronald E. Powaski

**THOMAS MERTON ON NUCLEAR WEAPONS**

Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1988  
169 pages -- \$7.95

Reviewed by **James H. Forest**

---

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.

Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction*, p. 129.

It is often thought that it was world crises in the sixties that provoked Thomas Merton to turn his attention toward the issue of war and led him toward his advocacy of nonviolence. In fact, he had been thinking about these topics since he was a boy.

In 1930, when he was a fifteen year old student at Oakham, Merton took Gandhi's side in a student debate over whether or not the Indian people should rule their own country. Merton's team lost by thirty-eight votes to six. Gandhi was then regarded as an enemy whose best virtue was that he provided so many amusing possibilities for British editorial cartoonists. Merton, not readily swayed by majorities or cartoonists, never lost his admiration for Gandhi. It simply became more profound as he got older.

It was the teaching and example of Jesus, rather than Gandhi, that moved him from a minority position in debates to taking a costly personal stand that many of his contemporaries could only regard with contempt. In March 1941, over two years after his conversion to Roman Catholicism, Merton registered as a conscientious objector. By then his attitude toward

war was no longer simply the result of emotional feelings, he wrote in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, but had to do with moral duty:

God was asking me, by the light and grace he had given me, to signify where I stood in relation to the actions of governments and armies and states in this world overcome with the throes of its blind wickedness. He was not asking me to judge all the nations of the world, or to elucidate all the moral and political motives behind their actions. He was not demanding that I pass some critical decision defining the innocence and guilt of those concerned in the war. He was asking me to make a choice that amounted to an act of love for His truth, His goodness, His charity, His Gospel, as an individual, as a member of His Mystical Body. He was asking me to do, to the best of my knowledge, what I thought Christ would do.

Despite hesitation, he found he could accept the government's view on a number of key points: that it was a war of self-defense, that it was necessary, and that it was for a just cause. His "last and most crucial doubt about the war," however, "was the morality of the means used in the fight: the bombing of open cities, the wholesale slaughter of civilians . . . methods that descend to wholesale barbarism and ruthless, indiscriminate slaughter of non-combatants." To participate in such murderous actions was, he felt, nothing less than mortal sin. "After all, Christ did say: 'Whatsoever you have done to the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.'"

Registering as a conscientious objector, Merton was nonetheless ready to join the army of medical corps:

I would not be spared any of the dangers that fell upon other men, and at the same time I would be able to help them, to perform works of mercy, and to overcome evil with good. I would be able to leaven the mass of human misery with the charity and mercy of Christ, and the bitter, ugly, filthy business of the war could be turned into the occasion for my own sanctification and for the good of other men.

In the end Merton was turned down by the military, not because of his views about what it meant to follow Christ but simply because he did not have the required number of teeth. (At least one of the missing teeth was pulled because of an infection caused when some young Nazis nearly ran over Merton when he was hiking in the Rhine Valley in 1932, a long time before most Americans had heard of Hitler.)

Despite the attention Merton gave to war in his autobiography, many of his readers were unprepared for his renewed advocacy of these same ideas in the last eight years of his life. These are the years that provide the material Ronald Powaski has gathered together in this engaging study, material that ranges far more widely than the title suggests.

It is fascinating to see how skillfully the author has organized the material, starting with a review of Merton's Christology and concluding with a sensitive and perceptive chapter on Merton's spirituality. Between the first and last pages he deals with the evolution of Catholic teaching on war and peace, the morality and causes of the arms race, the Christian peacemaking responsibility, and nonviolent action. It is a fine and inclusive overview of Merton's late writings on all these topics and makes the kind of book that I am eager to give to others. (In fact, I have already sent one copy to a friend in South Africa for whom many of the issues in the book are as immediate as the pavement on the streets.)

I miss attention to the biographical dimension. Just as Merton's interest in these subjects had deep roots, the writing he did in the sixties was closely bound up with specific events and friendships. He became involved with the *Catholic Worker* movement, joined the Fellowship of Reconciliation, was among the Founders of the Catholic Peace Fellowship, was a sponsor of Pax (which eventually became Pax Christi USA), and was intensely involved in correspondence and occasional visits with a number of people whose lives centered in the peace movement.

Also missing is the realization that not every text quoted in this book is equally revealing of Merton's personal convictions. His suppressed book, *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*, written in the early 1960s and occasionally quoted in Powaski's essay, is actually less true to Merton's views than was *Seeds of Destruction*, which the Trappist censors allowed to be published in 1964. As Merton wrote me on 7 July 1962:

Thanks for your long letter [with critical remarks about the manuscript of *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*]. That just goes to show what a mess one gets into trying to write a book that will get through the censors, and at the same time say something. I was bending in all directions to qualify every statement and balance everything off so I stayed in the middle and perfectly objective, and so on, and then at the same time tried to speak the truth as my conscience wanted it to be said. In the long run the result is about zero.

In fact the book was far from zero. Circulated in *samizdat*, it was a book read with fierce intensity by many people who might not have given much thought to the same text had it been available from a local bookshop. But what Merton muted in its pages was his own pacifism and his understanding of what the example and teaching of Jesus should suggest to his disciples. Merton instead stressed the just war doctrine, which at least in theory was the Church's official teaching. He was convinced that in practice, given the

nature of modern military strategy and technology, pacifism and just war teaching brought one to identical conclusions in a world in which the combatant was the one least likely to die in war.

Powaski's approach, in fact, seems to be quite similar to Merton's. He takes the just war doctrine seriously but the pages that shine brightest in his book are those in which it is Christ himself dominating the text.

---

Gerald Groves

*UP AND DOWN MERTON'S MOUNTAIN:  
A Contemporary Spiritual Journey*

St. Louis, Missouri: CBP Press, 1988  
207 pages -- \$8.95

Reviewed by **Frank X. Tuoti**

---

"What we've got here is a failure to communicate."

From the Motion Picture *Cool Hand Luke*

The communication failure of the Groves book is not due to the absence of data and information as such, but of depth and substance; not a void of facts but of insight. The book is a hybrid autobiography (of Groves) and biography (of Merton) and falls well short of being an acceptable, worthwhile endeavor in either classification. In the preface, Groves gives us his reasons for writing the book:

I knew that I had more insight into Merton's personality and into the Order of which he was a member for over twenty-seven years than the half-dozen or more of his biographers who had not even met him.

It is one thing for a famous person to write an autobiography and quite another for an unknown to do the same. After all, who was he (Merton) when he wrote "Seven Storey Mountain"?

I figured that, as a former Trappist, my account might have the same appeal. Perhaps even more. For I had not only gone up Merton's spiritual mountain but had to come back down again.