

THE RAIN SPEAKS ON: Contradiction in Thomas Merton's View of Peace

by **Linell Roccaforte**

Thomas Merton once said:

I have had to accept the fact that my life is totally paradoxical. I have also had to learn gradually to get along without apologizing for the fact, even to myself. . . . [I]t is in the paradox itself, the paradox which was and is still a source of insecurity that I have come to find the greatest security. I've become convinced that the very contradictions in my life are in some ways signs of God's mercy to me; if only because someone so complicated and prone to confusion and self-defeat could hardly survive for long without special mercy.¹

Merton was indeed prone to confusion. Some confusion sprang from events in his life: watching his mother die of cancer; seeing his father die of a brain tumor; always questioning his belonging as he lived and studied in France, England, and the United States. Confusion continued throughout his young adulthood. As he recklessly spent his inheritance, he often used time in a destructive manner. His college years were filled with disillusionment. Over and over his soul sought comfort in things that only served as elements of escape. From what was he escaping? Why was it that years before he even dreamed of becoming a hermit, all he really wanted to do was to seek an unknown hiddenness where he believed life could be whole?

After college Merton found spirituality. This was a great turning point in his life. He wanted a wholeness that he believed God could give him. Knowing the brokenness of the world, Merton thought (as many

1. Parker J. Palmer, *The Promise of Paradox: A Celebration of Contradiction in the Christian Life* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Maria Press, 1980), p. 17.

people think) that the way ultimately to know God, the way ultimately to be whole, is to distance oneself from the world. But Merton did not simply run to the monastery. Round and round his thoughts went. He wanted to write. He wanted to be alone. He wanted to have friends. But more than everything else he wanted the confusion in his life to end. Thomas Merton wanted peace.

This essay is, therefore, an examination of Merton's writings and thoughts about peace. It is critical that his writings about peace be studied. First, these writings have been used to support peace and peace movements. He is quoted by secular and religious alike. As an international peace figure, however, he has been greatly misunderstood because his writings have sometimes been studied in isolation from his life. How his work and life were dependent upon each other must be examined. Second, his writings are filled with contradictions. And third, examination of contradictions in his writings may illumine who Merton is and how this was reflected in his work. Actually, what Merton thought and wrote about peace and that which is believed to have been his ideas about peace are contradictory.

This essay seeks to confront and analyze this contradiction — wanting the reader to know that contradiction is not always a redemptive aspect of Thomas Merton. Merton had many choices in life. He accepted pacifism practically, not just theoretically. Had he had more teeth, perhaps he would never have walked out of the draft board office in 1941 (after he was rejected for having too few teeth). If he had never walked out and faced the world, perhaps there would be no contradictions in his peace writings. At least, they would be different from that which is now generally regarded as truth in Merton's understanding of war and peace. But he did walk out and he walked on, went on, to Harlem. And there he did not meet the end of his confusion, but embraced it once more.

I. HEYDAY IN HARLEM

In *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton describes his first meeting with the Baroness Catherine de Hueck. This woman, an immigrant from Russia, was committed to bringing hope to Harlem's poor. Her hope was beyond a material one, though there were programs for food and clothing. Catherine de Hueck's mission was to bring love to a place which constantly

struggled to feel love, since the oppression was overpowering. Merton first heard of the Baroness's work through a lecture she gave. Sitting in the audience among church leaders and lay people, he heard something he was longing to hear. He heard sincerity. He felt the power of commitment to changing the plight of the poor. And above all, he heard her words rise above that which takes captive of the world's pursuits. Catherine de Hueck's purpose had risen above herself so that her being captured unselfishness in a way that can only become reality when life is lived for the betterment of others. Her lecture caused Merton to reflect on his life. He toyed with the idea of working in Harlem.

Unsure of his vocation, he began volunteering at Friendship House, the project run by the Baroness. It is interesting to note that Merton made no friends in Harlem. The manifestations of poverty depressed him. And though the children played, laughed and smiled as all children do, Merton has little recollection of himself laughing with them. Surely he had some good times in Harlem. In *The Secular Journal* he writes of the children flying their kites and staging plays, but he was only an observer of other people's happiness. These stories about happy times are only recorded in his journal as events observed. For though Merton worked and lived among the people at Friendship House, his spirit was never really there.

Thomas Merton didn't go to Harlem to serve the poor. In those days, he thought only about the poverty of his soul. However, the Baroness invited him to continue his working and living with their community. Merton listened seriously to her invitation. What else could he do with his life? What else? In the back of his thoughts lay an ever present desire. "I could become a monk," it said. It haunted him in his every thought and action. The fantasy of medieval robes, chants, silence and peacefulness spun an imaginary world that he wanted to become real. He was tortured by the decision to stay and work in Harlem or become a monk. He writes:

No need for anything new, or for any excitement whatever. If I pray, either I will change my mind or I will not. In any case, God will guide me. No need to be up in arms, no need to be anything other than what I am — but I will pray and fast harder. No sure excitement, arguments, tearing of hair, trips to Cuba and grandiose "farewell world" gestures. No need for anything special — special joy or special sorrow, special excitement or special torment. Everything is indifferent, except prayer, fasting, meditation — and work. I thank God and all the saints that I am not running around in circles — not yet. Defend me later, O God, against all scruples!²

2. Thomas Merton, *The Secular Journal of Thomas Merton* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1959), pp. 262-263.

Did Merton really think he was trying to be something other than what he really was? No, he enjoyed this self-torture. This is not to say that he liked depression or was calmed by confusion, but somehow the clutter of his insecurity was comforting. For if Merton had not faced this decision, he would have been bored. It was necessary for him always to have hanging decisions. Over and over he let the clashing thoughts of the choices life presented to him grind in his mind. In finalizing decisions he had to end the constant process of excitement which contrasting questions brought him. To suppress this feeling would be to choke the way he endured and enjoyed life.

Before Merton went to Harlem he knew he would never stay there. His cause was not to fight poverty. His cause was to find himself. He knew he was not going to stay in Harlem before he got there because to stay in Harlem was to make the hard choice. To stay in Harlem was to find himself by giving himself to others. And Merton really didn't want to give himself to others. Why did he not want to do this? To have given himself to others he would have had to give up the things which were most important in his life. These included writing, which consumed him, and solitude for which he claimed he always longed.

Merton's Harlem experience was part of his personal search. He was looking for meaning in life. He was seeking his function and purpose in the world. Most of all, he wanted not to be engrossed "in" life, but rather to know what it was "about." He writes:

To find life we must die to life as we know it. To find meaning we must die to meaning as we know it. The sun rises every morning and we are used to it, and because we know the sun will rise we have finally come to act as if it rose because we wanted it to. Suppose the sun should choose not to rise? Some of our mornings would then be "absurd" — or, to put it mildly, they would not meet our expectations.³

While Merton lived in Harlem, the sun rose every morning. The power of warmth — life — was right there before him, but Merton blocked these rays of meaning with his stubborn inner turmoil. Even as some beams of the sun's power — of life's power — seeped into his mind and emotions, Merton chose to see a cloudy sky. His unrisen sun was the result of expectations which were too great. Merton's mornings, afternoons, evenings and nights were lived in the "absurd." It is in this element of the absurd that Merton's understanding about peace was explored, developed, and at some points and in some ways, found.

3. Thomas Merton, *The New Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1951), pp. 9-10.

"Give up everything. Give up everything." These words, recorded in both *The Seven Storey Mountain* and *The Secular Journal* echoed until his death. These were the words that called him to the monastery. Merton thought that the Trappist life was the choice which would result in the greatest amount of spiritual difficulty. Leaving Harlem, he turned his back on a far greater challenge. For to stay in Harlem would have meant to give of his life in a way which was far more challenging to him than becoming a Trappist monk.

Was leaving "the world" a copout for Thomas Merton? Many have said that Merton should never have become a monk. Or, he should have left the monastery after he entered it. John Howard Griffin explains:

. . . many who made a religion of the "active life" sought to become Merton's conscience, to tell him what he ought to do and be. They wanted him to fit their own mystique. It is an understandable temptation. We were "on the scene" and knew what needed to be done and ached to have all the help in the world in accomplishing this or that good. Our temptation was to ask Merton to become less than he was by concentrating him in our area of activism, by converting him from a person of universal viewpoint to one of particular viewpoint. He saw the patterns for a greater perspective and therefore with greater wisdom. We did not always realize that.⁴

Griffin here exalts Merton's choice of living the monastic life. He does not acclaim it with more esteem than living "in the world," but simply sees it to be the life that best enabled Merton to present his viewpoint in a universal manner. Does living as a monk truly give one greater perspective and wisdom? Or, does Merton somehow gain perspective and wisdom through Griffin's eyes due to having found something in life beyond a common religious experience? If one is of a particular viewpoint, as in the role of activist as defined by Griffin, is it then impossible to also be of a universal position? Merton would not have been "lessened" by concentrating on a particular position because he already held a particular viewpoint in that he was an activist for contradiction. He is universal in this particularity in that he accepted contradiction as the world's greatest problem.

The "world" is not just a physical space traversed by jet planes and full of people running around in all directions. It is a complex of responsibilities and options made out of the loves, the hates, the fears, the joys, the hopes, the greed, the cruelty, the kindness, the faith, the trust, the suspicion of all. In the last analysis, if there is war because nobody trusts anybody, this is in part because I am myself defensive, suspicious, untrusting, and intent on making other people conform themselves to my particular brand of death wish Put in these terms, the world both is and is not a problem. The

4. John Howard Griffin, "The Controversial Merton." In *Thomas Merton: Prophet in the Belly of a Paradox*; ed. Gerald S. Twomey (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), p. 84.

world is a "problem" in so far as everybody in it is a problem to himself. The world is a problem in so far as we all add up to a big collective question.⁵

Merton's universal perspective included the essential concept which may be defined as the centrality of self. Human beings understand the world and its problems through themselves. Because that world struggle begins with personal struggle, the problems of the world are created because people are originally problematic to themselves. Merton says that we all add up to a big collective question. But before this ultimate question may be established, it is necessary to examine and address the ways in which individuals are a problem to themselves. Then connections may be made between individuals which present similarities and differences in the ways people are problems to themselves. In so doing, the world may begin to understand the causes of why people are problems to each other.

Thomas Merton was a problem to himself in many ways. He was never satisfied and always restless. His desire to write and enjoy recognition and intellectual status pulled against his feelings of wanting to live in a contemplative, silent way. Was the world's confusion threatening to Thomas Merton? Was he really looking for stillness and calm? Did he, in fact, want actually to be "at" peace? To say that one is "at" peace is to imply that one has reached the ultimate state of peace.

Was Merton aching to be "in" peace? This seems more the case. What is meant when the state of peace is defined in this way? Protective peace one might call it. Being "in" peace seems to imply that there is an opposite alternative that could be called being "out of" peace. Though being "in" peace may exclude the possibility of being "out of" peace, it remains important to acknowledge that to think of being "in" peace, is also to think of being "out of" peace since what something is often is determined by what it is not. Merton was "in" peace because he could not think about peace as a separate entity from war, turmoil, and confusion. When he wanted peace in an inner personal/ spiritual way, he wanted to be "in" peace so that he could also experience and express being "out of" peace.

If men really wanted peace they would sincerely ask God for it and He would give it to them. But why should he give the world a peace which it does not really desire? the peace the world pretends to desire is really no peace at all Many men like these have asked God for what they thought was "peace" and wondered why their prayer was not answered. They could not understand that it actually was answered. God left them

5. Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1971), pp. 145-146.

with what they desired, for their idea of peace was only another form of war.⁶

Merton was in peace by always being at war. Yes, Merton was left with what he desired since he found peace by knowing anguish. Turmoil and violence may be equivalent in that they both may have internal as well as external manifestations. But is it possible that external manifestations of turmoil can be enacted without having begun as inner anguish? Perhaps the confusion Merton induced over whether or not to stay or leave Harlem was his way of being in peace.

His poetry is revealing. It is earthy and yet spiritual. It is physical and awake to the senses, yet beyond the tangible. He says farewell to Harlem in his poem, "Aubade — Harlem," which was written for Catherine de Hueck.

Across the cages of the keyless aviaries,
The lines and wires, the gallows of the broken kites,
Crucify; against the fearful light,
The ragged dresses of the little children.
Soon, in the sterile jungles of the waterpipes and ladders,
The bleeding sun, a bird of prey, will terrify the poor,
Who will forget the unbelievable moon.

But in the cells and wards of whiter buildings,
Where the glass dawn is brighter than the knives of surgeons,
Paler than alcohol or ether,
Greyer than guns and shinier than money,
The white men's wives, like Pilate's,
Cry in the peril of their frozen dreams:

"Daylight has driven iron spikes,
Into the flesh of Jesus' hands and feet;
Four flowers of blood have nailed Him to the walls of Harlem."

Along the white walls of the clinics and the hospitals
Pilate vanishes with a cry:
They have cut down two hundred Judases,
Hanged by the neck in the opera houses and museums.

Across the cages of the keyless aviaries,
The lines and wires, the gallows of the broken kites,
Crucify, against the fearful light,
The ragged dresses of the little children.⁷

Poverty crucifies the oppressed. But this poem is not a statement about poverty. It is a paradox. It seems to be about Harlem's poor, and this reading cannot be denied the poem. It is also about Merton himself.

6. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961), pp. 121-122. Hereafter referred to in the text as *NSC*.

7. Thomas Merton, *Selected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1959), pp. 32-33.

Merton was oppressed in Harlem. He watched hope's slow death for Harlem's poor. In their ragged dresses, he saw them come to believe things about themselves which were not true. These falsities determined their destiny which was exactly what their oppressors, the white and wealthy, wanted for their lives. Merton was troubled to know that these people were terrified in their position in the world. He was troubled that they would come to "forget the unbelievable moon." But he was also distressed for another reason. Merton witnessed another torture at Harlem. There, with the ragged children and broken kites, he crucified himself. He did so for one reason. Merton knew he was self-destructive and that this self-destruction often overpowered him. He allowed it to overpower him because he actually enjoyed things that he saw were distractions to what he needed to do with his life. A friend of his, peace activist James Forest, writes:

But Merton knew his limitations well, and I think that was one of the main reasons Merton actually went into the monastery and stuck with it to the end. You know, he was wildly enthusiastic about women. He thought they were terrific, the best thing God ever did. And he liked looking at them and being with them. He enjoyed their company. And I think it was extraordinarily hard for him to withstand the temptations he had to become another Don Juan. So he went to the monastery partly because he knew he needed a special communal situation in which to live. Also he liked to drink Merton had difficulties, we would say, with these things. And so he put himself in a kind of environment that had built-in spaces, as well as certain brakes and limitations that helped him overcome his more self-destructive aspects and to channel his energies. It wasn't easy for him, nor was it easy for others on whom he depended, especially his abbot. At times he was really miserable with the limitations and seemed to complain bitterly about them with God, his friends, and himself. But there are certain outstanding results that have come from his being there.⁸

These limitations were what were to make him known. Had Merton not left Harlem and gone to the monastery, his writings would probably have resulted in small attempts, with a reduced audience. But he went to the monastery, becoming "a curious phenomenon in a chaotic age."⁹ His writings were read because others were searching for meaning. His books were opened with hopes of discovering something the chaotic age did not have: internal peace, and an answer for a way to reach global peace.

The chaotic age was not just the Cold War, or the years of the Vietnam War, or American society's building its success by power and

8. Merton: *By Those Who Knew Him Best*; ed. Paul Wilkes (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), pp. 60-61. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Wilkes*.

9. James Forest, "Thomas Merton: The Many Identities of a Spiritual Sojourner," *The Other Side* (July 1985), pp. 62-64.

materialism. The chaotic age remains today. Merton's writings continue to be attractive and read, not because they are an escape to peace, but for the same reason that Merton left Harlem.

Thus we never see the one truth that would help us begin to solve our ethical and political problems: that we are all more or less wrong, that we are all at fault, all limited and obstructed by our mixed motives, our self-deception, our greed, our self-righteousness and our tendency to aggressivity and hypocrisy. (NSC, pp. 115-116)

To understand this truth, Merton needed to face his limitations. He writes: "If you love peace, then hate injustice, hate tyranny, hate greed — but hate these things in yourself, not in another" (NSC, pp. 122). This Merton did. He hated his limitations which caused him to be selfish, hurt others, and be destructive to himself. One wonders if he really understood these words which he wrote: "For only love — which means humility — can exorcise the fear which is at the root of all war" (NSC, p. 119).

Fear lived on in Thomas Merton, but love lived on as well. Its power ate away at the roots of war within him. He wrote about peace because he was empowered by the battle of love and fear he experienced. He wanted the love to win. In this frenzy his pen scrawled. In his thoughts he wished for peace, and by these thoughts he has been proclaimed by many a great peacemaker.

II. A PIOUS PACIFIST?

The majority of people, both those unfamiliar with his writings and those who have read them, call Merton a pacifist. Was he a pacifist? Merton did not embrace pacifism in its entirety. In a letter dated June 1962 to Dorothy Day he writes:

It is true that I am not theoretically a pacifist. That only means that I do not hold that a Christian *may not* fight, and that a war *cannot* be just. I hold that there is such a thing as a just war, even today there can be such a thing, and I think the Church holds it. But on the other hand I think that is pure theory and that in practice all wars that are going around, whether with conventional weapons, or guerilla wars, or the cold war itself, are shot through and through with evil, falsity, injustice, and sin so much so that one can only with difficulty extricate the truths that may be found here and there in the "causes" for which the fighting is going on. So in practice I am with you, except insofar, only, as a policy of totally uncompromising pacifism may tend in effect to defeat itself and yield to one of the other forms of injustice. And I think that your position has an immense importance as a symbolic statement that is irreplaceable and utterly necessary.

I also think it is a scandal that most Christians are not solidly lined up with you. I certainly am.¹⁰

What does Merton mean when he says he was not theoretically a pacifist? For Merton, a just war was, and is, possible. Why did he hold such a position? Perhaps it was his connection to the Church which provided him with the need never totally to reject this theory as a possible option. Perhaps it was not his need for a connection, but more a feeling of obligation to the common position held by the Church. Or maybe it was his own uncertainty on the issue. For without doubt, Merton's being in itself remained composed of questions.

How can a person filled with questions and searching be a pious pacifist? Piety has both positive and negative definitions. Postively, it illustrates reverence for deity and a sense of devotion towards divine worship. It is usually associated with religion, but it may also be represented through showing reverence for a person or thing. In this manner it relates more closely to dutiful worship than to devotion. However, the two are not mutually exclusive in that, despite the way and reasons for expressing reverence, worship is being enacted and is the basis of reason for the initial act of piety.

In several ways Thomas Merton was, in a positive manner, a pious pacifist. He was devout to life. He was dedicated to supporting and advocating peace because he believed that it was totally necessary in pursuing sincere devotion to God. Merton says:

Though not a total pacifist in theory myself, I certainly believe that every Christian should try to practice non-violence rather than violence and that some should bind themselves to follow only the way of peace as an example to others. I myself as a monk do not believe it would be licit for me ever to kill another human being even in self-defense and I would certainly never attempt to do so. There are much greater and truer ways than this. Killing achieves nothing. Finally, though as I said in theory I would still admit some person might licitly wage war to defend themselves (for instance the Hungarians in 1956) yet I think that nuclear war is out of the question, it is beyond all doubt murder, and sin, and it must be banned forever. Since in practice any small war is likely to lead to nuclear war, I therefore believe in practice that war must be absolutely banned and abolished today as a method of settling international disputes.¹¹

In a discussion preceding these words, Michael Mott claims that Merton was too dogmatic. No doubt Merton's opinions were often pre-

10. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: The Letters of Thomas Merton on Religious Experience & Social Concerns*; ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985), p. 145. Hereafter referred to in the text as HGL.

11. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1984), pp. 416-417. Hereafter referred to in the text as Mott.

sented with much assertion, but though this tendency is usually perceived as arrogance, the opposite is more likely. For uncertainty as well as humility is essential to the original construction of these thoughts.

In his statements on the limitations of nonviolence he shows a uniformly tentative approach. It would be wrong to see him as inconsistent, more just to admit he never resolved the problem in a way which was satisfactory to him. Where his argument has weak points in logic, Merton was clearly aware of them. (Mott, p. 417)

Michael Mott accuses Merton of being dogmatic, but this statement may equally well apply to him. Mott claims boldly that it is unjust to see Merton as inconsistent, but to see Merton as consistent is to establish Merton's logic as completely weak. For certainly, central to Merton's logic was his inconsistency.

Merton ultimately resolved his inconsistency in a way that was very satisfactory to him. He embraced inconsistency. He wrapped its power around his life. He clung to it in his writings as a child does who is unwilling to unclench her arms from the teddy bear which so comforts her.

Merton's inconsistency in his peace position is positive pious pacifism because it affirmed life. His inconsistent words were in themselves a constant battle of ever revolving thoughts about the dialectical relationships that bombard our lives. Among the greatest and most obvious of these is life and death, violence and nonviolence.

Only when we see ourselves in our true human context, as members of a race which is intended to be one organism and "one body," will we begin to understand the positive importance not only of the successes but of the failures and accidents in our lives. My successes are not my own. The way to them was prepared by others. The fruit of my labors is not my own: for I am preparing the way for the achievements of another. Nor are my failures my own. They may spring from the failure of another, but they are also compensated for by another's achievement. Therefore the meaning of my life is not to be looked for merely in the sum total of my own achievements and failures within the achievements and failures of my own generation, and society, and time. It is seen, above all, in my integration in the mystery of Christ.¹²

The interconnectedness of humanity is critical to Merton's peace position. Believing humanity's intended function to be the development of an interdependent organism, he understood war and violence as a destructive counter force which prevented both the development and growth of this organism. The human organism, for Merton, was sustained by God. The distinction between religion and God is important here. For though organ-

12. Thomas Merton, *No Man is an Island* (New York: Walker & Company, 1986), pp. xxv-xxvi. Hereafter referred to in the text as *NMI*.

ized religion was the context by which Merton both came into the Christian community and lived as a Trappist monk, organized religion also had many negative attributes for him. God, on the other hand, was the hope through which he saw nonviolence to be both possible and powerful. There is no doubt that religious and philosophical notions dominate the reasons for his peace position. Gordon Zahn states: "To Merton nonviolence is first and always a matter of orientation to life; nonviolence as tactic is a secondary, almost incidental, consideration" (*Twomey*, p. 69).

Out of such personal commitment sprang Merton's writings on peace, developments of his theological thoughts and study. His life revolved around contemplation, and constant reflection is ever present in his manuscripts. Merton's view of life was multi-layered. Merton saw the world like a painting in which colors may be blended, mixed, overlapped, but in the many layers of paint there is much that is unknown, unseen, and misunderstood. This he accepted daily, though at times with frustration. There is beauty and destruction in the world's great paintings of humanity. But Merton believed there need be no destruction if people live an active nonviolent life. This he addressed especially to Christians. How could one say he or she was for God and also advocate violence which can only be against humanity as it brings only destruction and no beauty?

Merton staunchly opposed nuclear war and nuclear weapons. However, this is not to say that he did not believe in theory that they could be used in justifiable defense. He says:

Assuming that a "just" war is at least a theoretical possibility, and granting that in a just war Christians may be bound to defend their country, the question we want to examine here is whether or not the massive and unlimited use of nuclear weapons, or the use of them in a limited first strike which is foreseen as likely to set off a global cataclysm, can be considered under any circumstances just . . . It is certainly legitimate for a Catholic moralist to hold in theory that a limited nuclear war, in defense, is permitted by traditional moral principles. He may even hold the opinion that the strategic use of nuclear, bacteriological and chemical weapons is theoretically permissible, provided that there is a possibility that what we are defending will continue after it has been "defended."¹³

Gordon Zahn explains Merton's openness to the traditional moral teachings on war. Whereas Merton cannot truly be labeled a pacifist in the way the term is usually used and understood, he seems also not to be a nuclear pacifist in that total rejection of the justification of these weapons was not a part of his thinking. Zahn writes in a sort of desperate cry: "But more must

13. *Thomas Merton: Pilgrim in Process*; ed. Donald Grayston & Michael W. Higgins (Toronto: Griffin House, 1983), p. 140. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Grayston*.

be said. It is clear from the overall thrust of his writings that his heart was with the pacifists" (*Grayston*, p. 140). But if Merton's heart was with the pacifists, was his mind elsewhere?

It is sometimes argued that Merton would have lost many readers had he chosen less modified pacifist views. Or rather, had he taken a strongly pacifist position from his earliest writings, he would never have been the influential spiritual leader which he has become. Who is to know what would have happened to his peace position had he lived on into the decades of the 1970s and 1980s? Zahn, insisting that Merton's heart was with the pacifists, speculates what Merton's position might have been today.

If, as I have suggested, he always was more of a pacifist than he realized or was willing to admit, the dramatic changes in the Church's attitude toward war and associated issues would probably have freed him from his self-imposed caution and reservations. To borrow a phrase usually employed in quite a different context, Merton might have come "out of the closet" by now to declare a more total rejection of war, a rejection in theory as well as in practice. (*Grayston*, p. 141)

What is the purpose in defining Merton as a pacifist? This label has been used to imply that Merton had peace, yet to imply that Merton had peace would be to misunderstand all of his writings. The common assumption is that for one to write about something, one must have attained a high point of knowledge and understanding of the subject. The opposite is more the situation in Merton's case. It is not that he was ignorant or unaware of current theological and political thought about peace. It is simply that, though Merton did write from concern for the issue, he wrote mainly for himself.

His writing is primarily self-exploration, the words ever rolling and poetic, creative thoughts stretching from deep within his being out into the world. His words are not always logical because Merton had little need for logic since he viewed life as a jagged pattern of rhythm, repetition and variety. The soul searches for its place in the world. Merton's soul was ever searching, searching to know God. That is why he wrote. In his writing he came to know *not* what he must know, but how he must live. Living in this revelation, Merton could not love God and advocate violence as a means of God's love.

Ernesto Cardenal offers a different interpretation of how Merton expressed reverence for life:

Merton's message is very much alive today. And as far as Nicaragua and Central and Latin America are concerned, I can attest that Merton would have supported the Sandanista revolution, he would have supported the liberation of Central America, the liberation of all Latin America Merton would have supported all of this, because it is the will of God

expressed in reality. Much is said about Merton and nonviolence and back in the days when I was in the monastery, Merton spoke a great deal about Gandhi to the novices. He made us listen to a record of Gandhi's. Even so, he told us that Gandhi had said that his method of nonviolence would not have worked in Hitler's Germany, that it had only been possible against English imperialism, but not against German Naziism. And certainly in Somoza's Nicaragua it would not have been possible to fight using only Gandhi's method. That is why we act as we do today.

(Wilkes, pp. 38-39).

Would Merton truly have supported the Sandanista revolution? Yes, he would have supported the liberation of Central America, Latin America, indeed, all the world. But does freeing the oppressed justify the use of violence? Cardenal says that "Merton's message is still very much alive today." This implies one of two things: 1) that Merton would support violence, or 2) that Cardenal has shaped Merton's thought in order to support his own cause.

To listen to Merton is to hear contradiction — peace and war — silence and noise — confusion and stillness. What makes these contradictions so powerful? From where do they come?

At the root of all war is fear: not so much the fear men have for one another as the fear they have for everything. It is not merely that they do not trust one another; they do not even trust themselves. If they are not sure when someone else may turn around and kill them, they are still less sure when they may turn around and kill themselves. They cannot trust anything, because they have ceased to believe in God. (NSC, p. 112)

It is possible that Merton could not completely identify with a pacifistic position because he too continued to experience fear. Maybe he was afraid, due to uncertainty, that pacifism was not a commitment God required of all people. However, Merton knew it was a requirement that God required of him in how he lived his life. Was the root of his war, as a practical pacifist and a theoretical believer in a just war, fear of everything? He assumes not believing in God is reason for lack of ability to trust. But Merton, though always seeking with all his being to trust God, was unable to trust himself.

Despite Merton's insistence that he was not a pacifist, nonviolence was the means he personally advocated for individual as well as global conflict. He was outspoken about his opposition to the Vietnam War. Though never an enthusiastic sidetaker, Merton took a definite position on this war.

Therefore when I take a side in this question, it is not the side of the United States and it is not the side of Communism. Peking, Washington, Saigon and Hanoi want the war to go on. I am on the side of the people who are being burned, cut to pieces, tortured, held as hostages, gassed, ruined, destroyed. They are the victims of both sides. To take sides with massive

power is to take sides against the innocent. The side I take is then the side of the people who are sick of war and want peace in order to rebuild their country . . . I, therefore, join with those who deplore [the Vietnam War].¹⁴

Merton was on the side of the people because he thought a believer could be on no other side. He was against the war because it made people suffer, but he did not claim pacifism as the only means by which the wounds from violence would end. Violence would end when enough people stopped advocating and instigating violence. By taking an anti-war stand, he was not being pro-pacifist, but simply anti-violence. This is not to say that he only spoke against violence after it occurred. However, we may conclude that Merton approached peace from an ethical perspective and not a pragmatic one. Toward the end of his life this position was further clarified.

III. GOING TO THE CIRCUS

One of Merton's prayers was "Teach me to go to the country beyond words and beyond names." Forest writes: "He lived long enough for the prayer to be answered. Ironically, the necessary path for him to find that country, which was always nearer than the tip of his nose, was full of words and names" (Forest, p. 62). At the end of his life, Merton was given permission by his superiors to go to Asia for a conference. "He was," his friend W. H. Ferry commented, "like a kid going to the circus."¹⁵ Asia enticed him.

Merton's life is the story of a journey. Rembert G. Weakland discussed this journey as a search for God.

When a monk enters a monastery, what is asked of him is "Are you truly seeking God?" The question isn't "Have you found God?" The question is "Is he seeking God? Is his motivation highly involved in that search of who and what God is in relationship to us?" It's not philosophical — it's existential. And Merton, to me, was a great searcher. He was constantly unhappy, as all great searchers are. He was constantly ill at ease, he was constantly restless, as all searchers are — because that's part of their search. And in that sense he was the perfect monk. Contemplation isn't satisfaction — it's search. (Wilkes, p. 163)

This restlessness, this search, the unsettled part of Merton is what made Merton human. His frequent unhappiness and confusion made him a

14. Thomas Merton, *Faith & Violence* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), pp. 109-110.

15. James H. Forest, *Thomas Merton: A Pictorial Biography* (New York/Ramsey: Paulist Press, 1980), p. 93.

dreamer. He thought continually about other places, new things he could do, ways to be different. Though he could not help Cardenal with the founding of his community at Solentiname in Nicaragua in a physical sense, he remained its spiritual director. Cardenal says about the founding of Solentiname:

Things were crazy at the beginning, and I asked him what rules to establish for the foundation of the community. The first rule, he told me, was that there were to be no rules. Merton could say this at this time in his life because he didn't have any particular mental bias any more. He wanted to establish a community where there were no habits, no rules, where the faithful could coexist with the communists You see, Merton had entered a religious order that had more rules than any other order in the world. He put up with them — and this he told me — but he didn't agree with them. And sometimes he'd say that monastic life was like living in a circus. (Wilkes, pp. 37-38)

Cardenal reports that Merton himself sometimes described the monastery as a circus. For years he had pleaded with his superiors for permission to live a quieter, more secluded life. Finally, his request was granted and the monastery built a hermitage for him, though "hermitage" seems a poor name for the place since Merton was not a hermit in the usual sense of the word. Thousands of letters reached his home in the woods and many people came to visit him there. He left himself on occasion. And yet, this hermitage was of the utmost importance to him. It was his home. It was the identity he had craved for so long. But it was not enough. While he lived there, he was still thinking of being other places. After asking and asking, waiting and pleading, he finally received his hermitage.

Years later he received permission to go to Asia. On his way to Asia, Merton was, as Ferry said, like a child on his way to the circus. He felt part of a circus in the monastery according to Cardenal. These statements by his friends are fascinating because both see Merton as part of a "circus." Maybe he was not on his way to a circus, or coming from a circus. Maybe Merton never left the circus. Sometimes the ridiculous — or "absurd" as he called it — charmed him. Sometimes he found it stupid and irritating. A clown has a sad painted face, but is always trying to make others laugh. Merton was a clown. Though he himself and his writing could be serious and intense at times, there was something about him which could be young and sweet and boyish.

This let him enjoy the contradictions within his life which contradicted what he believed he should be and how he thought he should become that. He wanted to be a vessel of God. He wanted to be a force for truth. In his essay "A Tribute to Gandhi," he writes:

The profound significance of satyagraha becomes apparent when one reflects that "truth" here implies much more than simply conforming one's words only to one's inner thought. It is not by words only that we speak. Our aims, our plans of action, our outlook, our attitudes, our habitual response to the problems and challenges of life, "speak" of our inner being and reveal our fidelity or infidelity to ourselves. Our very existence, our life itself contains an implicit pretention to meaning, since all our free acts are implicit commitments, selections of "meanings" which we seem to find confronting us. Our very existence is "speech" interpreting reality. But the crisis of truth in the modern world comes from the bewildering complexity of the almost infinite contradictory propositions and claims to meaning uttered by millions of acts, movements, changes, decisions, attitudes, gestures, events, going on all around us. Most of all a crisis of truth is precipitated when men realize that almost all these claims are in fact without significance when they are not in great part entirely fraudulent.¹⁶

Merton's aims, plans of action, outlook, attitude, response to problems and challenges in life were all based on contradiction. This determined how he lived "truth-force." For contradiction was the means through which Merton spoke. His very existence was contradiction interpreting reality. His crises in truth were precipitated by the realization that deceit was a powerful force in himself and in the world, the very "circus" of which he was always a part.

And how did this realization affect his understanding of nonviolence? Anthony T. Padovano states:

Merton's capacity to see many sides of the same question, his penchant for paradox, enables him to keep alive a saving dialectic in the construction of a viable nonviolence. His pacifism was not absolute even though his distrust of violence was constant. In his attitude toward nonviolence he was suspicious of facility and fakery. One must not deal with the human spirit as though its deeper needs could be easily healed or falsely addressed.¹⁷

Padovano discusses Merton's understanding of nonviolence in the context of Eastern spirituality and thought. Merton's attraction to the East was much more than an anxiously awaited departure from the monastery. Asia was part of his continuing search. "The East answered his psychic and spiritual needs in a way Western Christianity could not fully satisfy" (Padovano, p. 74). And by turning to the East Merton moved closer to a more traditional, theoretical — as well as practical — conceptualization of pacifism.

It was especially in Zen that the encounter with reality seemed to go beyond the contradictions of his life. The point, however, is not the

16. Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964), pp. 230-231.

17. Anthony T. Padovano, *The Human Journey: Thomas Merton, Symbol of a Century* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, 1982), p. 72. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Padovano*.

resolution of the contradictions but the experience of living them so fully that one gets beyond them. Zen pushes the contradictions to their ultimate limit where one has to experience madness or unity. The irony lies in the fact that the contradictions are the essence of unity and yet elude it Merton's long search for the self terminated paradoxically in the East where the no-self or the nonself is the answer. The reason why nonviolence is difficult for the West is because it undermines the empirical self on which so much of Western culture is premised. Merton's Eastern pilgrimage is a marriage of Hinduism and Buddhism. From Hinduism he learns about nonviolence; from Buddhism he appreciates why nonviolence is necessary. The loss of the self is the beginning of wisdom and the essence of pacifism. (Padovano, p. 76)

Therefore, Padovano concludes that Merton "saw no future in the West without the East" (Padovano, p. 79). Reality is what determined Merton's vision. In the West, it is assumed that reality is found by resolving contradiction within the self. In the East, however, this is not so. There, reality is attained and encountered in contemplation and compassion by way of dispensing with the self.

The eradication of self was, for Merton, a very attractive and desirable pursuit because it served as a connecting element to the "human dimension." James Forest writes:

He argued strongly against a highly politicized peace movement that got so lost in its slogans and ideologies that it lost touch with what Merton called "the human dimension." As he wrote in another letter: "The basic problem is not political, it is apolitical and human. One of the most important things to do is to keep cutting deliberately through political lines and barriers and emphasizing the fact that these are largely fabrications and that there is another dimension, a genuine reality, totally opposed to the fictions of politics: the human dimension." (Forest, p. 78)

In the reality of the East Merton learned that everything he once believed he must give up was actually the search for "nothing," which he did not know how to find. Merton was drawn to the Chinese Taoist philosopher, Chuang Tzu. Henri Nouwen asks: "What did Merton learn from Chuang Tzu?" The answer is nothing.

Chuang Tzu is a real master for Merton: he taught him nothing new but awakened and led him through the barrier of his own contradictions to the deeper ground of his consciousness Merton had found how so-called consistency and logic often lead to despairing absurdity. The temptation to hold fast to a once-chosen technique or form of action is all too great. Who can recognize the moment that the old solution becomes senseless? Not the one who has buried himself in strategies and techniques, nor the one who expects good to come from a method, whether this is now called nonviolence or revolution. If one does that, then one will go on with actions which have become absurd, just because they seemed fruitful once long ago.¹⁸

18. Henri Nouwen, *Thomas Merton: Contemplative Critic* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), p. 73.

In learning nothing, Merton discovered that this despairing absurdity is often the reality that humanity sees as true and therefore follows, but which is destructive in not enhancing the human dimension. In *The Asian Journal*, Merton writes: "I meet a woman and child walking silently, the woman slowly spinning a prayer wheel — with great reverence and it was not at all absurd or routine — the child with a lovely smile."¹⁹ Merton had changed a great deal since writing *The Seven Storey Mountain*. He went to the monastery to escape the world, but the "absurdity" of the situation was that he learned it was impossible to hide.

After entering the monastery to free himself of the world's illusions he found that the illusions were just as much in himself and in the monastic life as in man's world, and because of this discovery he turned again to the world in a humble attempt to share the truth with his fellowman. In his monastic experience he had learned that he and his fellowman were one in nature and destiny.²⁰

It was the same with his experience of nonviolence. Thich Nhat Hanh speaks of this experience:

Thomas Merton was there in the monastery but he cannot be confined to that place. When you are a man of peace, even if you hide yourself in a mountain, you are working for peace. Because being in peace and working for peace is the same thing . . . I don't make any distinction between being and doing. Sometimes we do very much, but not for the sake of peace. Sometimes we do not do anything, but we are for peace. So instead of saying, "Don't just sit there, do something," we can say the opposite: "Don't just do something, sit there." Thomas Merton — his life, his feelings, and his work — are enough to prove his courage, his determination, his wisdom. He did more for peace than many who were out in the world. (Wilkes, pp. 152-153.)

Though he spent the last twenty-seven years of his life in a monastery, Merton journeyed far beyond its walls. It was in this journey, and not in his ways of proving himself an advocate of peace, that he learned about nonviolence. John Howard Griffin said: "All things for him had some potential connection."²¹ Nonviolence served as a critical element because it was not simply a connection to life, but was *the* connection. Nonviolence is life's true way. Nonviolence is the means. It is the end. It was the way in which Merton truly believed and lived in practice, even if he could not wholly reconcile himself to nonviolence in theory. He says:

19. Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton*; ed. Naomi Burton, Brother Patrick Hart & James Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1973), p. 92.

20. James T. Baker, *Thomas Merton, Social Critic: A Study* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1971), p. 37. Hereafter referred to in the text as *Baker*.

21. John Howard Griffin, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Visual World of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1970), p. 18.

There can be no question that unless war is abolished the world will remain constantly in a state of madness and desperation in which, because of the immense destructive power of modern weapons, the danger of catastrophe will be imminent and probable at every moment everywhere And the first job (in reference to the survival of the human race) is to understand the psychological forces at work in ourselves and in society.

(*Forest*, p. 9)

This is the great task that captivated Merton's being. He therefore wondered and thought about his contradictions. He knew their existence within his thoughts and actions and was troubled by them. Contradiction continued even after his death as he was returned from Asia in a military plane. Where had his journey taken him? Merton had already explained: "The monk is a bird who flies very fast without knowing where he is going. And always arrives where he went, in peace, without knowing where he came from."²² Merton flew to Asia "like a kid going to the circus."

In fact there was that quality in Merton throughout much of his life. The more he found his way, the more the childlike flourished. He could laugh with the abandon and power of a monsoon. One might open a letter from him and find a snapshot which Merton had identified as "the only known photograph of God": in this case a summer view of the land rolling away from his hermitage porch and, dangling from the blue sky, a great hook such as is used in heavy construction; a view of the God who is forever fishing in the human pool.

(*Forest*, p. 93)

Indeed, Merton knew that the pool of humanity is filled with violence, chaos, and confusion. In this pool, he was flustered and torn. He wrote: "When I am alone, I am no longer lonely." Perhaps he was not lonely, nor forced to face the world's confusion as a participant in society, but Merton was never satisfied.

James T. Baker tells the story of Merton's return to Saint Bonaventure University (where he taught before entering the monastery) one evening. He opened his Bible, placed his finger on a random verse and discovered the words spoken to Zachariah: "Thou shalt be silent" (*Baker*, p. 14). All his monastic life Merton said that he both loved and craved silence. The silence for which he ached haunted him. The ache was taunting. It reminded him of his constant failures. It made his contradictions blatant. John Eudes Bamberger, Merton's physician says: "I felt that his death expressed a good deal of continuity with his monastic life, in the sense that he had resolved some of the tensions about his vocation" (*Wilkes*, p. 122). Were his tensions resolved because Merton, in death, finally became that which he wanted to be? A silent man. A silent monk. A silent peacemaker.

22. Julius Lester, "Merton & Us," *Katallagete* 9: 3 (Summer 1986), p. 7.

Obviously, Merton's legacy lives on through his writing. Not only have his words survived, but his message has endured as well. Ernesto Cardenal insists: "Merton's message is very much alive today." So we must ask: what is Merton's message for today? Does it support violent revolution in Central America? Does it insist that nuclear weapons are products of insanity, but justify conventional warfare? Does it wish to be only for "negative peace" (anti-war) or does it advocate "positive peace" (nonviolence included in all elements of society)? Does it support pacifism?

Were he alive today, I am certain Merton would be the first to acknowledge, and take gratification from, these gains [of peace in the world] — though, I am equally sure, he would be every bit as insistent in his reminders of how far we have yet to go. But he is not here, and we must content ourselves with the legacy of his writings and the peace movements he helped bring into being as the remaining source of the inspiration and guidance he provided when he was in our midst. What we make of these is up to us, as he, no doubt, would be the first to remind us.

(Grayston, p. 146)

This is what happened to Merton's legacy. We have made him into what we want him to be. We have created a mixed and confused message. Granted, Merton's message was mixed and confusing. It was grounded in contradiction because its strength was not political, or theological, but that of the "human dimension." At the end of his poem, *Original Child Bomb*, Merton concludes:

As to the Original Child Bomb that was now born, President Truman summed up the philosophy of the situation in a few words. "We found the bomb" he said "and we used it."

Since that summer many other bombs have been "found." What is going to happen? At the time of writing, after a season of brisk speculation, men seem to be fatigued by the whole question.²³

Merton was fatigued too. He wanted the destructive absurdities to end. The struggle to eradicate these began for him where he understood contradiction best. He went to Harlem for direction, and he received confusion. As a respected peacemaker, he solved the problem of needing to have a "stand" on anything by choosing to position himself on the same issue in many different poses (including facing opposite directions at times). And by meeting the East, he finally found the "nothing" which made his message everything.

When Merton was buried, it was raining. He had loved the rain. His journals rarely record bright sun, but are full of the sound of rain. The

23. Thomas Merton, *Original Child Bomb: Points for Meditation to be Scratched on the Walls of a Cave* (New York: New Directions, 1961), p.8.

sound of rain comforted him. The speech it created on the tin roof must have been very loud. And he listened. "It will talk as long as its wants, this rain." Does the rain truly talk? Is it the voice of God, our conscience, humanity's oneness? Maybe Merton believed it would talk as long as it wants since he was its voice. "As long as it talks I am going to listen." The drops fell. And there in the puddles, Merton's soul splashed. There in the mud, he looked down into contradiction and saw the "absurd" that shall never be grasped. The rain is clear.