

Rebels in a Death-Wish Culture: Opposition to the Death Penalty in the Writings of Thomas Merton and Albert Camus

By Mark C. Meade

Thomas Merton wrote little and published even less on the death penalty. At those rare times he mentioned it in publication or in his private journals and correspondence, he expressed opposition to it and solidarity with the condemned. His ethic on capital punishment and horror at its use were similar to the ideas and feelings of Albert Camus. Unpublished manuscript entries from reading notebooks on Camus donated by Merton to Syracuse University shed new light on how these writers, the Trappist monk and the unbeliever, could find common ground on the death penalty from divergent points of intellectual departure. These new findings, alongside references from Merton's essays and journals, highlight three social justifications of the death penalty that both Merton and Camus dispute: direct justification through religion; indirect justification through ritualization; and through ritualized language, how societal propaganda on the death penalty mirrors the justification of war.

Thomas Merton notes in his journal of July 20, 1967, "I am working on Camus's *Réflexions sur la guillotine* [*Reflections on the Guillotine*] – a powerful and subtle piece of work and very important for a real understanding of his novels. Perhaps the real key to them."¹ From this statement, one would expect to find "Reflections on the Guillotine" the subject of at least one of the seven essays Merton wrote about Camus,² but this is not the case. He made the discovery of it at the end and not the beginning of his work on Camus, just after he had sent one of his last essays on Camus to *The Sewanee Review*³ and finished a draft of his introduction to Camus's book *The Plague*.⁴ In its published form this introduction makes a telling reference to the importance he saw in the issue of the death penalty, its connection with a societal "death dance," and the connection of the state-based violence of war and the death penalty:

Indeed, what society preaches as *justification* of man's existence usually turns out upon examination to be a derisory, almost satanic repudiation of that existence. What society preaches as "the good life" is in fact a systematically organized way of death, not only because it is saturated with what psychologists call an unconscious death wish, but because it actually rests on death. It is built on the death of the nonconformist, the alien, the odd ball, the enemy, the criminal. It is based on war, on imprisonment, on punitive methods which include not only mental and physical torture but, above all, the death penalty. (*LE* 197-98)

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Though Camus was concerned with a host of social issues related to violence, including war, fascism, and colonial brutality, he devoted the entire essay “Reflections on the Guillotine” to the issue of the death penalty.⁵ Though not his most famous work, this essay is cited as a primary reason he was awarded the 1957 Nobel Prize in literature. He was a novelist with a conscience.

Merton’s only extended commentary on the death penalty, and on Camus’s “Reflections on the Guillotine,” is contained in one of his reading notebooks of summer 1967.⁶ He donated this notebook to Syracuse University in 1968 while making his arrangements to go to Asia, without culling any portions on the death penalty for publication. It is difficult to know whether he felt he was finished with his work on Camus or whether the prospects of travel diverted his interest. Much of Merton’s writings on war had been silenced, and many of the reflections from his reading notebook paralleled the death penalty with war. Possibly Merton felt his views on the death penalty would be likewise silenced.

Camus’s novels present models of heroic opposition to oppression and institutionalized violence, but they sometimes depict murderers as heroes. In *The Stranger*, the hero and murderer Meursault is executed after confrontations with secular and religious authorities. Merton compares Meursault’s semi-passive act of murder of the Arab to the *acedia* (spiritual torpor) battled by the desert fathers.⁷ Murderers are also characters in Camus’s novel *A Happy Death* and in the short stories “The Misunderstanding” and “The Renegade.” Why is murder a novelistic theme for Camus, who struggled for life-affirmation and rejected nihilism and most forms of violence? As quoted earlier from his journals, Merton saw Camus’s “Reflections on the Guillotine” as a “key” to understanding his novels and other works, and this perhaps explains why Camus likes to place his characters in absurd situations of inescapable violence.

In his novel *The Plague*, Jean Tarrou becomes a model of the death-penalty abolitionist. The essay “Reflections on the Guillotine” contains a personal story by Camus that sheds light on the character of Tarrou. Camus begins the essay by describing how Camus’s own father wanted to witness the execution of a man condemned to death for a brutal murder of a farm family including the children. When his father returned from the execution, his mother related that “he came rushing home, his face distorted, refused to talk, lay down for a moment on the bed, and suddenly began to vomit” (Camus, “Reflections” 609). Merton was most struck by “The idea of a simple man being so horrified at this . . . human sacrifice – his honest indignation is driven out by the revelation of a punishment which he assumed perfectly just” (1967 Notebook 24). Both Merton and Camus spend much time with the idea of the death penalty’s cultic connections with human sacrifice, the ritualized way in which society justifies its use of taking life and doing so “innocently.” Like Camus’s father, the father of Tarrou in *The Plague* gets up early to watch an execution. The difference is that Tarrou’s father is a prosecutor and regularly attends executions. His father is not sickened by it like Camus’s father, but takes a perverse joy in observing it. It becomes an extension of official duty.

In his introduction to *The Plague*, Merton vividly highlights the frightful nature of this father-son dynamic. Tarrou, as a boy, sees his father in court and realizes that “dressed in legal robes, haranguing the jury, demanding the death penalty for a criminal, [his father] was permitting himself to become the incarnation of socially approved blood lust. He was acting as the willing and righteous instrument of a society that delighted in murder, provided the murder could be carried out in socially acceptable ways” (*LE* 206). The ritual of sacrifice is a key factor. Robes and rituals of

justice separate the judge, lawyers, and jury from the act of murder and from personal association with the defendant. This keeps society's actors "ritually pure" from the murder committed yet free to contemplate continued violence without association with the original bloody act. The condemned is dehumanized and made less than human versus the court who acts as God in making judgment over life and death. In response to his father, Tarrou runs away but realizes he cannot escape implication as a participant in a violent world and declare himself separate and innocent. Merton may have first come to this awareness of the "guilty bystander" in his realization at Fourth and Walnut in Louisville that the monastic life both united him with humanity and implicated him in the world's injustices.⁸ Tarrou's flight from his father does not lead to escapism. The realization of his implication as "guilty bystander" inspires him to become a death-penalty abolitionist. Business has brought Tarrou to Oran, where a plague has crippled the city. Merton continues in his introduction:

[I]t is possible to refuse all conscious and deliberate co-operation in any social action, any doctrine, any policy, whether revolutionary or conservative, which *justifies murder in order to exploit it freely*. In other words, though one cannot avoid all implication in some form of violence (Camus did not believe consistent nonviolent action was possible), one can at least refuse to co-operate with the social machinery of *systematic and self-justifying violence*. . . . "On this earth," Tarrou declares in words which Camus explicitly made his own elsewhere, "there are pestilences (an early draft has "executioners") and victims, and it's up to us, so far as possible, not to join forces with the pestilences." (*LE* 206)

Merton finds it appropriate to re-insert "executioners" and ties the lessons of *The Plague* to other writings of Camus in opposition to the death penalty. This dual use of "pestilences / executioners" highlights Camus's association of the death penalty with the absurd and a senseless death impulse (Merton's "death dance").

One would expect an essay by Camus titled "Neither Victims nor Executioners" to be another explicit essay against the death penalty. However, most of the essay confronts broader issues of resistance to violence, especially institutionalized violence. Yet the argument serves capital punishment well. Camus presents us with the false choice between becoming victims of violence or perpetrators of violence. Camus does not have full faith in non-violence, but is concerned that for the sake of limiting violence we should never seek in its limited usage to justify it nor support legitimizing it in our institutions and organizations. In his opposition to the idea of salvific abstract principles that can be placed before human persons and to which humans can be sacrificed, Camus rejects presenting us with a utopia where humans can be completely free of violence (after the enemies have been killed). As Camus states, "People like myself want not a world in which murder no longer exists (we are not so crazy as that!) but rather one in which murder is not legitimate."⁹ The state's continuing the cycle of violence through execution does not serve to delegitimize violence.

Camus's Criticism of Church Approval and Participation in Executions

The Catholic Church has taken steps since the Second Vatican Council to actively oppose the death penalty and further de-legitimize its application, with many bishops taking the lead and an office established in recent years within the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. Despite increased

secularization of society, Camus was troubled by Catholic priests serving more as agents of the state than as advocates for condemned prisoners. Though scandalized by Church participation and approval of executions in his time, Camus's opposition to the Catholic stand was congruent with his thinking about religious and quasi-religious beliefs in general. He was fundamentally opposed to submitting oneself to an absolute and abstract principle which one would place above the person, and to which persons could be sacrificed. It did not matter to Camus whether you called this principle God or Marxism, as he believed the Marxist eschatology to be a quasi-religious devotion – that people in the present were expendable for the larger cause of historical progress toward an abstract future. Nevertheless, Camus opposed the rejection of all values, asserting that life was meaningless – that is, he equally rejected nihilism. As Merton points out in his essay “Terror and the Absurd: Violence and Nonviolence in Albert Camus,” Camus believed that Western civilization, through Christianity, had lost the ability to recognize virtue, beauty and balance – a Mediterranean, pagan outlook that embraced a joy of living and could affirm positive values like Plato's notion of “the Good” (*LE* 233).

While acknowledging that Camus was a fine critic of what may be called “religious malpractice,” a false but common perversion of Christianity, Merton thinks that Camus fails either to fully understand the true Christian message or to take it seriously in the light of how it was lived. Camus had a deep humanism he shared with Merton, but for Merton it is rooted in the Christian concept of the humanity of God in Christ shared by all people and also rooted in the Islamic Sufi notion of “le point vierge” (the virgin point).¹⁰ This concept from al-Hallaj, which Merton would have known through Louis Massignon, describes an inner unity with God at the center of our being. Merton often wrote the word “Zen” beside his notes on Camus. Like Zen, Camus presents a lens in which to see the world in an honest and immediate way, with a focus on the present instead of giving ourselves to the abstract future. Though both Camus's philosophy and Zen teaching are non-theistic, Merton believed he could use them to attain a more honest Christianity. In light of that honesty, Merton has to come to terms with the way Christianity has enabled the executioner in history.

Part of the Church's involvement, troubling to Camus, was the role of the priest to accompany a condemned person and who, too often, used the opportunity of weakness to effect conversion. The priest also helped justify the process as an insider that assured societal approval of the execution under the guise of assistance to a troubled soul. As an example of the horror of execution by guillotine, Camus recounts the story of Fr. Devoyod, a chaplain of Santé Prison (who seemed to Camus to be in favor of execution). Fr. Devoyod notes that the condemned man was “in a very bad mood and refused the consolations of religion. Knowing his heart of hearts and the affection he had for his wife, who was very devout, we said to him: ‘Come now, out of love for your wife, commune with yourself a moment before dying,’ and the condemned man accepted” (Camus, “Reflections” 616-17). Merton writes in his notebook: “Important for Camus – again the idea of the ‘victory’ of priest and Church over helpless victim” (1967 Notebook 25v). Camus also quotes a Swiss National Councilor from Fribourg who expresses the Catholic Church's support of the death penalty at the time:

the lowest of criminals when faced with execution withdraws into himself. He repents and his preparation for death is hereby facilitated. The Church has saved one of its members and fulfilled its divine mission. This is why it has always accepted

the death penalty, not only as a means of self-defense, but as a powerful means of salvation. . . . Without trying to make of it a thing of the Church, the death penalty can point proudly to its almost divine efficacy, like war. (Camus, “Reflections” 647)

This quotation, though conversely supporting just war theory and state execution, argues Merton’s point that war justification is similar to the rationalization of capital punishment. In addition, this Swiss National Councilor makes Camus’s point that the Church wants to distance itself from the filth of the act – “[w]ithout trying to make of it a thing of the Church” – while in the same breath stating its merits for the Church’s mission of salvation (the Church stays ritually pure from the act of killing yet encourages and justifies participation). In his manuscript notes on Camus, Merton writes: “Religious death penalty – closing man off from the ‘divine community’ but definitive judgment is up to God. Does not deprive man of eternal life. Hence ‘some justification.’ The headsman [executioner] is a sacred person” (1967 Notebook 32). This echoes the Marxist critique of Christians and other religions justifying human suffering for reward in the afterlife. As Merton suggests, it is not for us to be in charge of the ultimate judgment of a person nor to give or take life.

Camus sees both the irony and hypocrisy of the Christian view from being raised in a French colonial Catholic milieu in Algeria. Merton notes that “Camus wrote the equivalent of an M.A. thesis on ‘Plotinus and St. Augustine,’” that Camus admired the primitive Franciscans’ direct appreciation of God in nature, and that he sought out points of communication with believers in speaking with the Paris Dominicans (*LE* 264-65). Camus points out the example of Jesus crucified in “Reflections on the Guillotine”:

The unbeliever cannot keep from thinking that men who have set at the centre of their faith the staggering victim of a judicial error ought at least to hesitate before committing legal murder. Believers also might be reminded that Emperor Julian, before his conversion, did not want to give official offices to Christians because they systematically refused to pronounce death sentences or to have anything to do with them. (Camus, “Reflections” 648)

Camus also sees some positive examples within the Jewish and Christian traditions: “The fact that Cain is not killed but bears a mark of reprobation in the eyes of men is the lesson we must draw from the Old Testament, to say nothing of the Gospels” (Camus, “Reflections” 654). Camus realized that there was a problem in an increasingly irreligious Europe in putting the state before people. “Europe’s malady consists in believing nothing and claiming to know everything” (Camus, “Reflections” 652).

The “Death Dance” – Society’s Ritualized Execution

In his introduction to *The Plague*, Merton writes that “For Camus, this ‘death dance,’ this hidden propensity to pestilence, is something more than mere mortality.” It is a “willful negation of life . . . to justify evil use of . . . power in terms of ‘history,’ or of ‘the common good,’ or of ‘the revolution,’ or even of ‘the justice of God’” (*LE* 181). In his notebook entries on “Reflections on the Guillotine,” Merton notes that the ritualistic nature was:

Important for *L’Etranger*. This is the question. Not simply killing but [the question

of how do we justify] “innocent killing.” Ambiguity. Society has its ways of killing “innocently”: but the individual must not be allowed the same privilege. This is one of the points of *L’Etranger* – leading to the conclusion that in fact there is no innocent killing. (1967 Notebook 32)

Conducted under the auspices of due process of law, enshrined in legal terms and procedures, society can feel that it is just enforcing the rule of law, but can we let ourselves off the hook so easily? Camus argues that murders emanating from slums and areas affected by substance abuse may be indictments as much of society as of the guilty party. Further, since there has never been definitive proof of deterrence, with many studies disproving it and demonstrating *higher* rates of violent crime in places that retain the death penalty, why does society cling to it? Does someone who commits murder while under the influence of drugs pause to weigh consequences of his or her decisions and did they get to this point in life by doing so? For Camus, the real test is that society cannot believe in the deterrent effect. If it did, executions would be public and not private. If that disgusts us, then it is an indication the state should not kill.

In tracing the ancient development of a judicial system, René Girard suggests in *Violence and the Sacred* that “there was a direct correlation between the elimination of sacrificial practices and the establishment of a judicial system.”¹¹ He notes the enduring human need for a scapegoat. When a poorer and racially skewed segment of the population of the United States is executed in statistically significant and higher proportions for the same crimes, our attention must shift to darker aspects of our collective psyche. This demonstrates ritual thinking instead of blind justice.

By describing the murder witnessed by Camus’s father as a “human sacrifice,” Merton traces the gap in logic in the death dance: “C[amus] stresses the contrast between the awful reality, the actual murder [by this, Merton means the execution, murder by the state], and the fact that this reality is never known, but translated into a meaningless abstraction so that the rite may be purified and continued out of habit” (1967 Notebook 27). Merton translates Camus in stating, “Death penalty is at once ‘*inutile et necessaire*’ [useless and necessary] – hence it must be hidden but not abolished – remains a guarantee against some unknown murder which, it is hoped, will not happen” (1967 Notebook 29). The individual’s death is necessitated by an unproven abstraction, an example of what Camus would describe as a sacrifice to the absurd. This person will die as an example. It is not necessary that others committing the same crime receive the same punishment. Your life and the ending of it are not about you, but about something deemed necessary for society despite the lack of proven efficacy. Merton likens this again with war. “Preventive war: you must pay in advance for injuries I suspect you of wanting to commit! . . . dictates a rate of *payment* for injuries – (with interest and for *foreseen* injuries in war!” (1967 Notebook 28v, 30).

War and the Crisis of Language

Merton recognizes parallels between war propaganda, about which he had written an essay,¹² and justification for the death penalty, and also the connection with war justification and ritual. He makes note of it in the “Reflections on the Guillotine” notebook:

Same reasoning with war. Even where the evidence means that war does *not* accomplish its proposed purpose (in Vietnam) the assumption that something is being accomplished remains basic – an article of faith. Trust in chance! Love of

the rite is basic. [Here Merton uses “rite” as in ritual.] Fear that if one leaves this opportunity untried, something worse will happen. Trust to “make sure.” (Sign of uneasy conscience). (1967 Notebook 27v)

In the struggle for total death penalty abolition, we can do as Merton and Camus would urge – put people first. Merton notes that solidarity is “*inseparable from compassion* (for prisoner and for victim)” (1967 Notebook 31v). He reflects that as in Meursault’s trial in *The Stranger*, a sentence of death “*denies* this solidarity and affirms the righteousness of society” (1967 Notebook 30v). This assumed righteousness can blind us in the face of tragic failures of rightness, as evidenced by post-mortem indications of wrongful executions.

1. Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom. Journals, vol. 6: 1966-1967*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 267.
2. These essays are collected in Thomas Merton, *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, ed. Patrick Hart, OCSO (New York: New Directions, 1981) 179-301; subsequent references will be cited as “LE” parenthetically in the text.
3. Thomas Merton, “Camus: Journals of the Plague Years,” *The Sewanee Review* 75 (Autumn 1967) 717-30; reprinted in *LE* 218-31.
4. Thomas Merton, *Albert Camus’ The Plague* (New York: Seabury, 1968); reprinted in *LE* 181-217.
5. Albert Camus, “Reflections on the Guillotine,” in *The Plague, The Fall, Exile and the Kingdom and Selected Essays*, trans. Stuart Gilbert and Justin O’Brien (New York: Modern Library, 1963) 609-56; subsequent references will be cited as “Camus, ‘Reflections’” parenthetically in the text.
6. Thomas Merton, “Reading Notebook 1967 #2” (Thomas Merton Papers, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Library, Box 3) 24; subsequent references will be cited as “1967 Notebook” parenthetically in the text.
7. Thomas Merton, “The Stranger: Poverty of an Antihero” (*LE* 294).
8. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 140-42.
9. Albert Camus, “Neither Victims nor Executioners,” *The Power of Nonviolence: Writings by Advocates of Peace*, ed. Arthur and Lila Weinberg (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002) 60.
10. See Christine M. Bochen, “*Point Vierge, Le*,” in William H. Shannon, Christine M. Bochen and Patrick F. O’Connell, *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002) 363-64.
11. René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979) 297-98.
12. Thomas Merton, “War and the Crisis of Language,” in Thomas Merton, *The Nonviolent Alternative*, ed. Gordon C. Zahn (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980) 234-47.