

# Lax, Merton and Rice on War and Peace

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*James Harford*

Thomas Merton and his two long-time friends, Robert Lax and Edward Rice—as far back as their undergraduate days, and then throughout their lives—wrote voluminously about the absurdity and cruelty of war, and of the importance of peace activism.<sup>1</sup> Much of the writing was in biting, satirical letters to each other, or in articles for *Jubilee*, the magazine that all three worked on for fifteen years, while they often published elsewhere on the subject as well.

## The 30s and 40s

An early example of Merton's satire is his prize-winning poem on fascism, "Fable for a War," from Columbia's 1939 annual poetry volume. An excerpt:

The old Roman sow  
Bears a new litter now  
To fatten for a while  
On the same imperial swill.  
The cannibal will dig  
And root out Spanish bones beside the pig.

Germany has reared  
A rare ugly bird  
To screech a sour song  
In the German tongue:  
Tell me if there be  
A sparrowhawk for such birds as he?

...Europe is a feast  
For every bloody beast:  
Jackals will grow fat  
On the bones after that.  
But in the end of all  
None but the crows can sing the funeral.<sup>2</sup>

Lax, Merton and Rice were each editors-in-chief of the Columbia humor magazine *Jester* at one time or another in the 1938-40 period. Their levity, however, was mixed with savage sarcasm about the stirrings of war. One Christmas issue had a "Peace on Earth" cover that showed Mussolini, Hitler and Franco riding camels and gazing at the Star of Bethlehem while cradling bombs.<sup>3</sup> Inside was an 8-page folio of the Goya sketches of wartime horror in Spain. They even ran a "Stop the War" ad as WWII was looming.

Lax, always the gentlest of the three, wrote this poem in long-hand, circa 1941:

I believe that all the people should stop their fight  
 I believe that one should blow  
 A whistle or sing  
 Or play on the lute  
 Or say very quietly into a microphone  
 That whatever they think they are doing it is wrong<sup>4</sup>

As World War II approached, most men who were eligible marched lock-step into the military, and their patriotism soared as they enlisted. Rice was one of those, and was ready to join. He expected to be drafted and was planning to join the Marines, but he had bad eyes that would plague him all his life, and he was declared 4-F. Not willing to serve as a combatant were Lax and Merton, whose detestation of war was palpable. Neither had disqualifying physical ailments—although both were borderline hypochondriacs—but it was their pacifist convictions that held sway.

Lax eventually got conscientious objector status,<sup>5</sup> but first had to undergo the same humbling experience that befell many another young American in those months, and he wrote Merton about it, using a racial epithet that was, unfortunately, common for the times:

Oh, Myrtle....Among the draft they did force me naked in a room with a thousand jigs in a similar condition and direct me harshly to piss in a Dixie cup which I could not. They did fumst me and pummel me and direct me to an impractical truck. They did transfix me with needles, startle me with bright lights, pound my kneecaps, and sound with unsharpened pencils my ears.<sup>6</sup>

On one of my visits to him on Patmos, in 1997, Lax gave me a paper he had kept since writing it out in 1941, 36 years earlier:

My objection is to taking human life. My desire is to help preserve lives that are endangered...My belief is that a single God, good and loving, rules the universe. I believe that His authority extends to every event, large and small. I believe that in this scheme man is particularly blessed with a conscience to advise and a will to choose between good and evil action. The religious writings in harmony with this belief and which seem to me of great importance are The Ten Commandments, the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm and the Lord's Prayer. These express for me the goodness of the Lord and the proper faith and right behavior of man.<sup>7</sup>

Merton's despair over world militarism was voiced not only towards his country, but to the whole of mankind, in "An Argument: Of the Passion of Christ," which was published in *Thirty Poems*, the first volume of Merton poetry published by *New Directions*, in 1944. This is the fourth and last stanza of the poem.

The cry that rent the temple veil  
 And split the earth as deep as hell  
 And echoed through the universe,  
 Sounds, in bombardments, down to us.  
 There is no ear that has not heard  
 The deathless cry of murdered God:  
 No eye that has not looked upon  
 The lance of the crucifixion:  
 And yet that cry beats at the ears  
 Of old, deaf-mute interpreters,  
 Whose querulous and feeble cries  
 Drown stronger voices, and whose eyes  
 Will let no light of lances in:  
 They still will clamor for a sign!<sup>8</sup>

Disillusioned by the bellicosity of his adopted country, Merton inserted a scathing passage in his 1947 poem, "Figures For An Apocalypse III," addressed to his friends back in New York with this sub-title: "Advice to my Friends Robert Lax and Edward Rice, to get away while they still can." This is the fourth stanza:

Time, time to go to the terminal  
 And make the escaping train  
 With eyes as bright as palaces  
 And thoughts like nightingales.  
 It is the hour to fly without passports  
 From Juda to the mountains,  
 And hide while cities turn to butter  
 For fear of the secret bomb.  
 We'll arm for our own invisible battle  
 In the wells of the pathless wood  
 Wounding our limbs with prayers and Lent,  
 Shooting the traitor memory  
 And throwing away our guns—  
 And learning to fight like Gedeon's men,  
 Hiding our lights in jugs.

In "A Letter to America" he expressed deep disappointment with what he considered the excessive militarism of his adopted land. This poem started out on a high note:

America, when you were born, and when the plains  
 Spelled out their miles of praises in the sun  
 What glory and what history  
 The rivers seemed to prepare.

And then turned ominous:

How long are we to wake  
 With eyes that turn to wells of blood  
 Seeing the hell that gets you from us  
 With his treacherous embrace!<sup>10</sup>

Merton looked back on that period in *The Seven Storey Mountain*, writing that, "If I had objected to war before, it was more on the basis of emotion than anything else," but now "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 own blind wickedness." He would be willing, he said, to serve as a stretcher-bearer, "so long as I did not have to drop bombs on open cities, or shoot at other men."<sup>11</sup> His entry into the Trappists made this moot.

In 1951 Merton offered, in the prologue to *The Ascent to Truth*, an apocalyptic view of the world that might well have been written today:

The human race is facing the greatest crisis in its history, because religion itself is being weighed in the balance. The present unrest in five continents, with everyone fearful of being destroyed, has brought many men to their knees.<sup>12</sup>

### The Jubilee Years

Throughout its fifteen year lifetime, the magazine *Jubilee*, started and edited by Ed Rice, with strong contributions from both Lax and Merton, relentlessly carried anti-war messages to its readers. Typical was the April, 1957, issue which led off with a Rice quote of St. Augustine: "And if anyone either endures or thinks of war without mental pain, his is a more miserable plight still, for he thinks himself happy because he has lost all human feeling."<sup>13</sup> Rice, himself, edited a seven page article titled "War & Peace" illustrated by a stark Georges Rouault lithograph from his *Miserere* series. The piece offered a somber summary of the expected terrifying consequences of nuclear warfare. Nobelist Harold Urey wrote: "Scientists have repeatedly stated that no adequate defense against the atomic bomb is to be expected in the future." In a Bikini test report was found: "...the radiological effects have no parallel in conventional weapons...contaminated ships became radio-active stoves and would have burned all living things aboard them." A quote from Lt. Gen. James M. Gavin said that, "Current planning estimates run on the order of several hundred million deaths...depending on which way the wind blew."<sup>14</sup> Catholic comment was from Jules-Gerard Cardinal Saliège: "Are we drunk or are we insane? Ten million men were killed in the first world war, forty million in the second; if a third world war comes there is every indication that far more than a hundred million will die. You can truthfully say that the devil is calling the tune...." The oft-stated argument for or against "just war," which dates back to St. Augustine, was given an airing for *Jubilee* readers. "It is possible for a nation to engage in a just war...." stated Reverend Francis Connell of Catholic University. Absolutely not, said Alfred Cardinal Ottaviani, who wrote "...the conditions which theoretically make it justified and permissible are never present...."<sup>15</sup>

Merton himself rejected the label "pacifist," believing that a just war was, at least theoretically, sometimes the only alternative. In practice, however, he said, the just war concept was irrelevant in an age when nuclear destruction was possible. He wrote Rice on February 28, 1959, that he would review a book on the dropping of the bomb on Japan under a pen name.

What then have I done? This. I have set down in a swirl and written a short address of the book with my own hand...but this has not been done without subterfuge and an assumed name. Which assumed name is not making I think its last appearance because under it also I can publish like articles...outside my official ken.<sup>16</sup>

He used his own name later that year for a book that included the powerful "Chant To Be Used In Processions Around A Site With Furnaces." The whole poem is one long flow ending with this:

Do not think yourself better because you burn up  
friends and enemies with long-range missiles without  
ever seeing what you have done.<sup>17</sup>

Towards the end of 1961 Merton wrote Lax, in their special jargon, about plans for publishing new material on peace, and added jabs at the belligerency of Catholics:

From all parts I make together paperbacks of peace for New Directions.... It is articles of peace by Erich Fromms and Lewis Mumfords...and finally sly jibes about peace from English Cathlick intellectuals very witty and sly indeed, saying war is much sin, and it is, baby, it sure is. This the popes have all said...also Cardinal Ottaviani.... But not so our yonder folk catholic and suburban fathers who all cry out dead rather than red it is physical evil to smash reds with bombs and is moral evil, like sin, to be beat by reds and have to suffer prison. How new the gospel has become in these our purlieus. Choice of evils, choose the one which makes most sore the enemy and violate every type of human decency.<sup>18</sup>

His cynicism about America's war stance is reflected in this excerpt from another letter to Lax at Christmas time:

Here with the ship of state already half submerged and with waters up to our beard standing nobly on the <sup>19</sup> tottering captain's bridge, We Santa Claus salute you.

### The Sixties

It was in 1962, that Merton—with the collaboration of both Lax and Rice—went all out in his attack on the international war psychosis. It started with an apocalyptic note to Lax on New Year's day:

We are in an awfully serious hour for Christianity, for our own souls. We are faced with the necessity to be very faithful to the Law of Christ, and His truth. This means that we must do everything that we reasonably can to find our way peacefully through the mess we are in. ....We have to try to some extent to preserve the sanity of this nation, and keep it from going berserk which will be its destruction, and ours, and perhaps also the destruction of Christendom.

I wanted to say these few things, as we enter the New Year, for it is going to be a crucial year....

Unfortunately, Merton was often obliged to maintain anonymity when writing about war, as for his *Jubilee* article in March of that year titled "Testament to Peace, Father Metzger's thoughts about the duty of the Christian."<sup>20</sup> Father Max Josef Metzger had been executed in 1944 by Hitler's Gestapo for trying to get letters out of Germany to bishops in various countries through a Swedish lady, who turned out to be a Gestapo agent. He "died for Germany just as heroically and just as wholeheartedly as any soldier who fell on the battlefield. And he died for peace," wrote Merton, without author credit.

In spite of his efforts at remaining anonymous, Merton was beginning to get national attention. On April 12, 1962 a Merton prayer was read to the Congress by Frank Kowalski, Democrat from Connecticut, who addressed "this Congress, our President, our military forces, and our adversaries." It concludes using this sentence:

Grant us prudence in proportion to our power,  
Wisdom in proportion to our science,  
Humaneness in proportion to our wealth and might.

Ironically, it was in the same month, April, 1962, that Merton wrote Jim Forest about the latest, and firmest, clampdown on his peace writings: "Now here is the ax. For a long time I have been anticipating trouble with the higher Superiors and now I have it. The orders are, no more writing about peace...I am hoping to get the book [*Peace in the Post-Christian Era*] through on the ground that it is already written."<sup>21</sup> In fact, it took forty-two additional years, until 2004, before the book finally came out.

It was not possible to halt some of Merton's peace works that were on the way to press. And so *Jubilee*, in May, 1962, carried a striking seven pager by the monk, leading off with a pitch-black first page set off by **Thomas Merton** in bold white type and the title, **RELIGION AND THE BOMB** in even larger white type.<sup>22</sup> The article is vintage Merton, the polemicist, so impassioned that he wrote his friend, Ping Ferry, that

I do not realize how strident I have been until I get into print. The one in this month's *Jubilee* will set a whole lot of people on their ear, and I guess it is my fault...[T]here are smoother ways of saying the same thing. I lash out with a baseball bat. Some professor of non-violence I am. Oh well....<sup>23</sup>

The article is not only strident but—it must be said—exaggerative, making it seem that a U. S. nuclear first strike may have actually been a possibility. "The interests of the West, the NATO, and the Church are all confused with one another," he wrote, "and the possibility of defending the West with a nuclear first strike on Russia is sometimes accepted without too much hesitation as 'necessary' and a 'lesser evil.'

Merton's peace-writing momentum kept building and in October, 1962, he co-opted Bob Lax's occasional broadside publication, *PAX*, with "Original Child Bomb." As much a political tract as poetry, it was written in numbered journalistic-style paragraphs. Some readers evidently did not get the satire, which included four citations of Admiral Leahy's prediction that the bomb would never explode. The reporting is a bit sloppy. Alamogordo, site of the first nuclear bomb test, is misspelled twice. An excerpt:

....So it was decided Hiroshima was the most opportune target, as it had not yet been bombed at all. Lucky Hiroshima! What others had experienced over a period of four years would happen to Hiroshima in a single day!<sup>24</sup>

A translation of that poem into French had already been set in type when the Abbot General of the Trappists, Dom Gabriel Sortais, vetoed its publication. "I suppose he is one of those people who is convinced that France has to have the bomb and maintain her honor with the *force de frappe....*" Merton wrote acidly to the nun who would have done the translation into Portuguese.<sup>25</sup>

The official Trappist wraps were reapplied in 1964, when Merton was told by the secretary of Dom Gabriel's successor, Dom Ignace, that he was forbidden to republish some of his articles on nuclear war, including some that had been permitted. In his journal he lumped in other grievances:

Thus, I am still not permitted to say what Pope John said in *Pacem in Terris*. Reason: "That is not the job of a monk, it is for the Bishops." .... A grim insight into the stupor of the Church in spite of all that has been attempted, all efforts to wake her up. It all falls into place. Pius XII and the Jews, the Church in South America, the treatment of the Negroes in the U.S., the Catholics on the French right in the Algerian affair, German Catholics under Hitler.... The whole thing is too sad and too serious for bitterness.... [S]ilent complicity is presented as a greater good than honest, conscientious protest.... I refuse complicity.... In any case, I have been definitely silenced on the subject of nuclear war.<sup>26</sup>

James Finley, who was a novice under Merton at Gethsemani, remembers going to see him once when he was in the midst of writing *Seeds of Destruction*. "They told me," he said, "to take out the part about nuclear warfare. How can I call it *Seeds of Destruction* if I have to take out the destruction?"<sup>27</sup>

Ed Rice continued to be an ally in publishing Merton's writings on peace in *Jubilee*. In 1965, for example, he printed "Gandhi And The One-Eyed Giant"—an allusion to the likening of the white man's callous entry into Africa in virtual blindness. Merton had admired Gandhi as far back as his school days at Oakham and here he related the sainted Indian's principles to those of another much-revered man, John XXIII:

They are pertinent for everybody, but especially for those who are interested in implementing the principles expressed by another great religious mind, Pope John XXIII, in *Pacem in Terris*. Indeed this encyclical has the breadth and depth, the univer-

sality and tolerance, of Gandhi's own peace-minded outlook. Peace cannot be built on exclusivism, absolutism and intolerance. But neither can it be built on vague liberal slogans and pious programs gestated in the smoke of confabulation. There can be no peace on earth without the kind of inner change that brings man back to his "right mind." Gandhi's observations on the prerequisites and the disciplines involved by *satyagraha*, the vow of truth, are required reading for anyone who is seriously interested in man's fate in the nuclear age.<sup>28</sup>

In 1965, he called out Gandhi's legacy to the world, quoting his very words:

The evils we suffer cannot be eliminated by a violent attack in which one sector of humanity flies at another in destructive fury. Our evils are common and the solution of them can only be common. We are not ready to undertake this common task because we are not ourselves. Consequently, the first duty of every man is to return to his own right mind in order that society itself may be sane.<sup>29</sup>

Bob Lax, too, was much influenced by Gandhi and was, himself, on a perpetual mission to preach the gospel of peace in his poetry. He once told his friend Anthony Bannon that, "The whole idea of non-violence, what Gandhi called *ahimsa*, is of prime importance to me. I try in my poetry to make it a kind of a song that evokes a picture of this peaceable kingdom." In another talk with Bannon he said that:

Art is a way of profoundly reflecting and communicating the concept and reality of peace.... Peace is the work of the artist as well as the statesman, and any work of art at best—poem, picture or concerto—provides a pattern for, and is an instrument of peace. The artist is above all a peacemaker and prophet of peace. It is with this understanding and by his authority that he functions in the world.<sup>30</sup>

Lax got a passionate message from Merton in late 1965 after the monk had received a letter from some women who had been fasting to influence the Vatican Council on peace initiatives:

...I am fallen on the floor with sighs and transports because I have received from the women who fasted in Rome for peace a

paper they all writ, while fasting, they signed it all with fasting fingers saying be our friend. How should I not be friend of these fasting ladies who have moved the whole Council up ten notches closer to God and make them speak of peace and kept silence the American Bishops from jumping up and yelling about bombs and war. They have shut up that fool Bishop Hannon with their fasting and they deserve praise, let them think of me any time they want I am ready to be thought of kindly by such ladies. Tomorrow Mass for the peace, but the mists of bad feeling are all over this country let me tell you it smell bad here in Denmark.<sup>31</sup>

A few weeks later, his exasperation with the U. S. government was beyond toleration; he wrote again to Lax: "We American citizens have had enough of President Johnson and of Secretary McNamara as hoped also of J. Edgar Hoover. That for the govt."<sup>32</sup> He had hoped that Vatican II, spurred by John XXIII's strong message, would move peaceful actions by national governments, including his own. He wrote Sister Thérèse Lentfoehr, in the last days of 1965, that, "The big thing now is to get people to understand the real importance of the Council teaching on war and peace—and the Pope's insistence on the same ideas."<sup>33</sup>

In August, 1966, the Vietnam War peaking, Merton wrote an article for *Jubilee* about the Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, preceded by Hanh's own essay which was illustrated by a grisly photo showing the self-immolation of a Buddhist monk that had occurred in 1963. "In the Buddhist belief," wrote Nhat Hanh, "life is not confined to 60 or 80 or 100 years; life is eternal...To express will by burning oneself, therefore, is not to commit an act of destruction but to perform an act of construction, i.e., to suffer and to die for the sake of one's people."<sup>34</sup> Merton wrote on the following page that,

This is not a political statement. It has no ulterior motive, it seeks to provoke no immediate reaction "for" or "against" this or that side in the Vietnam war. It is on the contrary a human and personal statement and an anguished plea for Thich Nhat Hanh who is my brother. He is more my brother than many who are nearer to me by race and nationality, because he and I see things exactly the same way. He and I deplore the war that is ravaging his country. We deplore it for exactly the same rea-

sons: human reasons, reasons of sanity, justice and love. We deplore the needless destruction, the fantastic and callous ravaging of human life, the rape of the culture and spirit of an exhausted people. It is surely evident that this carnage serves no purpose that can be discerned and indeed contradicts the very purpose of the mighty nation that has constituted itself the "defender" of the people it is destroying.<sup>35</sup>

Merton could not resist quoting some fellow Americans at the peak of U. S. involvement in the Vietnam war—a General who said the way to peace was to "bomb North Vietnam back into the Stone Age," and Cardinal Spellman, who had addressed the troops in Vietnam, deplored the home protesters, with the statement, "My country right or wrong." In the same article he cited the Vatican Council's proclamation that even without nuclear, chemical and bacteriological weapons modern war can be "savagery far surpassing that of the past" involving entire populations. He likened the human race to "an alcoholic who knows that drink will destroy him and yet always he has 'good reasons' why he must continue drinking." Written thirty four years before another U. S. President afflicted with that same addiction led the country into war in Iraq, the Merton words cut hard in the re-reading. He was not, however, in favor of burning draft cards ("I just do not know if their position is comprehensible to a lot of frightened and confused people") although he backed "responsible" dissent. He also praised the Pope Paul's "clear and firm protest against war and injustice" at the UN, calling it a "most serious and highly credible reminder that instruments for peaceful conflict solution are at hand."<sup>36</sup>

Lax showed what was for him a rare cynicism in a 1967 poem about international peace negotiations that was handwritten to his South Dakota friend Gerry Lange, on stationery that carried PAX in big letters at top and bottom:

We say:

They don't trust  
us

I say:

Can you blame  
them?

They say:

They don't trust  
us

I say:

Can you blame  
us?

We talk  
& they talk  
about

"confidence-  
building  
measures"

I say:

name one

(silence)

I say:

Change the  
tone  
in the way  
we talk  
of  
them  
&  
to  
them

You say:

is that  
all?

I say:

Try that  
& I'll give  
you another  
one  
tomorrow<sup>37</sup>

Merton's journal entries sometimes became as angry as his letters to his friends in 1967, as in this entry:

"...I think the world of the U.S.A. in 1967 is a world of crass, blind, overstimulated, phony, lying stupidity. The war in Asia gets slowly worse—and always more inane. The temper of the country is one of blindness, fat, self-satisfied, ruthless, mindless corruption...."<sup>38</sup>

Vietnam was not the only theater of war that concerned Merton. He wrote his lawyer-friend John Slate, who had been a Columbia classmate, in 1967 that

This Israel-Arab war sounds very nasty indeed. Things feel like 1939. Hope I am wrong. Lax is in Patmos. Should he get out of there? Patmos, Greece, will reach him. Let me know if something specially dramatic happens—I may or may not hear things here. Maybe first thing I will know—I will be going up in a radioactive cloud all mixed up with the Gold of Fort Knox and the fissionable materials treasured there.<sup>39</sup>

He did not absolve his fellow American Catholics from their culpability by any means, delivering this blast in a letter to Lax as the Vietnam war was still being waged in 1968:

When you come to ol' Kaintuck don't let on you are coming to see me. Frantics are burning my books in L'ville (honest, have writ to papers, "will burn *Seven Storey Mountain*: Merton is commie red atheist contra Vietnam war pitznik)...Catlick papers all full of turmoil over your friend...

[signed] Beppo Zampiglione<sup>40</sup>

Rice, after *Jubilee* folded in 1967, began traveling, and went to see Merton in 1968, some time after returning from Asia. He wrote in his Merton biography, *The Man In The Sycamore Tree*, about how deeply affected his friend was by the pictures he brought back of Vietnam scenes, including one picture of a mother and baby horribly scarred by napalm burns. Merton, wrote Rice, "looked at it a long time, wondering not only about the tragic burns on the two victims, but what had happened to the interior sensibilities of the young American men who could drop such a weapon without an apparent thought of the consequences."<sup>41</sup>

Throughout the year 1968, the last one of his life, Merton fulminated in his journal over the Vietnam War. He kept up on national affairs with the help of people who sent him news clips—Dan Berrigan, Ping Ferry, Jay Laughlin, John Howard Griffin, Victor Hammer, Carolyn Hammer [librarian at University of Kentucky] probably Ed Rice and Jim Forest. He talked also to Dan Walsh who, he says, “has a lot of inside knowledge of the Democratic Party.” That Walsh’s knowledge was sometimes irresponsible gossip is indicated by his comment to Merton that LBJ’s resignation “was all a ruse, that he would be drafted at the convention and thereby circumvent Bobby Kennedy.”<sup>42</sup> It is doubtful that anyone with Merton’s spiritual credentials went on record with more severity about his country than the monk. He used phrases in his journal like “incredible barbarity” “killing utterly defenseless people” “the moral sense of this country is eroded” “the country is under judgment....”<sup>43</sup> Few editorialists used harsher words than Merton did in accusing President Johnson of “unconvincing fraud” over his action at the time of the Pueblo incident.<sup>44</sup> It must have hurt him deeply to receive the criticism he got from some Catholics. “A devout Catholic is burning my books,” he wrote, “I must be godless, as I wish to save lives rather than kill Commies for Christ.”<sup>45</sup>

He still harbored hope that his fellow citizens would come to their senses, but worried that they might not:

I have never had such a feeling of the strange madness that possesses the country. And yet there is still some hope—based not on reason but on a basic good will and a luck that might still hold. Or is there a basic good will? Has it all been mortgaged to a police state? Are we already *there*? We may be!<sup>46</sup>

### Legacy

Merton’s views on peace and war have had profound effect on tens of thousands, maybe millions, of people worldwide in the decades since his death. Some of the monk’s wisdom gets new attention as fresh statements are published. This was quoted by Merton’s old friend, Jim Forest, himself a man who has devoted his life to international peace, in 1996—probably 30 years after it was written—in the introduction to the Japanese printing of *The Seven Storey Mountain*:

I reject this [“their ideology of matter, power, quantity, movement, activism and force”] because I see it to be the source and expression of the spiritual hell which man has made of his world: the hell which has burst into flame in two total wars of incredible horror, the hell of spiritual emptiness and sub-human fury which has resulted in crimes like Auschwitz and Hiroshima....

...by being in the monastery I take my true part in all the struggles and sufferings of the world....

...It is my intention to make my entire life a rejection of, a protest against the crimes and injustices of war and political tyranny which threaten to destroy the whole race of man and the world with him. 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.<sup>47</sup>

In a lighter vein, but no less profound, is this poem by Bob Lax, which I re-discovered in a pile of his letters sent to me from Greece. With Lax’s characteristic simplicity, it was written longhand to his publisher, Emil Antonucci, on a piece of 3 by 8 cardboard. An audience at the Princeton Public Library reacted with audible amusement when I read it recently:

war/  
peace

mmmmmm

rrrrrr

mmmmmm

rrrrrr

rrrrrr

mmmmmm

rrrrrr

mmmmmm

mmmmmm

rrrrr

mmmmmm

rrrrr<sup>48</sup>

Lax's horror of war and killing was certainly equal to Merton's. In fact, he had a respect for life that included all beings—even insects. My daughter Jennifer recalls that, when she visited him on Patmos in 1994, he would not let her dispose of a spider on the window sill. He had her put a glass jar over it, slip a card underneath, and release it outside.

In 1999, the year before Lax died, his *peacemaker's handbook* came out—just three poems, single words strung down 104 pages in both English and German. Here's a portion of the first one, which went 16 pages, untitled:

how  
to  
start  
the  
day  
right

tips  
from  
the  
mas  
ters:

1: lie  
in  
bed  
for  
a  
while

&  
look  
at  
the  
ceil  
ing

2.

3.

4.

5.

be  
present  
to  
the  
mo  
ments  
as  
they  
pre  
sent  
them  
selves  
to  
you

-  
bring  
peace  
to  
the  
mo  
ment

let  
the  
mo  
ment  
bring  
peace  
to  
you

-

When I finished reading this poem, I realized that I was, indeed, at peace. I derived peace, as well, and considerable satisfaction

when, in 2004, Merton's *Peace in the Post-Christian Era* was published with a stirring, memory-jogging introduction by Forest: "While Thomas Merton would be pleased that forty-two years later this labor of love is at last in bookshops and libraries, it would distress him that, far from being a poignant memento of a bygone era, it remains both timely and relevant."<sup>49</sup>

Recollections of George W. Bush's actions in Iraq come all too vividly to mind when reading, for example, this Merton remark quoted by Forest: "Indeed the big powers have been content to use the UN as a forum for political and propagandist wrestling matches and have not hesitated to take independent action that led to the discrediting of the UN whenever this has been profitable to them."<sup>50</sup>

## Notes

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1. From a paper presented at the 9<sup>th</sup> General Meeting, *International Thomas Merton Society*, San Diego, June 9-12, 2005, and from James Harford's book, *Merton & Friends A Joint Biography of Thomas Merton, Robert Lax and Edward Rice* published by Continuum International, 2006.
2. *Columbia Poetry* 1939, Columbia University Press, pp. 60-61; reprinted in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New Directions, 1977), pp. 712-713.
3. *Jester*, December, 1938, front cover.
4. Found by the author in a pile of Lax writings, now in the Lax archive, Friedsam Library, St. Bonaventure University, Olean, NY.
5. In a *Catholic Worker* remembrance of Lax in Jan., 2001, p. 7, Tom Cornell wrote that he had been trying, in the 1950s, to get the Selective Service System to make him a CO by reason of his Catholic convictions. He didn't want to go to jail, and he wanted to fill out the application well so other Catholics would find it easier to be CO's. He asked Lax for counsel. "He [Lax] had sought conscientious objector status as a Jew, arguing his claim from the Torah rule that fruit trees must be spared." and, says Cornell, "He had no heart for battle...He sat there, and all he could say was he didn't know if he would do the same all over again, but again....He wasn't going to make my mind up for me, and he wasn't going to make believe the question was any less difficult than it is."
6. Lax to Merton, Apr. 2, 1941, Lax Columbia Archive.
7. Interview with Lax, Patmos, May, 1997
8. Merton, "An Argument Of the Passion of Christ," Stanza iv, 1944, taken from *30 Poems* (New Directions) in *Collected Poems*, pp. 53-54.

9. Merton, "Figures For An Apocalypse III 1947," fourth stanza, in *Collected Poems*, pp. 139-140.
10. Merton, 30 Poems, in *Collected Poems*, pp. 151-152.
11. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt & Brace, 1948), pp. 311-312.
12. Thomas Merton, *The Ascent for Truth* (New York: Harcourt & Brace, 1951), p. 3.
13. *Jubilee*, April, 1957, p. 1.
14. p. 15.
15. p. 19.
16. Merton letter to Rice, February 28, 1959, Rice Georgetown Archive.
17. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 349.
18. Merton to Lax, November 27, 1961, *When Prophecy Still Had a Voice: The Letters of Thomas Merton & Robert Lax*, ed., Arthur W. Biddle (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2001), pp. 232-233.
19. Merton to Lax, Christmas, 1961, Biddle, p. 234.
20. *Jubilee*, March, 1962, pp. 22-25
21. Merton letter to Forest, *The Hidden Ground of Love* (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1985), p. 266.
22. *Jubilee*, May, 1962, pp. 7-13: *Passion for Prayer*, pp. 65-79.
23. Merton to Ferry, May 8, 1962, *The Hidden Ground of Love*, p. 211
24. Merton, *Collected Poems*, p. 295.
25. Merton to Sister M. Emmanuel de Souza e Silva, November 2, 1962, *Hidden Ground of Love*, p.189.
26. Merton, *A Vow of Conversation, Journals, 1964-1965*, ed., Naomi Burton Stone (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux), p. 28, March 3, 1964.
27. Talk by James Finley to 8<sup>th</sup> International Thomas Merton Society Conference, Vancouver, June 7, 2003. *Seeds of Destruction*, MacMillan, 1967
28. Merton, "Gandhi and the One-Eyed Giant" in *Gandhi on Non-Violence* (New York: New Directions, 1965), p. 20; *Jubilee*, January, 1965, pp. 12-17.
29. Merton, *Gandhi on Non-Violence*, p. 72.
30. Interview with Bannon, Rochester, November 18, 1999.
31. Merton to Lax, November 10, 1965, Biddle, p. 315.
32. Merton to Lax, December 28, 1965, p. 316.
33. Merton to Lentfoehr, December 30, 1965, MCA.
34. Thich Nat Nhat Nanh, *The Buddhists*, *Jubilee*, August, 1966, pp. 7-13
35. Merton, "Nhat Hanh is My Brother", *Jubilee*, August, 1966, p 11; *Faith and Nonviolence* (Notre Dame, IN: UND Press, 1968), p. 106.

36. Merton, *Peace and Protest*, Continuum, Vol. 3, No. 4, Winter, 1966, pp. 509-512.
37. Lax to Lange, 1967, Harford personal file.
38. Merton, *Learning to Love* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), p. 239.
39. Lax to John Slate, June 6, 1967, Merton Columbia Archive—*Road to Joy*, p. 303.
40. Merton to Lax, March 15, 1968, Merton Columbia Archive—*When Prophecy Still Had a Voice*, pp. 387-388.
41. Rice, *The Man in the Sycamore Tree* (New York: Doubleday, 1970), p. 89.
42. Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, April 6, 1968 (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1998), p. 76.
43. Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, p. 33.
44. Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, p. 47.
45. Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, p. 67.
46. Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, pp. 69-70.
47. Forest, in *Catholic Peacemakers*, Vol. II, Roland G. Musto, Garland Publishing, 1996, p.753.
48. Lax to Antonucci, August 31, 1969, Harford personal file.
49. Thomas Merton, *Peace in the Post-Christian Era* (Mary Knoll: Orbis, 2004), p.vii.
50. Merton, *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*, p. 21.