

## An Interview about Thomas Merton with Dr. Martin E. Marty

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*Conducted by Vaughn Fayle, OFM*  
*Edited by Joseph Quinn Raab*

In 1964 Dr. Martin Marty published his *Varieties of Unbelief* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston) and Thomas Merton published *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux). Marty was meditating on the ways in which Christianity in America was itself becoming secularized and mutating into a kind of mythology at the service of patriotic nationalism and a justification for material privilege. Merton's book was prophetic in a slightly different vein; the monk was warning America that it was heading toward more violence and destruction. Merton argued that in spite of all the sincerity of white liberals in America, they would not be able to solve the "black problem" because they were part of the system, which itself was problematic. True liberation for blacks would require some destruction of institutionalized racism, a systemic evil, and this process would not be pleasant or pretty.

Merton reviewed Marty's book in *Commonweal* the very same week that Marty had reviewed Merton's book for the *New York Herald Tribune*, and as Marty later wrote to Merton "it turned out that you liked mine and I did not like yours."<sup>1</sup> In short, Marty had found Merton's "Letters to a White Liberal" too apocalyptic, too alarmist, too pessimistic. Events that followed, especially the riots in Newark and Detroit, caused Marty to revisit Merton's *Seeds of Destruction* and to see it in light of those events as being hauntingly accurate. In the August 30, 1968 issue of *The National Catholic Reporter*, Marty published an open letter to Merton, a public acknowledgment that Merton had indeed been "telling it as it is." The two expressed their mutual respect through a brief correspondence that followed.

In June 2010, Fr. Vaughn Fayle, OFM had the opportunity to interview Dr. Marty about his relationship with Thomas Merton. The interview was video-recorded by Michael Brennan, Director of the Chicago Chapter of the International Thomas Merton Society. The transcription of the interview that follows is an abridged version of the whole. It captures the

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1. The reviews appeared in January, 1965, but Marty's comment that "I did not like yours" comes from his letter to Merton published in the *National Catholic Reporter*, August 30, 1968.

heart of the interview but some sections have been omitted. The entire interview is available in the archives at the Thomas Merton Center at Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY.

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**Vaughn Fayle:** We are trying to do an ethnography of sorts and capture testimonies from people who were influenced by Thomas Merton in some way.

**Martin Marty:** I did a book of five hundred years of American History in 500 pages and it ends with Merton.<sup>2</sup>

**VF:** What was your impression of Catholicism as someone raised and schooled in the Lutheran faith, in the forties, fifties and sixties?

**MM:** I grew up in a little town in Nebraska which was exactly half-Catholic and half-Lutheran and we had good relations. It was a mysteriously different world; there were Czech Catholics and German Lutherans. Fr. Boesak would come by every now and then and meet with Pastor Oelschlaeger. We were good friends – my best friends were Catholic – but it never occurred to me until years later, when *U.S. Catholic* asked me to reminisce about it, that I had never been in any of their homes or vice versa. The great fear was inter-marriage. Everything else was fine. We played good basketball against each other.

Carrying that on, I went to what Catholics would call a minor seminary, a *Gymnasium* in the German style in Milwaukee – it combined boarding high school and junior college – and there my roommate, who was actually the first husband of my second wife – he died young, but he was a genius – and he and I started exploring and got to know Tom Stransky, CSP, who was much later to become head of the Paulists. Still later, at Vatican II, in the press conferences I would look at Tom and he would look at me with an “I know you, I know you” but we couldn’t think of how. Then one day he resolved it: we remembered that he and his partner Tom Ziebarth had defeated us in the Midwest Debating championships, and you never forget who defeated you. That was a breakthrough because in those early years we became friends and worked with Junior Achievement and started a little newspaper together, and in cases like that the line was eroding a bit.

For me the beginning of the breakthrough was when I attended a very conservative Missouri Lutheran seminary in St. Louis and through

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2. Martin E. Marty, *Pilgrims in Their Own Land: 500 Years of Religion in America* (Boston, Little, Brown, 1984).

artist Siegfried Reinhardt I met Water Ong, SJ and that was a total breakthrough.

**VF:** Had he started his work on *Orality*<sup>3</sup> at that point?

**MM:** I'm not sure, but you get the beginnings of it; he was interested in everything, whether it was drumbeats in Africa or whatever – his imagination was so rich. He was Catholic to the core, but never was that a barrier. He taught us that “catholic” is usually defined as “universal” geographically, but *kata holos* was the important thing – meaning it penetrates the “the whole” of the culture. He had a couple of books, one of them being *Frontiers in American Catholicism*.<sup>4</sup> By that time – it was 1952 when I graduated and was ordained – there were occasional Jesuit lecturers on campus, in events which had been unheard of even ten years earlier. But still the line wasn't completely broken until John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council.

**VF:** You were at the third session of the council, one of the very few representing the whole of the Protestant world.

**MM:** It was great being a Protestant at the council – I put on seventeen pounds! Every religious order wanted us to try out their chef.

**VF:** Do you happen to remember Archbishop Denis Hurley from South Africa? I think he was the youngest bishop at the Council.

**MM:** Yes. Decades later, the year before apartheid ended, I taught for six weeks at the University of Cape Town in South Africa and Archbishop Hurley was *huge* at that time. I did not meet Tutu at that time, but the leadership at the university was quite ecumenical.

**VF:** Back to the fifties then – this was a time when ecumenical and racial issues were at the fore . . .

**MM:** Well by 1954 with the U.S. Supreme Court decision *Brown vs. Board of Education* everything began to change significantly. There were not that many black Catholics in my circle, but whenever we would do a ride, like the March at Selma, we would always play a game on the bus – black, white, Catholic, Jew, agnostic – why are we all there? We would all go around and tell our stories and we would learn from each other and that was a deep bonding. I'll tell you one last thing – it may

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3. Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Methuen, 1982).

4. Walter J. Ong, *Frontiers in American Catholicism* (New York: Macmillan, 1957).

not be good for ethnography but I can say it – we were scared, we were crossing Edmund Pettus bridge and you could see a line of cops there who wouldn't let us through, so we had a prayer there. There is a picture taken of me on that scene – trembling – next to Fr. Joseph Fichter, SJ from the department of sociology at Loyola University New Orleans, a hearty and husky guy, and years later I said to him, "I was so glad you were there because I was so scared, physically scared." He said "You were scared? I *shat green* I was so scared!"

Now these are the years when Merton is getting noticed on the social action front as his influence was already affecting monastic vocations.

**VF:** Let me ask you, what was the common Protestant attitude in America about monasticism, and monastic orders such as the Trappists, at that time?

**MM:** I don't think the average non-Catholic knew the difference between a diocesan priest and a person in a religious order. We knew about the sisters. They saved my father's life when he was in the hospital. He had peritonitis before penicillin and they tended him for ten days and managed to pull him through. Still when I go back to that little town I look up the sisters. There was also a Benedictine monastery, Elkhorn. There was no hostility, just unawareness about these people. But after the council every religious order was supposed to have a non-Catholic on their study group. In December of 1968 I was in Dubuque at the Trappist monastery for one of the groups; it was a snowy night, as quiet as can be, and I was busy reviewing a fat book on pacifism for *The New York Times*. I turned on a Dubuque station and heard that Thomas Merton had died. I think it was the same day that the greatest Protestant theologian of the era, Karl Barth, had died.

**VF:** Had you read much by Merton just casually other than the book you reviewed?

**MM:** Well everybody read *The Seven Storey Mountain* – everybody read that. Thanks to Robert Lax and Giroux, I was reading other things coming out, not so much the poetry, but mostly his prose writings.

**VF:** And, of course, *Seeds of Destruction*, which you reviewed and in which Merton raised concerns about the position of the white liberal, and you had responded that we didn't really need a white James Baldwin in a sense. You seemed to perceive it as an attack on the white Protestant liberal social engagement . . .

**MM:** It wasn't an attack on just Protestant liberals – it was on liberals,

Catholic liberal, Protestant liberal, it didn't matter. I was a liberal but very much for the peaceful side of things. And not all liberals were for the peaceful side; the line was very thin. In 1967 when Israel was attacked, immediately there was pressure, for example, to sign a petition saying the U.S. should defend Israel *no matter what*, and some did – Abraham Joshua Heschel, for example, did, and noted Presbyterian theologian and activist Robert McAfee Brown puzzled over it, I can remember. Here was the issue: we had just begun to make the point for peace in Vietnam and some of the first people to call for military response on the Israel front were liberals. And Merton, though *Seeds of Destruction* didn't call for violence, was right up to the edge with what he was saying on the race front. My question and those of us at *The Christian Century* was about the paradox of his being a cloistered monk speaking out in such polemical terms on the issue – we wondered if he really had the vision for it. We were on the ground so to speak. Marching was the beginning of it, but peace people like Jim Forest, Dorothy Day, the Berrigans, pushed things right to the edge. We at *The Christian Century* began thinking, “Where do we go now?” and Merton [in *Seeds of Destruction*] envisions a virtual holocaust, smoke from the camps, and for these reasons and their implications I criticized him. But the reason I wrote that somewhat famous letter a few years later was just to say “the way things turned out, he wasn't very wrong.”

**VF:** Yes, you wrote, “I have been meaning to write for the past three years” and presumably those were very important years; all the chickens had come home to roost, and now you were almost saying that Merton was prescient.

**MM:** Yes, and we saw this more later, with respect to peace rallies than with race marches. It became clear later, due to the Freedom of Information Act, etc. . . . that the FBI and other government people were sometimes acting as *provocateurs*. We would be attending a peaceful rally and suddenly it would become boisterous, and we couldn't figure it out. Nobody coming to it was being boisterous and suddenly it erupted that way, and I think that's what we had not foreseen but Merton had foreseen.

**VF:** I'd like to explore this tension Merton talks about between “a police state” on the one hand which is easy to oppose, and this “un-Christian American Christianity” which sort of develops a theology of patriotism that denatures the gospel. He was very concerned about the latter because it's not so easy to see.

**MM:** Well, I think he was looking ahead. This all came to fruit in the

Vietnam protests, because then one after another – I think I have fifty books downstairs, I probably wrote several of them myself, on the end of American imperialism and criticizing this conflation of Christianity with American nationalism. What hadn't happened then yet was the rise of the Christian Right which seized all of these symbols. At first it was in the South, but it wasn't just the South; soon it went national.

**VF:** Where do you think we are now with race issues, now after the election of President Obama? Have we turned the corner?

**MM:** I think theologically we have turned the corner and among the elites it doesn't even arise as an issue. But you do have the rise of the Tea Party and that is racist to the core, no way around it, so it's not all behind us, and it still erupts and comes out in disguised forms.

**VF:** Merton and many others were concerned about the institutional level of embedded racism. Do you think on the institutional or cultural level we have turned the corner?

**MM:** We are in the thick of it. I gave a talk recently at DePaul University entitled “. . . Because I Am a Citizen.” I got the title from an interview I had heard with a doctor who provides free medical services in his retirement and when he was asked why he does that he said, “because I am a citizen.” So in the talk I looked at local, national and world citizenship. I contrasted this against Marx, not Karl but Groucho, who said “take care of me – I'm all I've got.” This is where your question comes in. This is what we are up against. We have got a lot of this idea running around here. If the Tea Party were even a party I could handle it, but it is really anarchist (they don't know that), they are just *anti*-government, anti-everything. They have this notion that nothing good can come of it. Now being a citizen doesn't mean surrendering the right to criticize. Rather that is part of it. But we need good government and good citizenship.

**VF:** It is ironic because you have the Tea Party and the many movements that will surely come after it and these often appeal to people who have an anti-institutional bent. Merton, ironically, attracts many spiritual seekers who are disaffected with institutional religion, those who feel distant from organized religion, those who feel more “spiritual” than “religious,” but he was a Catholic monk.

**MM:** Well yes, that is the attitude – anti-government, anti-institution, anti-organized religion; get rid of it all and get something new. But the one that's relevant here is religion, and I've always argued that Merton, the mediaeval mystics and others, they will be contemplative, they will

be in hermitages, but they are *not* making up a new religion. They are living off of the prayers of the community, they are doing what the ancient prophets did, and they stand inside the tradition. They are doing what Paul Tillich said was the Protestant principle; they take the tradition and *turn it over*. I don't think you could ever understand Merton without seeing the way in which "the body of Christ," if not "the institution," is necessary for achieving wisdom.

**VF:** I recently heard Huston Smith criticizing those who prefer a generic spirituality over traditional religion because he said, whenever there is a crisis, "I see the Methodists, the Catholics, the Lutherans there doing something good; you do not see an abstract spirituality in action." Do you think Huston was on to something?

**MM:** Yes, I am very much with him. I always say that I like spirituality with adjectives, medieval, monastic, feminist, black. I don't care but if it has an adjective then you have a resource, a repository, a norm for judging. Many graduate students today doing work in spirituality are going back to Julian of Norwich, Mechtild of Magdeburg, each serving as *ressourcement*, because they see the problems with an ungrounded "spirituality."

**VF:** Many who appreciate Merton worry that his voice is now limited to being heard in a few courses offered at Catholic colleges, that his influence is waning. Where does Merton fit in the imagination of young people today?

**MM:** The first thing with any great person, and I can say we are talking about a great person, is the generation after him has to kick over the traces, like with Albert Schweitzer, Karl Rahner and Hans Urs Von Balthasar. Then you start selective retrieval. You take those things that were half-finished and you have that younger generation work out the implications.

**VF:** Some within the Church, even in high levels, think Merton is *passé*; that he is problematic, and we should ignore him. What is your impression?

**MM:** Come back in twenty years and see who is remembered! Of course this is the yin/yang, there will always be conflicting interpretations, but a *dismissal* of him would be absurd.