

Disarming Discourse: Thomas Merton's *Breakthrough to Peace*, October 1961–September 1962

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A curious publication associated with the Trappist monk Thomas Merton (1915-68) is a paperback entitled *Breakthrough to Peace: Twelve Views on the Threat of Thermonuclear Extermination*, published by New Directions in September 1962.¹ No editor is credited, but it has an introduction by Thomas Merton. This paperback is an anthology of mostly previously published essays by notable peace writers at that time. The full list of contributors is as follows: Lewis Mumford, Tom Stonier, Norman Cousins, Erich Fromm & Michael Maccoby, Thomas Merton, Gordon Zahn, Howard Gruber, Walter Stein, Herbert Butterfield, Allan Forbes, Jr., Joost Meerloo and Jerome Frank.² A spate of paperback books had begun to be published in the United States in 1962 with a characteristic approach to promoting peace by means of nuclear disarmament.³ The question of disarmament was a controversial topic during a dangerous year of a nuclear show of strength between the USA and the USSR, from the Berlin crisis in October 1961 to the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962. The chief characteristic of the new genre of peace publication was that it failed to value the strategic ambiguity of nuclear deterrence and so manifested a general suspicion of the professional diplomat and the disarmament expert.

1. *Breakthrough to Peace: Twelve Views on the Threat of Thermonuclear Extermination*, intro. Thomas Merton (New York: New Directions, 1962); subsequent references will be cited as “BP” parenthetically in the text.

2. The Forbes essay was evidently not published previously, while the Zahn essay was a revised version of material that originally appeared in his book *German Catholics and Hitler's Wars* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1962). Merton's Introduction is original to the volume, and his own contribution to the body of the book, “Peace: A Religious Responsibility” (88-116), is a fourth version of material previously published in periodicals: for information on its successive iterations see Thomas Merton, *Passion for Peace: The Social Essays*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Crossroad, 1995) 37-38, 99; subsequent references will be cited as “PP” parenthetically in the text.

3. See Amitai Etzioni, *The Hard Way to Peace: A New Strategy* (New York: Collier, 1962); Erich Fromm, *May Man Prevail? An Inquiry into the Facts and Fictions of Foreign Policy* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor, 1961); Seymour Melman, *The Peace Race Instead of War Surrender: A Program to Put America's Unemployed Men and Factories to Work to Industrialize Emerging Nations* (New York: Ballantine, 1962); James Roosevelt, ed., *The Liberal Papers* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor, 1962).

This article is limited to Merton's views on nuclear deterrence within the publication of *Breakthrough to Peace*. It argues that Merton did not value the strategic ambiguity of nuclear deterrence as a means of maintaining the international peace. I will examine his opinion from four different perspectives: first, the Roman Catholic position on nuclear deterrence; second, the forming of the *Breakthrough to Peace* project; third, *Breakthrough to Peace* and Trappist censorship; fourth, the critics' response to *Breakthrough to Peace*. Merton's engagement with the concerns of US foreign policy from a theological perspective took place amid the escalating risk of a nuclear arms race during the late atmospheric nuclear testing phase of the Cold War. Merton, as an American Catholic author, privileged a moral logic over a political and military logic and this is precisely what caused him to reject the value of the strategic ambiguity of nuclear deterrence as preserving national security and maintaining the international peace. The immediate context of American nuclear fear in 1962 is best understood within the context of the Soviets exploding the largest thermonuclear bomb of the Cold War in its Arctic proving grounds in October 1961 and, in response to the Soviets, the US resuming atmospheric testing in April 1962. It was precisely because of his perception of escalating tensions and the risk of war that Merton believed the Roman Catholic Church had a moral duty within international relations to act as a moderating voice, almost as the spiritual equivalent of the United Nations, by speaking out against an escalating arms race. This essay focuses on Merton's motivation and audience reception. I will explain why this project mattered to Merton, and how the publication was received by its critics during the dangerous year of 1962. This in turn points to connections between Merton's literary influences and his outputs that were substantially different from the American Catholic mainstream that tended to "rally round the flag" at moments of national crisis.

Thomas Merton's sense of himself as actively working through writing to become a peacemaker was central both to his sense of religious vocation and to his identity as an author. Merton focused on becoming a pastoral support to Catholic pacifists within the parameters of his religious vocation. Merton, however, trusted his collaborators at face value. Jim Forest, an activist with the Catholic Worker, New Directions publisher James Laughlin in New York, and Wilbur (Ping) Ferry, at the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions in Santa Barbara, California, all benefited from their association with Merton, who was by then a well-known American Catholic author. Each collaborator related to Merton a political atmosphere of crisis that reinforced Merton's own sense of the rightness of his opinions on the necessity for the abolition of nuclear

weapons. Merton envisaged the *Breakthrough to Peace* anthology as critical of the dominance of nuclear realist discourse and as reassessing the validity of an American rhetoric of nuclear preparedness from scientific, psychological, sociological and ethical perspectives.

The selection of contributors was honed through three-way correspondence between Merton, Laughlin and Ferry. Of particular interest is Ferry's association with the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions. This educational institution grew out of the Ford Foundation's Fund for the Republic (1951-59) that was dedicated to protecting freedom of speech and civil liberties threatened during the McCarthy era.⁴ Merton's casual association⁵ with this social policy "think tank" highlighted how he imagined he could place his writings at the disposal of others as a means to legitimate the moral high ground of unilateral nuclear disarmament.

The Roman Catholic Position on Nuclear Deterrence

The Roman Catholic Church did not support unilateral disarmament during the bipolar Cold War (1945-91). Roman Catholicism maintained a qualified acceptance of nuclear deterrence throughout the Cold War era to justify the holding of a precarious peace while, at the same time, holding to the aspiration of multilateral disarmament in a nuclear world.⁶ Merton, by contrast, held an absolutist opposition to the deployment of nuclear weapons, even by means of a deterrence posture, as he wrote:

Leo Szilard limits all use of force to a *clearly defensive action*, and he *completely outlaws all indiscriminate massive destruction of civilian populations* as Pius XII did in the most unmistakable terms. Finally, Szilard's ultimate goal is disarmament and the abolition of war by international agreement, which Pius XII declared was a most serious obligation, binding on all, that would brook no further delay.⁷

The nuclear physicist Leo Szilard was promoting a "Council for Abolishing War" to lobby for disarmament in 1962. Merton, in this extract from *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*, conflated his own aspirations for the abolition of war with Szilard's attempts to control the outbreak of a

4. See Greg Barnhisel, "James Laughlin, Robert Hutchins, and Cold War Cultural Freedom," *The Princeton University Library Chronicle* 75.3 (Spring 2014) 389.

5. For Merton's time at the Center shortly before leaving on his Asian journey in 1968, see Thomas Merton, *Preview of the Asian Journey*, ed. Walter H. Capps (New York: Crossroad, 1989).

6. See David Hollenbach, "Nuclear Weapons and Nuclear War: The Shape of the Catholic Debate," *Theological Studies* 43.4 (1982) 577-605.

7. Thomas Merton, *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*, ed. Patricia A. Burton (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004) 120.

nuclear war, which necessitated a qualified acceptance of the strategic ambiguity of nuclear deterrence.⁸

Merton's stance aligned with an emerging Catholic nuclear pacifism whose adherents were members of the laity, although Catholic scholars were responsible for the formulation of the theoretical foundations of this new brand of moral pacifism. Historian Patricia McNeal mentions the influence of Walter Stein, associated with the Catholic New Left in England, on Merton's pacifism in the *Breakthrough to Peace* anthology.⁹ Merton believed that nuclear abolition was the only legitimate ethical position for faith-based pacifists to hold in the nuclear era, and so his *Breakthrough to Peace* had resonances with Walter Stein's *Nuclear Weapons and Christian Conscience* that had emerged from a symposium at the Dominican retreat centre at Spode House near Rugeley in Staffordshire.¹⁰ Five contributors to Stein's anthology were university lecturers: Walter Stein taught Philosophy and English Literature at the University of Leeds; Elizabeth Anscombe taught Philosophy at Somerville College, Oxford; Robert Markus taught Medieval History at Liverpool; Peter T. Geach taught Logic at Birmingham University; Roger Smith taught at Liverpool College of Art. The foreword was written by Archbishop Thomas Roberts, who noted freedom of conscience as being an appropriate Catholic response to nuclear weapons and he noted that the contributors "are far from regarding the absence of explicit official prohibitions, in this field of contemporary defence, as grounds for suspending the operations of conscience."¹¹ Members of the Stein symposium group were intellectual "Young Turks" who demonstrated a mixture of neo-Thomist Catholic moral philosophy with Wittgensteinian analysis (see Wicker 316). In this sense, they were engaged in doing a form of applied ethics on the limits of nuclear deterrence. The opinion of the Stein symposium group was a

8. See Phillip M. Thompson, *Returning to Reality: Thomas Merton's Wisdom for a Technological World* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012) 31; see also Merton's June 13, 1962 letter to Fr. J. Whitney Evans in Thomas Merton, *Witness to Freedom: Letters in Times of Crisis*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1994) 55 (subsequent references will be cited as "WF" parenthetically in the text) and Thomas Merton, *Cold War Letters*, ed. Christine M. Bochen and William H. Shannon (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006) 150-51 [#84] (subsequent references will be cited as "CWL" parenthetically in the text).

9. See Patricia McNeal, *Harder than War: Catholic Peacemaking in Twentieth-Century America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992) 113-14.

10. See Brian Wicker, "Making Peace at Spode," *New Blackfriars* 62.733/734 (1981) 314; subsequent references will be cited as "Wicker" parenthetically in the text.

11. Thomas Roberts, "Foreword," in Walter Stein, ed., *Nuclear Weapons and Christian Conscience* (London: Merlin Press, 1961) 13.

radical position that was not accepted by the British Catholic hierarchy.

Merton embraced the applied ethics of the Stein symposium group in England as being capable of integrating faith and reason within his sense of Catholic tradition. However, the moral judgment on the intention behind the possession of nuclear weapons was inseparable from an evaluation of the outcomes of policy choices. The issue was whether nuclear deterrence could make the world more secure from nuclear disaster or less so.

Merton was a unilateralist who did favor the abolition of nuclear weapons and he made this known within the circle of his closest correspondents, James Laughlin and Wilbur Ferry. Both were associated with Merton on the work of the *Breakthrough to Peace* project that was a protracted work that began in October 1961 and was published by Laughlin in September 1962. Merton shared through private correspondence with Etta Gullick at Oxford University his belief in Walter Stein as offering a credible moral corrective for seeking a general moral judgment against the possession and use of nuclear weapons as based on the incompatibility of these weapons with the provision of justice in war.¹²

The moral issue that Stein in England had grappled with was whether a credible deterrent could be maintained without an effective intention to resort to nuclear weapons should deterrence fail. Undoubtedly, to render deterrence credible it needed to appear that the determination to use nuclear weapons was beyond question. Merton, in his proposal for *Breakthrough to Peace* was planning to use Stein's moral logic as the basis to communicate the wrongness of intention so as to argue for the necessity for moral restraint on both possession and use of nuclear weapons that might precipitate an accidental nuclear war. Merton, however, did not involve himself with the debates of the English Catholic intellectuals, but he did share their frustration that the Roman Catholic Church was not facing up to the moral ambiguity of deterrence as risking war in order to maintain the international peace.

Forming the *Breakthrough to Peace* Project

Wilbur Ferry was a significant influence on the agenda for Merton's *Breakthrough to Peace*. Ferry's involvement came at James Laughlin's suggestion, not Merton's, as Laughlin wrote to Merton on November 3, 1961:

I'm most enthusiastic about your idea of a little paperback anthol-

12. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 48-50 [12/22/1961] (subsequent references will be cited as "HGL" parenthetically in the text); *CWL* 36-38 (#14).

ogy of pieces on peace. Do let's by all means try to get it up, and as quickly as possible, and I would like to urge you to bring Ferry into the picture, as I think he would be invaluable in adding some range, through his contacts. He must certainly be in touch with a considerable number of brilliant people who are thinking along these lines whom neither you nor I know about it.¹³

Merton shared his enthusiasm for Walter Stein's *Nuclear Weapons and Christian Conscience* in a letter to Laughlin, dated November 25, 1961: "It is really very good. With this and the material we already thought of, supposing we get it and Ferry approves of it, I think we almost have enough for a book" (*SL* 187). Broadly speaking, Merton's anthology was a commitment to the abolition of all war, not just nuclear war. Ferry sent Merton essays by Lewis Mumford, a philosopher of technology¹⁴ (see *HGL* 203). Merton had wanted to title his anthology "The Morals of Extermination," but because of the bleakness of the wording he changed the working title to "The Human Way Out," inspired by Mumford's critique of the nuclear arms race that had been presented by Mumford in a lecture of the same title presented on September 28, 1961 to the University of California while Mumford was a visiting research professor of government affairs at Berkeley.¹⁵ Mumford was highly critical of America's technoculture that he perceived of as placing efficiency before morality.¹⁶ Merton echoed Mumford's sentiments in his letter to Walter Stein at the University of Leeds in which he praised Mumford's critique of technology as one "where our weapons are telling us what to do. We are guided and instructed [and] nurtured by our destructive machines."¹⁷ Merton approved of Mumford's criticism in his letter to Walter Stein. Furthermore, Merton reprinted an abridged version of a previously published essay by Stein entitled "The Defense of the West" in *Breakthrough*

13. Thomas Merton and James Laughlin, *Selected Letters*, ed. David D. Cooper (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997) 185; subsequent references will be cited as "*SL*" parenthetically in the text.

14. See Merton's November 18, 1961 letter to Ferry (*HGL* 203).

15. Lewis Mumford, "Authoritarian and Democratic Technics," *Technology and Culture* 5 (Winter 1964) 1-8; see Robert Casillo, "Lewis Mumford and the Organicist Concept in Social Thought," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 53.1 (January-March 1992) 91-116; see also Robert Jacobs, *The Dragon's Tail: Americans Face the Atomic Age* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010) 44, 51-52; subsequent references will be cited as "Jacobs" parenthetically in the text.

16. Lewis Mumford, "The Human Way Out: An Address given by Mr. Lewis Mumford at the University of California, Berkeley, 28 September 1961, Dwinelle Plaza" (London: Friends Peace Committee, 1961).

17. *CWL* 44-46 [#18] (passage omitted in *WF* 27-29).

to *Peace*, which highlighted Merton's support for the abolition of nuclear weapons (*BP* 139-58).

Correspondence between Merton, Ferry and Laughlin focused on Merton editing the project, while Laughlin would be responsible for underwriting the costs of publishing the anthology. Merton wrote to Ferry on November 18, 1961, revealing "our [Merton's and Laughlin's] idea of a paperback of articles on peace" (*HGL* 203). Ferry was happy to give advice and insisted that the anthology should offer an alternative to the language of nuclear realism, which, in essence, meant an acceptance of the strategic ambiguity of nuclear deterrence as a means of maintaining the international peace. In Ferry's view, this position eliminated contributions by Protestant realists such as Reinhold Niebuhr. Merton admired Niebuhr as "an American voice, with a clarity, a sobriety, an objectivity, a lack of despair that *should* be ours."¹⁸ Ferry, in a letter to Laughlin on November 14, 1961, wrote: "[Reinhold] Niebuhr is a Realist. Your [Laughlin's] paperback will be a utopian one; i.e., the only kind of realism that is possible today."¹⁹ Niebuhr rejected the fatalistic view of the destructiveness of atomic weapons. Such "a purely tragic view of life," he wrote, "is not finally viable. It is, at any rate, not the Christian view."²⁰ This was the Niebuhr that Ferry was familiar with and was the reason why he was critical of Niebuhr's Christian realism. The Berlin crisis in 1961 witnessed a standoff between American and Soviet tanks at Checkpoint Charlie for 16 hours from October 27 to 28, 1961 that threatened to spark a third world war. This event initiated Niebuhr's questioning of the moral dilemma of thermonuclear weapons.²¹ Niebuhr's nuclear fears had provoked him to consider that a war could occur without anyone seeking to fulfill a messianic dream, and he thought, therefore, as well about how nuclear war could be avoided in the secular realm of international politics (see Craig 90). Ferry had an influence as to how Merton became informed on nuclear issues in 1962 and Ferry's influence tilted towards unilateral nuclear disarmament rather than a nuclear realism favored by mainstream Roman Catholic and Protestant churches.

18. Thomas Merton, *Turning Toward the World: The Pivotal Years. Journals, vol. 4: 1960-1963*, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 91 [1/28/1961]; subsequent references will be cited as "*TTW*" parenthetically in the text.

19. Unpublished November 14, 1961 letter of Wilbur Ferry to James Laughlin (archives of the Thomas Merton Center [TMC], Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY).

20. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (1952; rept., Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008) 157.

21. Campbell Craig, *Glimmer of a New Leviathan: Total War in the Realism of Niebuhr, Morgenthau, and Waltz* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003) 89; subsequent references will be cited as "Craig" parenthetically in the text.

Merton's personal target through writing was his dissatisfaction with Roman Catholicism as not facing up to the risks posed by an escalating nuclear arms race. It was for idealism that Merton set himself at odds against Catholic just-war theorists. Merton's reading of Stein had contributed to persuading him that the wrongness of intention was the moral benchmark against nuclear deterrence. Merton set the agenda for the publishing project as "ammunition for the waging of peace" intended to preserve the "moral values of Christianity, the freedoms of democracy – and the world for man."²² In this view, humanity was in "crisis" because of the existential threat of nuclear weapons and this he believed was being fueled by bellicose religious commentators.

The nuclear test-ban movement harnessed Hiroshima memory in 1962 as a rhetorical means to gain popular support against biological and environmental effects of nuclear fallout due to the resumption of atmospheric testing by the nuclear superpowers.²³ In the disarmament narrative the memory of the *hibakusha* or the victims of the Hiroshima atomic bombing was joined to the memory of the Japanese fisherman, Aikichi Kuboyama of the *Lucky Dragon* fishing vessel, who was reputedly the first recorded victim of fallout from hydrogen bomb atmospheric tests in 1954 in the Pacific proving grounds.²⁴ Merton was aware of the potency of Kuboyama's memory as an anti-nuclear symbol because he wrote to James Laughlin to acquire rights to reproduce Ben Shahn's paintings "The Saga of the Lucky Dragon," painted from 1960 to 1961, expressing Shahn's anti-nuclear visual statement. On December 15, 1961 Merton wrote: "It would be wonderful to get some of Ben Shahn's 'Lucky Dragon' pictures and run them in the middle of [*Breakthrough to Peace*] somewhere, perhaps with a note by him. They are on exhibit at some gallery in New York and it ought to be easy to get reproductions and permission to use them" (*SL* 190). Shahn's portrait of forty-year-old Kuboyama included a bright red dragon whose head is surrounded by a fire wreath, a symbol signifying the destructive power of nuclear weaponry.²⁵ The dragon foreshadowed the unmerited demise of Kuboyama as the reputed seminal victim of radioactive fallout. Merton's initial decision to use Shahn's painting series for the *Breakthrough to Peace* anthology

22. *BP* back cover.

23. See Ran Zwigenberg, *Hiroshima: The Origins of Global Memory Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014) and Jacobs 129 n. 27.

24. See Frances Pohl, *Ben Shahn* (New York: Chameleon, 1993) 27.

25. See Susanna Brooks Gorski, "The Artist, the Atom, and the Bikini Atoll: Ralston Crawford Paints Operation Crossroads" (unpublished MA thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 2010).

was motivated by the anthology's editorial tilt towards advocating for nuclear disarmament as predicated on his unwillingness to value the strategic ambiguity of nuclear deterrence as a means of maintaining the international peace.

Trappist Censorship

The politics of the cloister circulated around Merton steering his essay drafts through the labyrinthine process of Trappist censorship to publication that enacted a process of disciplinary dialectics between Merton and the censors because the monastic censors were the institutional gatekeepers of disciplinary knowledge and communication.

Trappist censorship, as a mode of juridical power, was intended to regulate the interrelated processes of publication and reading for safeguarding Catholic faith and morals.²⁶

Merton's abbot, Dom James Fox, was an institutional steward, rather than an institutional gatekeeper, and he was concerned about Merton and valued his pacifist writings. However, Dom James had to balance the interests of the Trappist community with Merton's diverse interests. Merton, as an advocate of nonviolence in the tradition of early Christianity, was proposing that the Roman Catholic Church should advocate for the preservation of rights by nonviolent means and without the tacit acceptance of the need for peace to be defended through recourse to nuclear weapons. Dom James tried to accommodate the passage of Merton's writings through the censorship process. In December 1961, Dom James wrote to the Master Censor, Fr. Paul Bourne at Holy Ghost Abbey in Conyers, Georgia, daughter-house of the Abbey of Gethsemani. Dom James informed Bourne that the Trappist censor had rejected Merton's draft of an article for *Commonweal* magazine on the grounds that Merton's cloistered remove did not qualify him to offer an opinion on nuclear weapons, and anyway, what could a monk offer to inform a debate on nuclear war.²⁷ This rejection ended Merton's efforts to submit "Nuclear War and Christian Responsibility" to the editors of *Commonweal* for their Christmas 1961 issue as he had planned for in October 1961. Merton had an ability to persuade others of the credibility of his viewpoint within the institution. Merton introduced Dom James to Jerome D. Frank, Professor of Psychiatry at Johns Hopkins University while Frank was visiting Merton at the abbey in his capacity as a contributor to Merton's *Break-*

26. Regulations for Censors issued by the Generalate House, Rome (January 5, 1952) (TMC archives).

27. Unpublished December 16, 1961 letter from James Fox, OCSO to Paul Bourne, OCSO (TMC archives).

through to Peace.²⁸ Merton, as novice master, believed in the pedagogical benefits of monks learning to become attuned to social and political events beyond the cloister walls as part of the ongoing conversion of life that was the primary focus of the vocational life of a monk. It was for this reason that Merton invited Frank to speak to the monastic community on nuclear war. In his letter to Bourne, Dom James gave his impression of Frank's presentation: Frank "spoke of the A.B.C. [Atomic, Biological and Chemical] warfare. If we are going to pray for peace intensely, we should realize what tremendous dangers threaten peace – and not only the peace of the world, but the very survival of the human race – not only this generation, but future generations – even for hundreds of years."

This fitted Merton's commitment to the dignity of human life that manifested itself as an absolutist position against all war, not just nuclear war, as he imagined "biological" and "chemical" warfare as being an intermediate form of warfare between conventional and "atomic" warfare. Frank contributed to influencing the abbot's approach to the veracity of Merton's opinions, but it was Merton who had engineered the event. Dom James reminded Dom Gabriel Sortais, the Cistercian Abbot General, that Merton carried significant influence across the spectrum of Catholic opinion and, as a consequence, Dom James advised Dom Gabriel that Merton should be given latitude to publish as his conscience demanded and as monastic censorship rules permitted.²⁹ Dom James worked behind the scenes to persuade the Abbot General that some censors were going beyond the rules of censorship because the rules that circumscribed permissions to publish only applied to doctrinal or moral errors and Merton was merely expressing his opinion, which was not a legitimate reason for withholding permission for him to publish.³⁰ This differed from the views of Trappist censors who based their concerns on the lack of rigor of Merton's argument, meaning that his opinion could be misconstrued by readers as being a legitimate Catholic position supporting unilateral disarmament, which was not the position of the Catholic Church, which did tolerate the strategic ambiguity of nuclear deterrence for maintaining the international peace.

Dom James tactfully negotiated with the censors how Merton's wishes

28. See Jerome Frank, "Breaking the Thought Barrier: Psychological Challenges of the Nuclear Age (*BP* 206-49).

29. Unpublished January 9, 1962 letter from James Fox, OCSO to Gabriel Sortais, OCSO (TMC archives).

30. Unpublished February 14, 1962 letter from James Fox, OCSO to Gabriel Sortais, OCSO (TMC archives); unpublished February 18, 1962 letter from Paul Bourne, OCSO to James Fox, OCSO (TMC archives).

could be accommodated in order to facilitate his publication. It was Dom James who played a significant part behind the scenes in steering Merton's writings through censorship, though this was largely unknown to Merton who maintained a suspicion of his superior. Dom James wrote to Fr. Paul Bourne on Merton's behalf because Merton needed Bourne's approval before he received permission to publish on behalf of the Trappist Order and the Roman Catholic Church. Dom James defended Merton to Bourne as being a spokesman for a particular "school of Catholic thought"³¹ manifested by Christian pacifism. Dom James persuaded Bourne to nominate Fr. Charles English, who had formerly been a managing editor of *The Catholic Worker* newspaper,³² to act as Merton's censor in order to facilitate a smoother passage of Merton's essays to publication. Merton affirmed Catholic Worker pacifism, which ultimately had Christian anarchist roots manifested as suspicion of state authority, but the character of Merton's pacifism that called for the abolition of war, not just nuclear war, was not familiar to Trappist censors, who were suspicious of Merton's line of argument because neither the hierarchy nor the theologians had advocated this position as a legitimate position for Catholics to espouse.³³

Merton played a double game of submitting his articles to be officially censored for publication while, at the same time, privately circulating his letters in *samizdat* fashion within his correspondence circle. Merton redrafted similar content under different working titles without comprehensive revision because he was motivated to do anything to support Catholic Action for nuclear pacifism. Dom James intervened on Merton's behalf with the Trappist censors concerning the flurry of Merton's articles. Dom James wrote to the master censor, Fr. Paul Bourne: "Now another point from our end of the 'battlefield' is another article by Father Louis [Merton]. It is not, indeed, a spate article, but sort of a Preface to an Anthology of essays in regard to the present world situation, where the threat of nuclear destruction of the human race hangs over all our heads."³⁴ Although the "anthology" mentioned was *Breakthrough to Peace*, Merton's "preface" which became the anthology's introduction needed to be approved for publication by the Trappist censors. Dom James related to Fr. Paul Bourne the psychological "battlefield" they occupied

31. Unpublished December 16, 1961 letter from James Fox, OCSO to Paul Bourne, OCSO (TMC archives).

32. See Dorothy Day, "On Pilgrimage: The Story of Jack English's First Mass," *The Catholic Worker* (March 1, 1959) 1, 7-8.

33. See Bellarmine McQuiston, OCSO and Paul Bourne, OCSO, censor's reports on "Peace: Christian Duties and Perspectives," January 9, 1962 (TMC archives).

34. Unpublished January 23, 1962 letter from James Fox, OCSO to Paul Bourne, OCSO (TMC archives).

continued to loop around Merton's so-called "little articles" against war and the ensuing volleys of letters between Merton, the censors and his religious superiors.

Correspondence between Dom James in Kentucky and Bourne in Georgia indicate that reasons for the delay in censorship was a backlog in the processing of articles from other Trappist houses undertaken by a small censorship team.³⁵ Therefore, delays in monastic censorship were not as nefarious as Merton imagined.

Critics Respond to *Breakthrough to Peace*

Merton consolidated his writings that were still possible to publish under the constraints that religious censorship imposed on his writings for publication. What was still possible for Merton was to pass over editorial control of the *Breakthrough to Peace* anthology to James Laughlin. Merton had persuaded Laughlin to remove his name as the book's editor because of Trappist censorship. Laughlin wrote to Merton stating his view: "I'm sorry that we can't say 'edited by Thomas Merton' on the cover of 'Breakthrough to Peace', but if we can say 'Introduction by Thomas Merton' that will at least be a big help in the marketplace."³⁶ Ironically, this made little or no difference to the critics, who associated the work with Merton himself. Professional scholars of diplomacy and foreign policy negatively evaluated *Breakthrough to Peace* as having nothing practical to offer either policy makers or the public and this evaluation was based on the anthology's unwillingness to accept the value of the strategic ambiguity of nuclear deterrence for maintaining the international peace. Nathan Keyfitz, at the University of Toronto, did see a merit in *Breakthrough to Peace* in questioning "the mentality of our age, its willingness to contemplate and plan total destruction" with its emphasis on human values "concerning the sacredness of the person the human race" in a world whose "realities are deterrence and counterforce."³⁷ Keyfitz, however, noted that the book "hardly contains the answers to the questions it raises" (Keyfitz 234). Hedley Bull, a professor of International Relations in London, evaluated the book as a "protest towards the official Western policy of reliance on nuclear weapons" and declared that the

35. Unpublished January 22, 1962 letter from James Fox, OCSO to Paul Bourne OCSO (TMC archives).

36. Unpublished May 4, 1962 letter from James Laughlin to Thomas Merton (TMC archives; not included in *SL*).

37. Nathan Keyfitz, "Review of Breakthrough to Peace," *International Journal* 18.2 (Spring 1963) 233; subsequent references will be cited as "Keyfitz" parenthetically in the text.

contributors made “superficial and arrogant assumptions” that anyone who was “unaware of the moral dimensions of the problem” was “a servant of some special interest.”³⁸ The issue for critics was that Merton and his collaborators had refused to acknowledge the threat of Soviet aggression that had required a deterrence posture.

Merton wrote in “Peace: A Religious Responsibility”:

the purpose of the present article is to stand back from the imminent risks of the Cold War crisis, seeking to judge the problem of nuclear war not in relation to what seem to be our own interests or even our own survival, but simply in the light of moral truth. A Christian ought to consider whether nuclear war is not in itself a moral evil so great that it cannot be justified even for the best of ends, even to defend the highest and most sacrosanct of values. (*BP* 89)

This would imply that Merton did acknowledge the risk, but he rejected making it his primary criterion for his argument which was dominated by a moral consideration rather than acknowledging the value of the strategic ambiguity of nuclear deterrence.

Merton had committed to New Directions marketing *Breakthrough to Peace* as peace literature that was unwilling to value the strategic ambiguity of nuclear deterrence for maintaining the international peace. Henry Pachter in 1962 evaluated writers on the “diplomacy of peace” such as Erich Fromm, C. Wright Mills and Charles Osgood as “amateur diplomats” who projected to the public their fears for the future of humanity as expressions of their “shame” at US “wrong-doing abroad.”³⁹ Merton conceived of Christianity as the matrix of modernity in such a way as reducing the Cold War to being a moral problem. In his essay “Christian Ethics and Nuclear War,” Merton wrote: “Christian leaders have actively joined in the Cold War and call on God Himself to justify the moral blindness and hubris of generals and industrialists, and to bless nuclear war as a holy and apocalyptic crusade” (*PP* 57-58). Merton, here, viewed American Catholicism as contributing to a bellicose rhetoric. However, such rhetoric comprised a part of the strategic ambiguity of nuclear deterrence. Critics saw a weakness in Merton’s unwillingness to face the Soviet threat to the international peace. Henry Pachter evaluated Merton as a “sectarian prophet who tolerates no argument” (Pachter 106). Should Merton and

38. Hedley Bull, “Review of *Breakthrough to Peace*,” *International Affairs* 39.3 (July 1963) 427-28.

39. Henry Pachter, “Amateur Diplomats and the Peace Literature,” *Social Research* 30.1 (Spring 1963) 98; subsequent references will be cited as “Pachter” parenthetically in the text.

his colleagues persuade half of a nation as to the folly of deterrence, Pachter argued, that these “amateur diplomats” would conjure up an even greater danger as the other half might precipitate a war to forestall its dispossession from power (Pachter 95-107). Pachter dismissed Merton and the contributors to *Breakthrough to Peace* as “prophets of doom” who as American “unilateralists” ignored the implications for the balance of power and risked bringing about the very “holocaust” they hoped to avoid. He concluded that Merton merely exhibited “ignorance of the real problem” rooted in a struggle between the superpowers. Merton was, in Pachter’s analysis, a “prophet of doom” who had chosen “to retire into the desert and be saved while the rest of us perish” (Pachter 107). Such critics dismissed Merton because of his unwillingness to value the strategic ambiguity of nuclear deterrence for maintaining the international peace.

By contrast, an enthusiastic review of Merton’s work by Justus George Lawler was published in the first issue of *Continuum* magazine in 1963. Lawler was a correspondent of Merton and was sympathetic to his position. The review praised the book as “encouraging” by speaking with the “voice of sanity, and inasmuch as many of its contributors, who have either in the past or present been vilified as unpatriotic, naïve, or cowardly, continue to plead, in effect, for the lives of their persecutors.”⁴⁰ Lawler very much praised *Breakthrough to Peace* for its holistic thinking, but Keyfitz and Bull were critical of Merton moralizing and oversimplifying the problem of nuclear weapons. In the opinion of professional commentators on foreign policy it was maintenance of the *status quo* and, where necessary, strengthening it that would give the West the best overall chance of continued peace and stability.

Merton was pleased with the reception the book received (see *PP* 92). The *Los Angeles Times* reprinted Merton’s introduction to *Breakthrough to Peace* in its entirety, indicating that there were those who felt the material had value for the general public even if academics and policy specialists doubted that Merton had anything new to offer through his anthology because he failed to acknowledge the strategic ambiguity of nuclear deterrence.

The general American public, however, was more concerned about security than the morality of the question of nuclear deterrence. Deterrence may not have been fully understood by the public, but it was generally accepted as a means of guaranteeing national security and keeping the international peace. Merton, by contrast, questioned the rationale for deterrence, but without acknowledging the role played by the Soviet Union

40. Justus George Lawler, “Balancing the Terror,” *Continuum* 1 (Spring 1963) 104-105.

as sabre-rattling by means of testing weapons in the atmosphere in 1961, thus breaking the 1958 moratorium preventing future atmospheric testing.

Conclusion

Merton aligned himself with a new style of Vatican politics from 1961 to 1962 espoused by Pope John XXIII, who chose to soften rhetorical condemnation of communism to reduce the tension of the Cold War. This softening of language was unrepresentative of mainstream Catholic America. Merton did appeal to sectional interests within Catholic America as seen from his association with the *Catholic Worker* and liberal “*Commonweal Catholics*.” This highlights that Catholic America was not monolithic. The issue was how American Catholics could demonstrate their loyalty to the nation as well as their faithfulness as Catholics. Merton’s witness was useful to progressive sections of Catholic America that still claimed to be anti-communist while also seeking alternatives to nuclear proliferation.

Merton’s critique of nuclear deterrence articulated his condemnation of massive retaliation rather than revealing any awareness of minimum deterrence as a flexible response to the Communist threat. Merton was not tempted to believe that American virtue was sufficiently developed that the nation could be trusted never to misuse nuclear weapons. After all, it had been the United States of America that had dropped the first atomic bombs over Japan in 1945. While this action had ended the Second World War, it had ushered in the Cold War. Merton held the view that the Roman Catholic Church, as a faith-based institution and community, had a responsibility to protect life and future generations and so had a moral duty to act as a moral persuader in calling for world leaders to eliminate the threat of nuclear weapons from international politics. Catholic activists gave Merton’s nuclear pacifist writings an afterlife. Merton himself was aware of this potential as he contributed to his own construction as a pastor for peace through the circulation of his nuclear pacifist writings during the dangerous year of 1962.