

# REALIZED ESCHATOLOGY IN MERTON'S A VOW OF CONVERSATION

By **Bill Koch**

Thomas McLaughlin, O.S.B., in his review of *A Vow of Conversation* (*Merton Seasonal* 13, Autumn 1988), touched upon a theme that I have been tracing through Merton's published writings for the past three years. That theme is Merton's "realized eschatology." I have come to the conclusion that in the final years of his life, all of Merton's intellectual endeavors (literary criticism, Oriental studies, ecumenical concerns, social issues) were anchored by a growingly intense eschatological orientation, and that his contemplative discipline had become radically informed by positive eschatological realities.

One of the clichés about Merton has been that he always valued contemplation above any other spiritual discipline for the Christian, and that to the end of his life everything he wrote was in one way or another reducible to the contemplative dimension of the Christian life. Why else would he retire into a hermitage but to enjoy the consolations of mystical graces? Merton himself flatly rejected this goal, writing in his journal in 1966: "I came to solitude not to attain to the heights of contemplation but to rediscover painfully for myself and for my brothers the true eschatological dimension of our calling" (M. Basil Pennington, *Thomas Merton, Brother Monk*, p. 128).

One of the crucial sections of *A Vow of Conversation* deals with how Merton saw the relationship of contemplation and eschatology. What is startling is that he consciously chose eschatology over contemplation. This is how he put it: "If it were a matter of choosing between contemplation and eschatology, there is no question that I am and would always be committed to the latter." Merton stated that his faith was an eschatological faith — a belief that here and now one participates in the "established kingdom." Contemplation and eschatology completed each other, even intensified each other. Contemplation had disciplined Merton for the eschatological vision and the eschatological vision was the broad metaphysical and existential ground in which his contemplation found roots.

Merton's vision of what was already realized in Christ was a two-tier eschatological perspective. One dimension was interior and personal: in the union of contemplation and eschatology, effected by the Holy Spirit, we are "awakened to know the Father because in Him

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[the Spirit] we are refreshed in the likeness of the Son. Our contemplation can be the experience of the life-giving Spirit through whom we realize that even as we are on the journey to perfection we can experience fulfillment and eternity.

The other eschatological dimension Merton emphasized was social and communal and, in essence, marked by the preaching of peace. In the other major eschatological section of *A Vow of Conversation*, Merton wrote: "The preaching of peace by a tiny remnant in an age of war and violence is one of the eschatological signs of the true life of the Church." Interestingly, this idea would be central to Merton's argument in "The Christian in World Crisis," a commentary on *Pacem in Terris* which he would complete in a few months (June 1964), and in which he boldly stated: "The Christian attitude to war and peace is fundamentally eschatological" (*Seeds of Destruction*, p. 129). And a year and a half later, Merton underscored the eschatological basis of peace in "Blessed are the Meek," when he wrote: "Christian non-violence is nothing if not first of all a formal profession of faith in the Gospel that the Kingdom has already been established" (*Faith and Violence*, p. 18).

Of course, one could say that Merton never was far from an eschatological perspective, although *The Seven Storey Mountain* and much of his poetry and prose of the 1940s and 1950s expressed a world-rejecting apocalypticism that was more a function of his response to the tragedies and frustrations of his secular life than a divine revelation. But as Merton experienced the mercy of God through his contemplation and as he deepened that experience through his studies, the apocalyptic motif was transformed. He never did believe that the apocalyptic tradition in the Bible should be used to predict future events. In *Vow* he wrote that this kind of eschatology only antagonized Christians and prevented them from seeing the "true thrust of eschatology, which is here and now." The apocalyptic vision was central to *Cables to the Ace*, as Luke Flaherty has demonstrated, yet the apocalyptic disintegration was targeted for certain human illusions based on pride and the idolatry of technological promises (Flaherty, "Thomas Merton's *Cables to the Ace*: A Critical Study," *Renascence* 24, Fall 1971, pp. 3-32). Indeed, the problem of idolatry in the modern world is a recurring theme in *Vow*.

Arching over Merton's apocalyptic critique was an eschatological perspective informed by his contemplative experience, a perspective summed up by the aphorism of Julian of Norwich, one which Merton treasured, that "All manner of things shall be well." Merton used this quotation in what might be considered one of the most profound sections of *Vow*. On page 87, he offered a wondrous description of the meaning of Christian hope: "Christ judges and separates good from evil in order to reveal the truth about man in this separation; but the rejected will turn out to have been chosen with a greater and more mysterious mercy." Julian's "eschatological secret" was also used in a revelatory segment of *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, where Merton found that this hope gave him reason to be optimistic about the political future of humanity, an optimism he had first voiced, almost guiltily, as early as 1955 (*The Living Bread*, p. 155).

Merton's mature eschatological perspective was realistic as well as visionary. The long section on contemplation and eschatology in *Vow* is followed by a description of the guns sounding at Fort Knox. "This is no mere distraction," Merton admitted. "I am here because they are *there*; indeed I am *supposed* to hear them! They form a part of an ever renewed decision and commitment, on my part, for peace." Ironically, Merton sketched out this profoundly communal eschatology while living in the solitude and freedom of a hermitage.