

# A Timely Time Capsule

Review of  
*Peace in the Post-Christian Era*  
 By Thomas Merton  
 Edited by Patricia A. Burton  
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During the 2004 presidential debates, both President George Bush and Senator John Kerry declared that nuclear proliferation was the foremost global concern. It was a sober assessment. The end of the Cold War nuclear stand-off has by no means meant the end of nuclear threat. The pressure points for catastrophe may be more uncertain and diffused with the rise of terrorist groups and so-called rogue states. But neither should we forget the prospect of a so-called tactical and limited use of nuclear weapons by America or another nuclear power, made more real by a program to develop ground-penetrating “low yield” bombs recently begun in the United States, in violation of the goals of the international Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. The need for enlightened leadership and wise action is as great as before. And the question of what constitutes a genuine Christian perspective and response, and a Christian approach to building peace, begs for attention as much now as ever.

Thomas Merton’s *Peace in the Post-Christian Era* arrives to us, as it were, in a time capsule, written in the context of Cold War tension in the spring of 1962. But much of its message has a timeless quality, fully applicable to the needs of today. The book was the fruit of an intense period of writing and thinking in response to the shadow of nuclear war that hung ominously over the world, and the question of Merton’s responsibility as a monk, and as a Christian, to speak out. His article “The Root of War is Fear,” which appeared in *The Catholic Worker* in October of the previous year, launched a stream of writing that included his Cold War letters, as well as “Nuclear War and Christian Responsibility” and “Christian Ethics and Nuclear War.” One version of “Nuclear War and Christian Responsibility” became the seed for *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*.

Merton’s task in writing the book was difficult for a number of reasons. Not only did he have to take into account the conservative standards of Cistercian censorship, and to a lesser extent his own image as a spiritual writer, but also the voices of fear and *realpolitik*, with their Catholic supporters, that endorsed the politics of power and nuclear confrontation. He therefore takes great care to ground his argument in Catholic tradition and New Testament Christology. At the same time, he discusses in pragmatic terms principles for negotiating incremental steps towards peace. These themes – what it means to be Christian, how to embody Christian belief so as to reduce and eliminate the threat of unprecedented mass destruction, and what can be learned from Catholic tradition – flow in contrapun-

tal fashion through much of the book. The book indeed can be viewed as Merton's effort to articulate, in a time of fear and crisis, a Christian perspective and a path of Christian action that would be credible to a skeptical audience, religious mainly, but non-religious as well.

But *Peace in the Post-Christian Era* never saw the light of publication as Merton intended, as it was proscribed by Dom Gabriel Sortais, Abbot General of the Cistercian order. Merton's response to censorial decree, expressed mainly through letters to friends, reflects a struggle between his vow of obedience and the demands of Christian conscience, and between a traditional and more radical understanding of the monastic charism. As in the case of his Cold War Letters, which started with a letter to Ella Gullick in October, 1961, he found a path through a loophole of sorts, mimeographing the manuscript and circulating it strategically. In his foreword to the book, James Forest estimates that five or six hundred copies of the mimeographed version ended up in circulation by the end of 1962 (xiv). Merton sent copies, for instance, to Hildegard and Jean Goss-Mayr in hopes that, through their intervention as secretaries of the International Fellowship of Reconciliation, the book might get a hearing from architects of Vatican Council documents (xvi). Its direct influence on Council deliberation is unclear, but Forest notes the close connection between Merton's ideas and those promulgated by the Council in "Schema 13" (which became *Gaudium et Spes*, the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*) (xvii).

Clearly the book stands as an important documentation of Merton's nascent public voice on questions of war and peace in the early 1960s, and thus of Catholic writing on peace in general during the Cold War. This is true in spite of the fact that most of the chapters made their way into print during Merton's lifetime in some form, in part or whole, and all but one ("The Scientists and Nuclear War," unpublished up until now) are available in editions of collected essays. For their collection in the book form intended by Merton constitutes a coherent whole, and provides a vivid picture of his most concentrated thinking.

The book is charged with a sense of urgency, reflecting Merton's perception of a world let loose from its moral and spiritual anchor, adrift in a makeshift morality that predicates security and peace on the threat of nuclear annihilation. The era was therefore "post-Christian," disconnected from Christian beliefs and ideals, still more from Christian love and the living presence of Christ. Merton meant the title to be provocative. At the same time, there are indications of cautiousness in the text, Merton trying to establish the legitimacy of his own voice in the ground of Catholic tradition, confronting not only the question of whether, as a monk, he could speak out on the issue of nuclear war, but whether he could voice an authentic Christian message and awaken genuine Christian awareness and response. Fortunately, thanks to the substantial foreword by James Forest, a young member of the Catholic Worker community in New York during the time Merton was writing the book who became a close correspondent and friend, and the detailed history provided by the editor, Patricia Burton, in her introduction, we have ample background for considering the development and biographical meaning of *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*.

Merton begins in his opening chapters by stating his political position in favor of "uncompromising" multilateral disarmament, by asserting the "one fundamental truth" that all nuclear war and other means of massive destruction are morally impermissible, and by arguing for a revitalized "spiritual and ethical center" and Christian perspective (17, 19). The remaining chapters in one way or another address these concerns, Merton building perspective by drawing with considerable care on Catholic tradition, as well as contemporary theological and scientific voices, and by identifying the shortcom-

ings of dissenting views. To a lesser extent, Merton uncovers psychological and cultural forces that are mistaken for a more spiritually grounded perspective. As he suggests at one point, “Constantly exposed to . . . fear for the future of our affluent society . . . we come to feel our insecurity as basic spiritual reality” (150). Cultural topics that he treats at greater length in later work, such as technology and mass media, make a brief appearance here as well.

Prominent among the ideas that weave through the book and knit it tightly together are the following:

First, the formation of Christian conscience vis-à-vis peace and war must accord with a fundamental understanding of what it means to be Christian: “The Christian is and must be by his very adoption as a son of God, in Christ, a peacemaker (Matt. 5:9)” (29). Merton draws on the New Testament and the early Christian philosopher Origen in particular to highlight the eschatological character of the early Christian position, and to distinguish a perspective based on a reality transformed by the actual presence of Christ in us and in the world, in which love for all is the guiding principle, and one rooted in concern for the preservation of secular traditions, institutions, or material well-being. Merton relies on the messages of Popes Pius XII and John XXIII to bring to light the contemporary meaning of the Christian viewpoint (e.g., 135).

Secondly, the Catholic just war tradition is pertinent, but at the same time the potentiality for destruction on a scale wholly unimagined in the development of that tradition needs to be taken into account. At different points, Merton distinguishes the ideal of absolute pacifism from “relative” or “nuclear pacifism,” maintaining the theoretical possibility of a just war, fought in defense, while at the same time at pains to define the limited conditions under which such an extreme action and Christian love could be reconciled (e.g., 83, 146). Merton recognized the virtual impossibility of a just war in which nuclear weapons were involved (nuclear pacifism), therefore the paramount need to work for war’s abolition. He at times treads a fine line, however, perhaps with censorship in mind, trying to provide an authentically Catholic perspective yet facing the limitations of that perspective in the admissibility of devastating force in a nuclear age (145-47). Thus in his chapter on “The Scientists and Nuclear War” he acknowledges a possible moral legitimacy in the basic argument of Leo Szilard, a nuclear scientist, allowing for the tactical use of nuclear weapons, but only in a defensive action in which every possible effort is made to avoid defenseless populations, citing its alignment with the positions taken by Popes Pius XII and John XXIII (119-20): “Here for once we have a real and serious distinction between the physical evil of destruction of property and the moral evil of genocide” (119). At the same time, he sides unequivocally with Szilard’s long-term goal of disarmament and the abolition of war (120).

Finally, the ethic of Christian love and truth must confront actively the ethic of power and mass destruction, indeed stand for “justice in every sphere” (133). Merton establishes the primacy of active nonviolent means over and against the policies that legitimize nuclear war: “Now above all is the time to embody Christian truth in action even more than in words. . . . [W]e have to rediscover the sources of Christian tradition, and we must come to realize that we have to a great extent abandoned the early Christian ideal of peace and nonviolent action” (129, 132). Merton’s belief in the necessity and efficacy of nonviolent action has an early and powerful expression here, predating his published work on Gandhi and nonviolence, but not Gandhi’s influence, as he had studied Gandhi as a schoolboy in England and years earlier in the monastery.

The book ultimately has more than biographical and historical significance. Much of Merton’s

concern, his analysis, and his general line of argument applies equally well to present-day questions of peace and war. It is not hard to sift out the historical context of 1962 from his writing, as James Forest points out, and to find left exposed elements of current policies, politics and individual and social psychologies that delimit or deny the possibilities for global peacemaking today. Statements such as “we are obliged to widen our horizons and to recognize our responsibility to build an international community in which the right of all nations and other groups will be respected and guaranteed” seem all too relevant (93).

Not surprisingly, Merton does not exempt any of those in power from probing the deepest sources of governmental policy, from going beyond the rhetoric of self-protection or righteous nationalism to issues of fear, “state of mind,” ideology and political will. He states that “The responsibility of preserving the world from nuclear disaster rests principally with the leaders of the nuclear powers and their collaborators in international politics” (109). But, characteristically, neither does he exempt any of us from our own soul-searching, and from striving to embody, as peacemakers, the Christian peace that will someday, one fervently hopes, dissolve the era of nuclear weapons. Commenting on the ideologies of hate and war at work in 1962, which have their analogy today, Merton writes, “The truth is that extremists on both sides are quite right. They are contemplating, in one another, the mirror image of their own hatreds, fears, suspicions and murderous intentions. . . . The Christian problem is . . . to dissipate the poisonous and blinding smoke of bellicose assumptions. The task begins in ourselves” (97-98). That Merton can remind and teach us in this way is the most important reason to welcome publication at last of *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*.