

Spiritual Connectedness: Thomas Merton's Path to World Peace

By John A. Ostenburg

[W]here there is a deep, simple, all-embracing love of man, of the created world of living and inanimate things, then there will be respect for life, for freedom, for truth, for justice and there will be humble love of God. But where there is no love of man, no love of life, then make all the laws you want, all the edicts and treaties, issue all the anathemas; set up all the safeguards and inspections, fill the air with spying satellites, and hang cameras on the moon. As long as you see your fellow man being essentially to be feared, mistrusted, hated, and destroyed, there cannot be peace on earth.¹

With those words, Thomas Merton concluded his June 1964 essay titled “The Christian in World Crisis: Reflections on the Moral Climate of the 1960’s.” Ironic, indeed, that we who live nearly a half-century later find them as meaningful today as they were when written. Despite all our national security precautions and weapons of potential mass destruction, the peoples of the earth still suffer from fear of what may be done to them by their fellow man.

Merton, though isolated behind monastery walls in rural Kentucky at the time – or, perhaps precisely because he was enshrouded in silence and devoid of the influence of the opinion-makers – saw the need for peace to come to the earth one person at a time. His mission was not that of the missionaries of old who sought to convert whole nations, but rather that of the spiritual director who seeks to lead his charge to his or her own inner self. Merton knew that recognition of his or her spiritual center by each individual – regardless of the particular belief system of the person discovering that center – is the key to seeing a spiritual center in each of all others, and thus to recognizing a connectedness of man with man, a connectedness that supersedes the potential divisions that exist among nations. The admonition incumbent with his spiritual direction in this regard was: “If you love peace, then hate injustice, hate tyranny, hate greed – but hate these things *in yourself*, not in another.”² The path to peace is one of small individual steps of internal recognition and then of remedy, he cautioned.

The internal awareness that Merton was blessed to possess led him to the conclusion that the philosophy of “my country, right or wrong” was one to be avoided. In his words, “On the contrary, I believe the basis for valid political action can only be the recognition that the true solution to our problems is *not* accessible to any one isolated party or nation but



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that all must arrive at it by working together” (NSC 116-17). His words were an indictment of the type of blind nationalism that leads to international disagreements. Such international conflicts too often result in warfare, a forced turning of men against men by an entity that seems to exist outside of them. Some ephemeral “national interest” captures the moment and drives the conflict into being and men subsequently do battle with one another because of it. The “national interest” seemingly is driven by a fierce loyalty to, and love of, one’s own nation as provider of a quality of life which the citizens of that nation supposedly love and do not want to see challenged. Merton argues, however, that such love of life is not valid. “There is no real love of life unless it is oriented to the discovery of one’s true, spiritual self.”³ The “true, spiritual self” of which he speaks is the spiritual center found in everyone, if it is searched out properly. From its discovery will follow the obvious realization that nations are mere collections of individual persons; they exist only because those individual persons allow them to. Thus the power to change the attitudes of nations rests with each individual.

According to Merton, such change can come not merely as a result of good wishes, or even prayerful wishes, but rather through active involvement with one another, an involvement that must be rooted in love. In his essay on “The Prison Meditations of Father Delp,” he points to the Christian’s need to be engaged individually with other individuals: “Christians must not be afraid to be people and to enter into a genuine dialogue with other men, precisely perhaps with those men they most fear or stand most ready to condemn” (FV 65). Merton sees Father Alfred Delp – a Jesuit who was imprisoned by the Nazis and condemned to death as a traitor for his work in planning for a post-Nazi-era re-Christianizing of Germany – as a symbol of what needs to happen in the modern Church. “The Church’s mission in the world today,” Merton writes, “is a desperate one of helping create conditions in which man can return to himself, recover something of his lost humanity, as a necessary preparation for his ultimate return to God” (FV 53). He maintained that Father Delp, by embracing his imprisonment and accepting his death as necessary steps in creating the “new order” that would bring each person closer to an awareness of his or her need to be truly spiritual, was a fulfillment of the Church’s new mission.

The new mission described by Merton is one of total awareness: awareness of the significance of the human person as a loving and to-be-loved creature, as Merton realized in his “Fourth & Walnut” satori moment,⁴ awareness of the reality that the earth and its varied living forms are God’s gift to humanity, not to be abused but to be respected, as Merton relates in his journal entry of December 11, 1962, when he writes that man cannot be separated from his natural environment, and that destruction of the environment leads to man’s own destruction;⁵ and awareness of the human and spiritual dignity of free man, entitled to true and just treatment, what Merton describes as “that Christian sense which sees every other man as Christ and treats him as Christ” (FV 143).

As Paul Elie has noted, the “Vision in Louisville” came almost simultaneously with Merton’s reading and careful study of Martin Buber’s *I and Thou*. Elie comments that Merton “saw the feeling [mystical union with another person] explained in the notion of ‘dialogic personalism,’ which made the relation between self and other an analogue for the relation between self and God.”⁶ Writing in his journal almost one month to the day after the entry that recorded the “vision,” Merton notes that Buber’s words “are among the wisest religious truths written in our century” (SS 196). He is referring specifically to Buber’s observation that one does not meet God in order to better know God, but rather to better know the meaning of the world in which the human person exists; and, further, Buber’s admonition that God is integral – though not objective – to the human mission to

give meaning to existence. Merton steps forward from that point of awareness on the path toward “ultimate return to God,” knowing internally that one best returns to God not by searching for God but by better knowing and loving each individual person.

To use modern parlance, the juxtaposition of the “Fourth & Walnut” experience with the reading of Buber became “the tipping point”⁷ for Merton. From that point on, he focused more intently on the shared internal reality of each individual with all other individuals, and he thus saw more clearly that such connectedness required more concern on his part with the externals of human existence. As a result, opposition to war, commitment to racial equality, an increased ecological consciousness, and similar social attitudes became active components of his personal spirituality. As he expressed in his comments a few months later regarding a particular trend then common in the Church, “What an awful weakness it is to *have to insist* that one is *always right in everything*. If we admitted some of our own mistakes, in accidentals, people might be more ready to believe us right in the essentials” (SS 249). Merton thus was ready to admit that national leaders, state and local leaders, and even Church leaders, often were wrong in their positions and it was spiritually incorrect to blindly follow their lead out of loyalty to a nation, to a region, or even to a religion. His writings began to take on a more critical edge, especially – given the most significant social movement emerging at that time – toward the decisions of national leaders to engage in nuclear preparedness for war.

The cloak of nationalism tends to disguise man so that he appears as something other than what he truly is: rather than one individual connected to all other individuals through a spiritual bonding that has its strength in the very awareness that it exists, nationalized man becomes inflated with a superego that is incumbent with the new pride he experiences over the self-importance he gains from his novel puffed-up status. In this condition, he no longer is aware that his “I” is no different than his neighbor’s “I,” but instead pounds his chest with pride that his national “we” is more powerful than his neighbor’s national “we.” This condition results in what Merton refers to as “certain ‘climates’ of opinion which make it practically impossible to solve civil or international problems except by resort to violence” (SD 100). By contrast, Merton sees an authentic awareness of one’s personal self (and thus awareness of all others’ personal selves that are identical to his own) as the path to non-violent behavior: “Once we enter again into contact with our own deepest self, with an ordinate self-love that is inseparable from the love of God and of His truth, we discover that all good develops from within us, growing up from the hidden depths of our being according to the concrete and existential norms laid down by the Spirit Who is given us from God.”⁸

This may appear to some to be the path to anarchy – a denial of the value of the state and a total reliance instead on the value of the individual – but in fact it is not. Rather, it becomes a different way of viewing the state, the association of a different set of values with the state than those traditional nationalistic values of defend and conquer. Instead, the state is viewed as the collection of individuals who offer assistance to one another because of their love for one another; they extend services to one another as the need for those services may arise; they collect taxes from one another in order to provide the financial basis for delivery of such services; they establish laws so that the behavioral components of respecting one another are codified and thus available to all involved. Far from being unnecessary, as anarchists would contend, the state that recognizes the value of the individual over the collective is viewed as more valuable than any nation has been seen ever before.

According to Merton, “man’s service of the world consists not in brandishing weapons to destroy other men and hostile societies, but in creating an order based on God’s plan for His creation,

beginning with minimum standard for a truly human existence for all men" (*FV* 66). In other words, recognition of the importance of the individual, as a spiritual being imbued with the Holy Spirit, and then treatment of each individual in a just and fair manner, is the path to world peace. Rather than spending billions of dollars on weapons to destroy others, Merton would advise spending the same billions to provide food, medicine, housing, education, the opportunity for employment, etc., for those most in need.

Although the major focus of much of Merton's writing on social justice was in opposition to the nuclear proliferation of the "Cold War" era and to American involvement in Vietnam, his words have an unquestionable application to more contemporary circumstances also. Personally, as one who grew to maturity in the 1960s, I shared his opposition to the Vietnam War and also his concerns about the direction in which the nuclear arms race was driving us as a people. My opposition to war came not from any personal fear of being drafted – it was honed while I was a seminary student and thus enjoyed a deferment from the draft – but rather because of the awareness that struck me one evening as I watched a television news report on the return to the U.S. of the bodies of soldiers who had been killed, and listened to a mother weeping for her lost son; suddenly I was struck by a realization that Vietnamese mothers were mourning their dead sons too. It made me acutely aware of the horror of war, an awareness no doubt fed by so much of Merton's writings that I had been reading at that stage of my life. Today I have the same feelings regarding the weeping done by the mothers of U.S. soldiers who are losing their lives in Iraq, and by the mothers of killed Iraqis. And Merton's words still ring in my ears: "[A]ll reasonable men are bound by their very rationality to work to establish a real and lasting peace" (*SD* 124). It is a challenge not easily undertaken in today's world of jingoistic patriotism and a near-cancerous fear of terrorists.

Indeed, I often recognize – as did Merton – that confrontation sometimes is justified. The true threat of terrorists who would attack innocent persons simply to advance their ideological causes justifiably should be opposed as vigorously as possible, just as should be the evil of genocide that has been perpetrated on some peoples by some governments. As Merton stated, "the duty of the Christian as a peacemaker is not to be confused with a kind of quietistic inertia that is indifferent to injustice, accepts any kind of disorder, compromises with error and with evil, and gives in to every pressure in order to maintain 'peace at any price'" (*SD* 125). But, wrongdoing should be opposed universally, not just against those we see as potential enemies; so-called "friendly nations" cannot be given a pass for the horrors they commit just because we want to continue to cater to their good relations. Wrongful acts are wrong, regardless of who the wrong-doer may be. The path to war, therefore, should be rarely taken, and then must be walked very cautiously on the few occasions when it is. The wrongdoing that is to be corrected must be clearly delineated. The justification must be consistent with the beliefs and needs of the people of the nation that is going to war. Consideration must be given to those who will suffer the consequences of the actions of war. The option to enter into the conduct of war must be the last resort, chosen only when absolutely no other option is available.

Long prior to the occasion for such a decision, however, the climate of a Christian nation – and, indeed, our leaders continually proclaim that the United States of America is a Christian nation – should be consistent with the spiritual guidance that Merton offers. "The Christian," he says, "has the obligation to treat every other man as Christ Himself, respecting his neighbor's life as if it were the life of Christ, his rights as if they were the rights of Christ. Even if that neighbor shows himself

to be unjust, wicked and odious to us, the Christian cannot take upon himself a final and definitive judgment in his case” (*SD* 126-27). Truly, a Christian nation that follows such guidance will find itself rarely in need of warfare as a means of furthering the well-being of itself or its citizens.

From Thomas Merton’s vision of the authentic Christian perspective, then, the only true security available to man comes from his love of and respect for his fellow man, and not from whatever weapons he may be able to manufacture, or whatever conflicts in which he might eventually gain the upper hand. According to Merton, such love and respect develops only from a deep awareness of every person as a spiritual being, an awareness that breeds unity, what he had referred to a few years prior to his 1962 “tipping point” as “a union of hearts, a union of spirits, a communion between persons.” He summarized it as follows.

A communion between persons implies interiority and depth. It involves the whole being of each person – the mind, the heart, the feelings, the deepest aspiration of the spirit itself. Such union manifestly excludes revolt, and deliberate mutual rejection. But it also presupposes individual differences – it safeguards the autonomy and character of each as an inviolate and solitary person. It even respects the inevitable ambivalences found in the purest of friendships. And when we observe the real nature of such communion, we see that it can really never be brought about merely by discipline and submission to authority.⁹

- 1 Thomas Merton, *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1964) 183; subsequent references will be cited as “*SD*” parenthetically in the text.
- 2 Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 122; subsequent references will be cited as “*NSC*” parenthetically in the text.
- 3 Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968) 112; subsequent references will be cited as “*FV*” parenthetically in the text.
- 4 Thomas Merton, *A Search for Solitude: Pursuing the Monk’s True Life. Journals, vol. 3: 1952-1960*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 181-82; subsequent references will be cited as “*SS*” parenthetically in the text.
- 5 See Thomas Merton, *Turning toward the World: The Pivotal Years. Journals, vol. 4: 1960-1963*, ed. Victor A. Kramer (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996) 274.
- 6 See Paul Elie, *The Life You Save May Be Your Own: An American Pilgrimage* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2003) 256.
- 7 See the title of a recent book by Malcolm Gladwell – *The Tipping Point* (New York: Little, Brown, 2000) – in which the author shows how a relatively small matter suddenly will tip circumstances in one direction or another.
- 8 Thomas Merton, *The New Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1961) 236.
- 9 Thomas Merton, *Disputed Questions* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1960) 118.