

Contemplative Citizenship: Thomas Merton and Responsible Political Freedom

By Steven P. Millies

*“Would that all the people of the LORD were prophets!
Would that the LORD might bestow his spirit on them all!”
Numbers 11:29*

*“I am, in other words, a man in the modern world.
In fact, I am the world just as you are!
Where am I going to look for the world first of all if not in myself?”
Thomas Merton¹*

As a political theorist, I cannot describe a good political order built on Thomas Merton’s ideas. At least part of the reason why owes to the fact that the notion of building a “good” political order is not entirely native to the Christian tradition, anyway. Where Christianity has attempted to do such a thing, either amid the Eusebian enthusiasm of the fourth century or the absolutism of Christian monarchs in the High Middle Ages, the results have been less than appealing either on political or Christian grounds. But Christian faith cannot be alienated from our worldly lives, and so Christians face political choices.

In *The City of God*, Augustine reminds us that faithfulness to the Gospel enjoins us to have a care for justice in this world, but not to lose our focus on a more transcendent goal. I am not being original when I say that “to those who have ears to hear, [the *City of God*] has a great deal to say to many of us who are not mystics, today, in America.”² That was Merton, expressing his view of Augustine’s treatment of life in the City of Man lived toward the City of God. Augustine does not offer us the foundations for a Christian state and, in fact, Merton supposes we would be right to believe Augustine “would not have placed very high hopes in one” (*CG* xiv). But we do have, beginning with Augustine and through the tradition transmitted to Merton and to us, the grounds for a sort of Christian critique of secular history and politics emerging from Augustine’s mystical view of history, and a model for Christian life that only coincidentally strengthens the temporal order. But strengthen the temporal, political order it does.

The writings of Thomas Merton, a contemplative monk, a poet, a mystic, might otherwise appear to be a strange place for a political theorist to begin that critique. Yet when we consider the struggles of Christianity across the centuries to come to peace with how to integrate Christian life and political life, we should be struck by how Merton’s writings attempt to integrate the rigors of Christian living with political action, in a way focused uniquely on the problems of our own age. Indeed, as Merton’s monastic vocation unfolded in

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the last decade of his life, the political dimensions of contemplative life moved to the fore of his own engagement with spiritual questions. Intriguingly, he suggested as well that everyday Christians have a growing obligation to be contemplative in their living.³

Merton observed that, to most people, “Christian social action is not Christian *in itself*, but only because it is a kind of escalator to unworldliness and devotion. This is because we apparently cannot conceive material and worldly things seriously as having any capacity to be ‘spiritual.’ But Christian social action, on the contrary, conceives man’s work itself as a *spiritual* reality.”⁴ In contrast, by blurring the distinction between the worldly and unworldly, and in joining action essentially to contemplation, Merton urges us to recognize the possibility of sanctity within the temporal and profane. Yet Merton was right about how most of us see Christian social action. The core problem, therefore, is one of overcoming misperceptions of worldly entanglements and transforming Christian life into an active critique of worldliness and materialism, while losing neither a proper spiritual focus nor an engaged love of the world and God’s people. We turn to Merton because his life and work identify and unravel these problems through his unique experience of monasticism. Merton saw his vocation and political involvement as essentially linked, and increasingly saw that link at work in every human life, not just the monk’s. We are discussing the role of vocation in the life of every Christian believer, and I am proposing that the openings in Merton’s cloister wall to worldly problems mean that the wall must be open from both sides. Just as the monk is joined to the world of Christian social action amid his contemplation, we who live outside the cloister bear a growing responsibility to join our action to some time spent in contemplation, reflecting on the meaning and content of our activity.

With all of this as background, we take up Thomas Merton’s challenge in the light of humanism because our task is to inquire “under what conditions Christians can establish, by their outlook and their action in the world of today, the claim to be true participants in the building of a new humanism.”⁵ This, in turn, is because “Christianity can not only throw light on the most typical and most urgent problems of the modern world, but . . . there is a certain light which Christianity alone can provide” (LL 138). This is the mission Merton himself charted in a pregnant little essay titled “Christian Humanism,” where his own reflections coincided neatly with the arguments of Jacques Maritain. Maritain, thirty years earlier, had described an “Integral Humanism” built on a Christian awareness of social and civil life, and seeking “a Christianly-constituted lay state” that would govern less from a foundation of “univocal” authority, as Christian states have been governed in the past, and more from an *ethos* of “sanctity” adapted to “changing historical conditions” such as the increasing empowerment of modern human beings (longer life, literacy, etc.) and our aptitude to govern ourselves.⁶

These revolutions in the lives of lay people had been on Thomas Merton’s mind for quite a while as the 1960s dawned. That essay on Christian humanism reaches the expansive conclusion that “The teaching of the Gospel is that men are no longer servants of God, no longer bound merely to complex ritual observances and obscure legal systems known only to experts” (LL 144) in our religious lives. With that as prelude, we should understand that “the New Testament provides a theological basis for the practical life of love” (LL 143), one built on a genuine *metanoia* that takes place in the life of every Christian as “*a summons to permanent newness of life*,” not just theologically and religiously, but practically, socially, and politically, as well (LL 140). This is an extremely demanding standard for the people in the pews, those whom Merton described as seeing Christianity only as “a kind of escalator to unworldliness and devotion,” and Merton had no illusions about the challenge. In 1964 he wrote to Daniel Berrigan, “I wonder if we are really going to have to get along without a structure one of these days. Maybe that will be good, but Lord it will be rough on most people.”⁷

We should be careful to observe that Merton's context was strictly religious in that letter to Berigan, but his underlying point goes far beyond the structural question of the institutional Church and embraces facts of human life in the twentieth (and twenty-first) century. Merton's call for ongoing conversion and "*permanent newness of life*" asks for nothing other than complete transformation, one that he imagined stretching far beyond life in contemplative religious institutes. "Life," Merton suggested in a retreat he gave for contemplative prioresses, "is not a question of a gnostic elite, of being especially smart, of being separated from everybody else."⁸ Religious life in an institute is a particular vocation, perhaps, but "The great problem of contemplative life, of religious life, of the priesthood and of everyone else, is that we have been corrupted" by "worldly power" (SC 81). Whether cloistered or leading an active, worldly life, we all share a common implication in worldliness and compromise. And, if religious life is no shelter from worldliness, then we who are living the *vita activa* can ill-afford to shelter ourselves from the contemplative dimensions of religious life that can lend a kind of interiority and context to our living.

The only solution to our social and political problems can come from an interior disposition toward justice and the common good in the life and work of each citizen, and recognizing that Christian life imposes on us an extreme, existential ethical position, each of us recognizing our total responsibility for each other and for all. But that, in turn, depends first on the *metanoia* and ongoing renewal that Merton points us toward. In political terms, "We don't have to follow anybody's line," Merton tells us (SC 84). The Christian is not bound to any ideological construction, and neither can any progressivism, liberalism, conservatism, or traditionalism capture fully what Christianity brings to bear on the common problems of humanity. That light that only Christianity can throw on the most urgent problems of the human family is a light of faith, not ideology. Nevertheless, once that light is thrown on human problems by a living faith at work in the life of a human person, the political consequences become inevitable. The actions of citizen-believers fundamentally transform the nature of the *polis*.⁹

This transformation is born from freedom, and yields in its recognition of our shared humanity and common need for one another a greater freedom. "My freedom is not fully free when left to itself," Merton wrote, but "It becomes so when it is brought into the right relation with the freedom of another."¹⁰ The goal most emphatically is not bound up in dogmatic or otherwise doctrinal ambitions: Thomas Merton does not point us toward a confessional state, any more than he expected Augustine would have approved of one. Transformation is not exterior, but interior, and it can happen only through the free and interior response of a soul to the inner voice of conscience found through contemplation. Ironically, it is through our turning inward, in an "absence from" one another, that we can fully become "present to" each other and direct our energies outward toward the men and women who share the world with us (SC 3).¹¹ Merton described this tension between presence and absence in the context of contemplative institutes, of course. But the problems and temptations of monastic communities also can be the problems and temptations of political communities. Every critic of contemporary political liberalism, from the right or the left, shares in common their outrage at the atomism of our present political values, the centrifugal tendencies that frustrate and fracture community in the ceaseless drive to maximize individual rights and advantages.¹² One hope we can foster reasonably in our survey of Merton's conception of Christian humanism is that it may be possible to achieve the interiority absent from these political values through the application and living of the Christian critique of modern political culture, identifying much in this culture that is good and beneficial, and much that could be improved.

Enthusiasm for this result should not obscure the difficulty, nor the irony that we are cut off from that result by the very circumstances that make reaching it possible. Part of what obstructs and blocks us are the very circumstances that have empowered us politically and spiritually to take charge of

our own lives and destinies. The “feeling or intuition” of unity with God, fellow human beings, and the world that comes to us through prayer simply gets crowded out by the pace of the *vita activa*, and especially amid the demands of our compartmentalized contemporary lives.¹³ And so, we come to a contradiction: that the revolutions of human life in history which have empowered us also tend to shout down and crowd out the contemplative interiority that might enable us to make best advantage of our empowerment for our benefit as individuals and as a culture. The hustle of active living, amid work, family, and all the other things that preoccupy us, leaves little room for the reflectiveness to which our empowered condition obliges us, and that our wounded, imperfect world needs.

What remains for us? Our recurring theme is contradictions – between the temporal and the transcendent, between the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa*, between inwardness and engagement with the world, between our busy condition of empowerment and the silence we require to make use of it. We have also a very specific suggestion from Thomas Merton, to “reach out to embrace both extremes of a contradiction at the same time” (*NMI* xvii). Easier said than done, to be sure. Yet that is the Christian calling. The fruit of a true, properly Christian humanism, only can be the relentless interior struggle of the Christian living his or her own life in the world. That struggle, in turn, is an insidious challenge to truths to which so many of us are clinging. “The great problem of our time,” Merton asserted, is “to tackle the self-destructive alienation of man in a society dedicated in theory to human values and in practice to the pursuit of power for its own sake” (*CWA* 153). To put those values our political system espouses into real, meaningful practice is the sum of our political good.

Here lies the task for the Christian political theorist, which is no different from the task simply of the Christian. We ought not to seek to re-make the temporal order in the image of the Gospel, and neither can we afford to withdraw into a self-righteous cocoon. The answer only can be found by turning inward, by recognizing that inescapably we must be “mysteriously present at once to [our] own [selves] and to the freedoms of all other men” in the world, all around us (*CWA* 154-55). The simple truth of Christian life lived in this way cannot be contained in my own life. It must break out. It must challenge all that is around it. It must change our way of living. But it must be won and lived as each person’s own. The strange truth at which we arrive is that we must change our world by changing ourselves. Our political problems, by comparison, seem simple, of course.

Christianity, as Merton suggests, is situated uniquely to address our most pressing temporal problems because Christianity, particularly in its contemplative iterations, possesses the resources necessary to live a fully human, free life. This is not to say that all of us need keep silence during meals or sing compline at the end of every day. It is to say, however, that the essential problem of politics is not so different from the problem of prayer, and we are right to keep the comparison in mind. Just as “in meditation we should not look for a ‘method’ or ‘system,’ but cultivate an ‘attitude,’ an ‘outlook’: faith, openness, attention, reverence, expectation, supplication, trust, joy,” so it must be in our common life together.¹⁴ To embrace that likeness, to seek a better world through our own spiritual growth, is the message that lies at the heart of Merton’s humanism.

There is no recipe to create a paradise, to solve the world’s basic problems – not even in the Gospel, as our political history so lamentably illustrates. But light shines on a path through the world toward newness of life. The legacy of Merton’s writings is to focus that light in a way that clarifies what our Christian life means in the world, and that to live without immersing ourselves in our common life together is to create a circumstance where “grace and spirituality will have little practical meaning” at all (*LH* 134).

1. Thomas Merton, “Is the World a Problem,” *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971) 145; subsequent references will be cited as “*CWA*” parenthetically in the text.
2. Thomas Merton, “Introduction,” *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods (New York: Modern Library, 1950) ix; subse-

- quent references will be cited as “CG” parenthetically in the text.
3. “[I]t is no longer permissible for Christians seriously and honestly to devote themselves to a spirituality of evasion, a cult of other worldliness that refuses to take account of the *inescapable implication of all men* in the problems and responsibilities of the nuclear age” (Thomas Merton, *Life and Holiness* [New York: Herder & Herder, 1963] 136; subsequent references will be cited as “LH” parenthetically in the text). Merton’s language elsewhere (“global nuclear cataclysm”; “world crisis”) suggests that we would be right to extrapolate his concern beyond nuclear politics in light of the phenomena of globalization and technological improvements that have made the world smaller, made each person accountable in new and frightening ways: see Thomas Merton, *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*, ed. Patricia A. Burton (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004).
 4. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) 68.
 5. Thomas Merton, *Love and Living*, ed. Naomi Burton Stone and Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979) 137; subsequent references will be cited as “LL” parenthetically in the text.
 6. Jacques Maritain, “Integral Humanism,” *The Collected Works of Jacques Maritain*, vol. XI, ed. Otto Bird, trans. Otto Bird, Joseph Evans, and Richard O’Sullivan (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996) 229. Intriguingly, Maritain also anticipates the dimension of Merton’s thinking that seems most applicable here: “It is, moreover, in the order of things that it not be in secular life itself, but in certain souls hidden from the world, some living in the most highly contemplative Orders, that this new style and this new impulse of spirituality begin to appear, in order to spread from there into secular and temporal life” (231).
 7. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985) 83 [June 30, 1964].
 8. Thomas Merton, *The Springs of Contemplation: A Retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani*, ed. Jane Marie Richardson, SL (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1992) 72; subsequent references will be cited as “SC” parenthetically in the text.
 9. “This Christian discipleship entails a certain way of acting, a *politeia*, a *conversatio*, which is proper to the Kingdom” (Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence* [Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968] 16).
 10. “First of all, our choices must really be free – that is to say they must perfect us in our own being. They must perfect us in our relation to other free beings. We must make the choices that enable us to fulfill the deepest capacities of our real selves” (Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island* [New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1955] 24-25; subsequent references will be cited as “NMI” parenthetically in the text).
 11. See also: “For too long the rule of silence was a means of being *absent* from one another. This sets up a contradiction, and people suffer from it. . . . You were silent because you were more or less *excluding* people. When people come together, there is always some kind of presence, even the kind that can give a person an ulcer. What we have to do is arrange things in such a way that the presence is a positive and not a negative experience” (4-5; emphasis added).
 12. Communitarian liberals – especially Amitai Etzioni – have argued that “modern thinking – with its emphasis on universal individual rights [rather than those of a particular estate] and the virtue of autonomy, of voluntary action and consensual agreements . . . pushed ahead relentlessly, eroding much of the weakened foundations of social virtue and order while seeking to expand liberty ever more” (*The New Golden Rule: Community and Morality in a Democratic Society* [New York: Basic Books, 1996] xvii). Alasdair MacIntyre’s neo-Thomist voice articulates the traditionalist critique of “the individual moral agent, freed from hierarchy and teleology, [who] conceives of himself and is conceived of by moral philosophers as sovereign in his moral authority,” cut off from anything that would subject or tie him to another human being (*After Virtue*, 2nd ed. [Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984] 62). Finally, even Kantian liberals such as Michael Sandel have begun to tug at the edges of individualism, noting the insufficiency of the ethical underpinnings of their approach, dependent as they are on “The moral frailty of the deontological self,” which is cut off from historical and cultural ties to “family or community or nation or people” (*Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* [New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982] 178).
 13. See SC 16: “Perhaps the reason a lot of people don’t feel it is that they just don’t have time. They never seem able to stop long enough to allow anything to break through. It certainly is not something inaccessible to the human race.”
 14. Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1969) 39.