

## Gun Culture, Mass Shootings and the Prophetic Witness of Thomas Merton

By **Glenn Amorosia**

The murder of four African American girls in 1963 by white supremacists disgusted Thomas Merton. In his poem “Picture of a Black Child with a White Doll,”<sup>1</sup> Merton memorializes and bemoans the murder of one of those little girls, Carole Denise McNair, killed in the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing in Birmingham. That poem echoes his combined sadness, anger and love at seeing the picture of Carole Denise holding a white doll:

Your dark eyes will never need to understand  
Our sadness who see you  
Hold that plastic glass-eyed  
Merchandise as if our empty-headed race  
Worthless full of fury  
Twanging and drooling in the southern night  
With guns and phantoms  
Needed to know love. (ll. 1-8)

Merton mocks the racism of those Southern whites’ way of life. He calls out “our empty-headed race,” their “Twanging and drooling” and their “guns and phantoms.”

The killing of children in school shootings in our current day, ranging from elementary school to high schools to colleges and universities, would certainly have sickened Merton. Today’s mass shootings are part of gun violence, a staple in the US culture. The locations of the schools where the mass shootings occurred are now etched in our minds: Sandy Hook, Parkland, Santa Fe, Oxford, and most recently, Uvalde and Highland Park.

Merton wrote several journal entries about the bombing that killed the four little girls. He had bitterness towards the white Southern racists who used violence out of their paranoia of a potential “slaughter” of whites by blacks: “Last Sunday was a terrible day in the South. A church was bombed in Birmingham and four Negro children were killed, and later two other Negroes were murdered in ‘rioting.’ It now seems that the racists in the deep South are trying to provoke violence so as to not have a general slaughter.”<sup>2</sup>

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Mass shootings motivated by race and religious bias have occurred frequently throughout the United States since Merton's days: the attack at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina in 2015; against the synagogues in Pittsburgh and in Poway, California in 2018 and 2019; in El Paso, targeting Hispanic immigrants in 2019; and the anti-Asian spa shootings in Atlanta in 2021. Merton predicted that the racial violence would inevitably expand around the country. It had already come to his home state of Kentucky in March 1968:

People in Detroit buying guns. Groups of vigilantes being formed to shoot Negroes. Louisville is a violent place, too. Letters in *U.S. Catholic* about the war article – some of the shrillest came from Louisville. This is a really mad country, and an explosion of the madness is inevitable. . . . But the fears, frustrations, hatreds, irrationalities, hysterias, as all there and all powerful enough to blow everything wide open. One feels that they *want* violence. It is preferable to the uncertainty of “waiting.”<sup>3</sup>

The growth of these mass shootings since Merton's day is staggering. In the entire decade of the 1960s, there were 48 dead and 125 injured in eight mass-shooting events. In only the two and half years since 2020, there have already been 171 dead and 300 injured in 37 mass shooting events.<sup>4</sup> These 2020-2022 numbers are low given that the lockdown of the Covid pandemic reduced exposure to mass shootings. Today's debate about the causes and possible solutions to the mass shootings is highly partisan. That debate quickly degenerates into a hyper-politicized argument pitting the progressive, anti-gun, pro-gun control faction against the right-wing, anti-gun control, Second Amendment faction. This latter group often deflects the discussion away from the gun control issue, steering it towards one of mental health care.

Gun violence is embedded in our culture. Merton abhorred the prevalence of guns and their use as a solution to issues. The growing use of assault weapons is an extension of military weapons into the civilian sphere. Weapons intended for warfare have now spread to the streets, the malls, the schools and the places of worship. The signs of trouble were brewing already in September, 1967:

Talking all around it: but the one thing that has to be said, and I don't quite know how to say it. A feeling of great violence is in the air everywhere. We are really on the verge of a blow-up. And this time it is the real blow-up. No one yet quite knows what it will be, because there is no fantasy to prepare us for it. . . . Something unparalleled and unspeakable is getting ready for birth. Life is not going to be comfortable for anyone.<sup>5</sup>

This laconic understatement is certainly prophetic: “Life is not going to be comfortable for anyone.” Merton knew more violence was coming because in the U.S. culture, the carrying of weapons is as embedded as eating and breathing. The rate of gun ownership in the United States is significantly higher than in any other country in the world. In the United States gun ownership is 120.5/100 people – nearly twice as much as the second highest country. By comparison, gun ownership in Canada is 34.7/100:

Civilians owned an estimated 393,347,000 total firearms in the United States in 2017 (measured against a 2017 population of 326,474,000). While many U.S.

residents own no guns at all, many others own multiple guns . . . the U.S. is home to more guns than people. An ABC News article about the 2017 (Small Arms) survey pointed out that the U.S. has “less than 5% of the world’s population, but 40% of the world’s civilian-owned guns.”<sup>6</sup>

Just as with nuclear weapons, having such huge numbers of guns inevitably leads to their use, often for evil intent. As Gordon Zahn referenced Merton in his introduction to *The Nonviolent Alternative*: “calling to mind Napoleon’s famous aphorism that the one thing you cannot do with bayonets is sit on them, Merton warned that this was a thousand times more true of nuclear weapons.”<sup>7</sup> This is just as true of assault weapons. Gun expenditures were \$28 billion dollars in 2021 in the United States, \$17 million dollars on weapons and \$11 million dollars on ammunition.<sup>8</sup> In the 1960s, Americans owned more rifles than handguns. That trend has reversed in recent years, reflecting guns being used less for sport and more for “personal protection.”

In his essay “The Machine Gun in the Fallout Shelter,”<sup>9</sup> Merton said that Americans had the theoretical right to protect their family in the hypothetical situation that someone tried to invade their fallout shelter in a nuclear attack. But that right is “unchristian,” “immoral” and “disastrous” if it leads to violence, pitting citizen against citizen.<sup>10</sup> A staggering fact is that more Americans have been killed through gun violence than in the total of all the wars: “Since 1968, more than 1.5 million Americans have died in gun-related incidents, according to data from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. By comparison, approximately 1.2 million service members have been killed in every war in U.S. history, according to estimates from the Department of Veterans Affairs and iCasualties.org.”<sup>11</sup>

Some segments of the United States not only consider weapons a natural part of American life but even as a “God-given” right. The National Rifle Association (NRA), starting with its president Harlan Carter in the 1970s and the rise of the New Christian Right and the Moral Majority in the 1980s, began speaking of gun ownership as a “God-given right”: “Our NRA Members stand foremost in the struggle to protect and preserve all our God-given, constitutional and long-accepted rights. We stand foremost among those who see and recognize clearly the unfailing mix and combination of those rights with the right of the people to keep and bear arms.”<sup>12</sup> Reference to the right to keep and bear arms as “God-given” was first made by Carter and later by NRA president Charlton Heston (1998-2003) and current NRA CEO Wayne LaPierre among others.

Merton experienced the pervasiveness of guns near his monastery. He often mentioned that he heard gunfire from hunters and others continually passing through his monastery’s property in Gethsemani, Kentucky or from nearby Fort Knox. “Someone reported a deer on the property. I haven’t seen it, but a deer doesn’t have a chance in this part of the world. The Kentuckians are hopeless madmen with a gun. They shoot everything. It is pathological, really, The wild life around here ain’t got it so good. I wish there was something that could be done about it, but not all levels of life in the Commonwealth are completely rational.”<sup>13</sup> It even caused him to comment: “Why live on a rifle range?” (*OSM* 164).

The culture of weapons in the United States spread throughout the world through films, TV and the media. On his Asian pilgrimage, he notes: “Movie posters – those Asian movie posters with the strange, enormous faces of violent or demented Western gods, the enormous gunners, surrounded

by impossible writings. They are a crass, camp deification of the more obvious emotions: love, hate, desire, greed, revenge. Why not John Wayne with eight arms? Well, he has enough guns already. Or the Dance of Shiva – with Sinatra” (*OSM* 215). “There are more guns in the movie posters here. More military bases. More soldiers” (*OSM* 227).

Even though Merton saw the culture of gun violence everywhere, he disagreed with the main premise of paleontologist Robert Ardrey’s book entitled *African Genesis*: that man’s killer instinct would never change: “He is totally and slavishly committed to a philosophy of ironbound determinism which is dominated by one inexorable obsession: that ape with the club. *Because* man descended in a direct line from an ape with a club, then he is predetermined to be a killer, he is before all else a killer, and it is folly to even consider him being anything else” (*NA* 170). In “Man Is a Gorilla with a Gun,” his review of Ardrey’s book, Merton said that this kind of thinking “abounded in the Europe of Mussolini, of Hitler, of Goebbels” (*NA* 171). Ardrey’s thinking ran counter to solving the problem of violence in the twentieth century.

The problem of violence is rooted in a kind of societal schizophrenia. As Merton said in his introduction to the book *Gandhi on Non-Violence*:

It is a crisis of *sanity* first of all. The problems of the nations are the problems of mentally deranged people, but magnified a thousand times because they have the full, straight-faced approbation of a schizoid society, schizoid national structures, schizoid military and business complexes, and, need one add, schizoid religious sects. “We are at war with ourselves,” said Coomaraswamy, “and therefore at war with one another. Western man is unbalanced, and the question, Can he recover himself? is a very real one.”<sup>14</sup>

Merton echoed the same theme of the “mental climate” in *The Nonviolent Alternative*: “Therefore one of the most important tasks of the moment is to recognize the great problem of the *mental climate* in which we live. Our minds are filled with images which call for violent and erratic reactions” (*NA* 68). It is no wonder that individuals in our society use violence to solve their own problems.

But does societal madness translate to mental illness of the individual mass murderers? Or is mental health merely a smoke screen to avoid discussion about gun control? The insanity of the culture turns the question of mental illness on its head. That person who seemed the sanest became the most terrible. Adolf Eichmann’s actions exemplify how the definition of sanity has lost its meaning:

The sanity of Eichmann is disturbing. We equate sanity with a sense of justice, with humaneness, with prudence, with the capacity to love and understand other people. We rely on the sane people of the world to preserve it from barbarism, madness, destruction. And now it begins to dawn on us that it is precisely the *sane* ones who are the most dangerous. . . . We can no longer assume that because a man is “sane” he is therefore in his “right mind.” The whole concept of sanity in a society where spiritual values have lost their meaning is itself meaningless.<sup>15</sup>

One of the worst examples of mass shootings was committed by an individual who had been convicted of domestic violence abuse. On November 5, 2017, Devin Patrick Kelley murdered 26

people, including an unborn child, and wounded 22 others, then killed himself at the First Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs, Texas. It was the deadliest shooting in an American place of worship in modern history.<sup>16</sup> Kelley was prohibited by law from purchasing or possessing firearms and ammunition due to a domestic violence conviction in a court-martial while in the United States Air Force, but the Air Force had failed to record the conviction with the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Even though there was no record or proof of mental illness, the then President of the United States, Donald Trump, immediately proclaimed that this incident was due to mental illness, not lax gun control: “After offering condolences to the families and community impacted by the tragedy, President Donald Trump said the shooting was the result of a ‘mental health problem’ – not that deriving from lax gun laws. ‘We have a lot of mental health problems in our country, as do other countries,’ Trump said on Monday. ‘But this isn’t a guns situation.’”<sup>17</sup> Trump’s response was the typical knee-jerk reaction the American public has come to expect from its politicians. There was no reason to confine the discussion to just two alternatives and with the wave of his hand proclaiming, “this isn’t a guns situation” rather one of mental health! An extensive database, compiled by researchers at the Columbia University Irving Medical Center and the New York State Psychiatric Institute, is the largest catalog of mass shootings and mass murder in the world. This research finds that mental illness is not a key factor in most mass shootings: “serious mental illness – specifically psychosis – is not a key factor in most mass shootings or other types of mass murder. Approximately 5% of mass shootings are related to severe mental illness.”<sup>18</sup>

In the one reference that Merton had to mass shootings in his writings, he stated Charles Whitmore’s brain tumor was not the “decisive cause” to his killing of 14 people and injuring 31 other people at the University of Texas on August 1, 1966. At that time, this was the largest mass shooting in US history, being surpassed 18 years later by the San Ysidro McDonald’s massacre:<sup>19</sup> “(Nothing new – bombs closer and closer to Hanoi – the Texas killer had a tumor on the brain, yes, but that was not the decisive ‘cause’ – does the Pentagon have a tumor on the brain? Maybe. Tumor of power)” (*LL* 130). Doubtless Merton would not have opposed improvements in mental health care to help to stem the tide of mass shootings. However, the true resolution to violence in Merton’s eyes, whether it be that of nations or individuals, was spiritual.

Much as in our time, gun control was a much-debated topic in Merton’s day, due to the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, and the political and racial violence that had erupted in the streets across America. At that time, the governing national legislation on gun control was over 30 years old. The 1934 National Firearms Act’s objective had been to eliminate gangster violence, using machine guns and sawed-off shotguns prevalent in the 1930s.<sup>20</sup> But these weapons were not even banned, just taxed. The objective of the Gun Control Act of 1968 was to deal with mail-order weapons. It was enacted after much political wrangling in the year of Merton’s death.<sup>21</sup>

In a letter from Merton to his friend, the poet Robert Lax, he references in his own poetic free form the issues in the 1960s gun control debate: “they have RIFLED – repeat: rilfed! – the golf compartment or the gove companion. THIS RILFING IS TOO MUCH. It has to stop. End Rilfs. Flog Rolfs. Catch the rilf in flagrante derilfo. Next thing you know there will be an assassination committed with a RILF. This is the pernicious sournoiserie with which the criminal element is about to get around the gun law. Ordering Rilfs by mail. Not covered by the Law” (*RJ* 185 [6/22/68]). After the

first, correct, spelling of rifle, Merton creates his own word “rilf.” To him the word “rifle,” which had been used to kill a president and the foremost civil rights leader of his time, was unspeakable. He knows there are too many weapons: “THIS RILFING IS TOO MUCH. It has to stop. End Rilfs. Flog Rolfs.”

Merton might have advocated for stricter gun control laws, but he knew that the real, ultimate answer to prevent violence was creating an environment of love; only then could laws work: “where 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” (*NA* 62).

Two individuals whose stances on nonviolence Merton admired so greatly in the twentieth century were Pope John XXIII and Mahatma Gandhi. John XXIII emphasized in his encyclical *Pacem in Terris* that the solution to violence could not be found in “liberal slogans and pious programs” (*GNV* 20). Gandhi believed the answer was to turn to the law of love, even though it seemed noble but impossible. Too many people only saw evil in others. According to Merton, man must trust God and through Him we can trust others: “It would be sentimental folly to expect men to trust one another when they obviously cannot be trusted. But at least they can learn to trust God. . . . If they trust and love God, Who is infinitely wise and Who rules the lives of men, permitting them to use their freedom even to the point of almost incredible abuse, they can love men who are evil” (*NSC* 118).

As he said in “The Machine Gun in the Fallout Shelter,” “A Christian is committed to the belief that Love and Mercy are the most powerful forces on earth. Hence every Christian is bound by his baptismal vocation to seek, as far as he can, with God’s grace to make those forces effective in his life, to the point where they dominate all his actions” (*NA* 105). Like John XXIII and Gandhi, like Merton, we must all trust in the “law of love.” With hope we can turn the culture away from violent solutions toward nonviolent ones. Gun violence does not have to be the answer to our problems. But this change will only occur one person at a time, one family at a time, one nation at a time. This is the final answer to the insanity of mass shootings: each one of us must start with ourselves.

1. Thomas Merton, *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977) 626-27.
2. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage. Journals, vol. 5: 1963-1965*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 17.
3. Thomas Merton, *The Other Side of the Mountain: The End of the Journey. Journals, vol. 7: 1967-1968*, ed. Patrick Hart (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1998) 66 (subsequent references will be cited as “*OSM*” parenthetically in the text). The reference is to Merton’s Letter to the Editor on Vietnam in the March 1968 issue of *U.S. Catholic*, congratulating the magazine “for taking a clear and courageous stand” against the immorality of the Vietnam War (photocopy in the archives of the Thomas Merton Center [TMC] at Bellarmine University).
4. See “List of Mass Shootings” (Wikipedia.com); other enumerations, defining a mass shooting as an incident in which three or more people have been killed or wounded, are very much higher.
5. Thomas Merton, *Learning to Love: Exploring Solitude and Freedom. Journals, vol. 6: 1966-1967*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1997) 288; subsequent references will be cited as “*LL*” parenthetically in the text.
6. “Gun Ownership by Country 2022” (Worldpopulationreview.com).
7. Thomas Merton, *The Nonviolent Alternative*, ed. Gordon C. Zahn (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980) xxiii; subsequent references will be cited as “*NA*” parenthetically in the text.

8. See Elizabeth MacBride, “America’s Gun Business Is \$28B. The Gun Violence Business Is Bigger,” *Forbes Magazine* (November 25, 2018).
9. Published as “The Shelter Ethic” in *The Catholic Worker* 28 (November 1961) 1, 5; *NA* 103-106.
10. See chapter 16, “The Root of War Is Fear,” in Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961) 1112-22; subsequent references will be cited as “*NSC*” parenthetically in the text.
11. Chelsea Bailey, “More Americans Killed by Gun Violence Since 1968 than in All US Wars – Combined,” NBC News, October 4, 2017.
12. Jessica Dawson, “Shall not Be Infringed: How the NRA Used Religious Language to Transform the Meaning of the Second Amendment,” *The Nation* (July 2, 2019).
13. November 19, 1962 letter to Thérèse Lentfoehr, in Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989) 242; subsequent references will be cited as “*RJ*” parenthetically in the text.
14. Thomas Merton, ed., *Gandhi on Non-Violence: Selected Texts from Non-Violence in Peace and War* (New York: New Directions, 1965) 3; subsequent references will be cited as “*GNV*” parenthetically in the text.
15. Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966) 46-47.
16. “Sutherland Springs Church Shooting” (Wikipedia.com).
17. Jennifer Calfas and Mahita Gajanan, “What We Know about the South Texas Church Shooting,” TIME online (November 17, 2017).
18. Columbia University Department of Psychiatry, “Mass Shootings and Mental Illness” (July 6, 2022) (columbiapsychiatry.org).
19. “Texas Tower Shooting of 1966” (Britannica.com).
20. “The National Firearm Act of 1934” (Encyclopedia.com).
21. “Gun Control Act of 1968” (Encyclopedia.com).

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