

identification with and compassion for all humanity, particularly those most excluded and oppressed.

Merton first mentions his “great admiration and compassion for the Negroes” in his journal of March 1961 (*Turning toward the World*, 99), where he is both impressed by their dedication to nonviolence and aware of the ambivalence of an approach that could simply invite a violent response from those whose status is challenged. In encountering three significant authors over the next couple of years, Merton discovers important principles of the contemporary struggle for racial justice. Reading Martin Luther King’s *Stride toward Freedom*, on the first major campaign of the movement, the Montgomery bus boycott, he recognizes the intrinsically Christian dimension of the movement in King’s description of his own spiritual development (119); in March 1962 he is “moved and disturbed” by the experiences of John Howard Griffin (soon to become a close friend) as described in *Black Like Me*, Griffin’s memoir of dyeing his skin and traveling through the South, and concludes, “What there is in the South is not a Negro problem but a white problem” (213); after finishing two books by James Baldwin he comments in February 1963 on two of Baldwin’s key ideas, that “liberation of the Negroes is necessary for the liberation of the whites” and that little is to be expected from “white liberals, who sympathize but never do anything” (297). All these ideas will show up in Merton’s own writings on the civil rights issue, beginning with his review of William Melvin Kelley’s novel *A Different Drummer* in September 1963 and his “Letters to a White Liberal” two months later (both reprinted in *Seeds of Destruction*, published in November 1964).

In the review of Kelley’s novel, he first raises the idea that the movement for racial justice is an expression of *kairos*, a time of crisis and decision that calls for a radical change of heart and change of direction (*Seeds of Destruction*, 76). Consequently, Merton insists, the call for integration cannot simply mean the inclusion of blacks into an otherwise unchanged social structure, but rather, a renewal of fundamental human values of liberty and community that

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Thomas Merton’s sensitivity to the issue of racial injustice in the United States dates back to his time in the summer of 1941 working at Catherine de Hueck’s Friendship House in Harlem, which he describes in his autobiography as “a living condemnation of our so-called ‘culture’ . . . a divine indictment against New York City and the people who live downtown and make their money downtown” (*Seven Storey Mountain*, 345). Thus, his deep interest in the movement for civil rights in the 1960s, like his concern for other social issues such as war and poverty, is a return to commitments from his premonastic years, now viewed through the lens of contemplative

will bring all, black and white, beyond "passive subjection to the lotus-eating commercial society that [the white man] has tried to create for himself, and which is shot through with falsity and unfreedom from top to bottom" (86). The same message is developed at greater length in the "Letters to a White Liberal," which situates the freedom struggle both in the context of the Christian responsibility to manifest the love of Christ and the truth of human dignity to all, and in relation to "liberal" idealism that approves of social reform so long as it does not adversely affect one's own comfortable living arrangements. Merton points out the inadequacy of a shallow optimism that can easily harden into opposition to social change if it threatens to get out of hand. He notes the insufficiency of legal changes that are not reflected in changes in attitude, and disagrees with those "who blithely suppose that somehow the Negroes (both north and south) will gradually and quietly 'fit in' to white society exactly as it is" (29). He characterizes a genuinely Catholic attitude toward racial justice as one that considers different races as correlative and mutually complementary, each contributing different gifts to a fully formed humanity (61). Again he calls for recognition of "the providential 'hour,' the *kairos* not merely of the Negro, but of the white man" (65), which is revealed in the nonviolent and deeply Christian movement for liberation led by Martin Luther King. The purpose of the movement is not only to secure social, political, and economic rights for oppressed blacks, but also to "awaken the conscience of the white man to the awful reality of his injustice and of his sin, so that he will be able to see that the Negro problem is really a *White* problem: that the cancer of injustice and hate which is eating white society and is only partly manifested in racial segregation with all its consequences, is *rooted in the heart of the white man himself*" (46).

Merton is not optimistic that whites will respond to this moment of decision, and he finds the subsequent shift away from nonviolence toward the more confrontational and even violent approach of the Black Power movement to be largely a consequence of white failure to heed the summons to redemptive transfor-

mation of individuals and society. In "Religion and Race in the United States," which first appeared in September 1964, he praises the movement led by King as "the greatest example of Christian faith in action in the social history of the United States" (*Faith and Violence*, 131), but he considers that the moment of *kairos* has passed, and a more destructive ethos has taken the lead. He nevertheless concludes that the failure of white Christianity to respond adequately to the invitation to conversion can actually be a purificatory experience, a dispelling of triumphalist illusions, a humbling admission that "we are not a special kind of privileged being, that our faith does not exempt us from facing the mysterious realities of the world with the same limitations as everybody else, and with the same capacity for human failure" (142). If the turn to violence on the part of blacks can lead to an awareness of the structural violence built into the social fabric of American institutions, Merton believes, then ultimately it can bring about authentic social transformation, though he is far from certain when or how this could happen.

In his final extended discussion of the civil rights struggle, "The Hot Summer of Sixty-Seven," Merton sees the nihilism and racism of black militants as at least in part a consequence of the violence of American power in Southeast Asia, as well as a violent reaction to civil rights struggles at home. He considers "the new segregationism" of the Black Power movement as "no improvement" on other racialist ideologies (177), though he is able to understand and even to empathize to some extent with the frustration and anger that prompted it. His conclusion is that Christianity by its very nature transcends all racial divisions in Christ, and that the task of the Christian is to "live up to what we ourselves profess to believe" regardless of how it is received (179). As he writes in his introduction to the section on the race issue in *Faith and Violence*, the Christian is called to "seek out effective and authentic ways of peace in the midst of violence," to identify the causes of injustice that fuel violence both in racial unrest and in war, and to critique the ways in which even religious institutions might consciously or unconsciously be profiting

from structures of injustice. He concludes this final statement on racial justice and injustice by declaring, "I for one remain *for* the Negro. I trust him, I recognize the overwhelming justice of his complaint, . . . I owe him support, not in his ranks but in my own, among the whites who refuse to trust him or hear him, and who want to destroy him" (129). One gesture of such support was a retreat planned for Martin Luther King and his associates in the spring of 1968 at Gethsemani, which was postponed because of the trip to Memphis from which King never returned — a tragedy that put a definitive end to the predominantly Christian and nonviolent phase of the civil rights movement and confirmed for Merton "the feeling that 1968 is a beast of a year" (*Other Side of the Mountain*, 78). POC

SEE ALSO FAITH AND VIOLENCE; RACISM;
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