thomas merton and the awakening of social consciousness

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The decade of the sixties bore witness to many broad and often tumultuous changes within American society. Among the more dramatic of these changes was the marked reawakening of social consciousness—an awareness that there are intimate and unbreakable connections between the private life of the individual and the public life of society, and that personal responsibility, though founded in the private, must extend to the public as well. It is impossible to determine accurately how pervasive this reawakening was; certainly it would be risky to read too much into the wide and often intense publicity it received and to conclude that it had penetrated every section of the population at equal strength.

One may safely conclude, however, that the new sense of social concern became the trademark of the country's intellectuals, especially those associated with journalism, the academic life and the church. The press, which as an institution had been considered during the fifties to be more or less a supporter of the governmental establishment, became in the sixties a gadfly for social reform and was largely responsible for bringing about the eventual change in official policy regarding the Vietnam war. Much has been said about the general mood of apathy which characterized college campuses of the fifties, and although this judgment is in some ways superficial, it is essentially accurate. A description by Jack Kerouac recalls what was then a not uncommon academic atmosphere: "Japhy and I were kind of outlandish-looking on the campus in our old clothes in fact Japhy was considered an eccentric around the campus, which is the usual thing for campuses and college people to think whenever a real man appears on the scene—colleges being nothing but grooming schools for the middle class nonentity which usually finds its perfect expression on the outskirts of the campus in

rows of well-to-do houses with lawns and television sets in each living room with everybody looking at the same thing and thinking the same thing at the same time. . . ."[1] The campus he is talking about is Berkeley! We are all familiar enough with the radically contrasting picture of the sixties.

Traditionally, the most conservative of social institutions has been the Church. (Incidentally, I am using this term in the broadest possible sense, to include Protestant, Catholic and Jewish religious groups.) This has been as true in America as anywhere else, with an important difference. Because of the pluralistic nature of religious life in this country, no single group has ever had the kind of sustained predominant influence upon national life as has been the case in Europe—in England, France or Spain, for example. The Church, or more correctly churches, did not make a practice of attempting directly to influence political decisions. Rarely did they have to. The tactic was different, one of indirection: a matter of producing the "good citizen" who would dutifully support the social ideology espoused by the churches. In the sixties this pattern changed substantially as more and more churchmen took the virtually unprecedented stand of speaking out against either the policies of the federal government or against general aspects of American culture. This was not merely a matter of isolated instances here and there, but a pattern of behavior which was markedly different from that of the preceding decade. Among the churchmen who gained national prominence for their outspokenness were Daniel and Philip Berrigan, James Groppi, Sloan Coffin, Malcolm Boyd and Abraham Heschel. The extent of the new pattern of behavior was indicated by the resurgence of a group like the Fellowship of Reconciliation and the founding of another, Clergy and Others United Against the War in Vietnam.

Thomas Merton, who died in December 1968, was one of the most notable of the American churchmen who experienced an awakening of social consciousness in the sixties and began energetically to employ his talents as a writer to bring other people, particularly Catholics, to a similar awakening. Because of the many ways in which he was so thoroughly a "man of his time," becoming acquainted with the nature of his experience can provide us with a better insight into the larger phenomenon in which he was an important actor. Merton was a monk, but whatever stereotypes that might call forth would very likely be of little help in understanding him, for he was far from being a staid, tradition-bound denizen of the cloister.

The problem of classifying Merton would be simple could we stop with the conclusion that he was a famous "spiritual writer" and nothing more.[2] In fact, he was considerably more: a good minor poet, a competent theologian, a general philosopher, a sensitive literary critic, an accomplished translator as well as biographer, a so-so novelist, a good historian, a skilled journalist and a remarkably accurate prophet. In all,

his works, which number over fifty volumes, provide a rich and highly diversified body of reading.

From the point of view I am taking in this essay, Merton's works are easily divisible into two large categories, categories which are characterized by the predominant attitude he takes toward social issues in each. These two categories are worth pausing over because they represent the most dramatic and the clearest index of the change in his social outlook.

First of all, let me state the case in the simplest way possible, after which I will concentrate on elaboration and analysis. From the time he gained national recognition as a writer (we can use 1948 as a convenient benchmark, the year *The Seven Storey Mountain* was published)[3] until about the middle of the 1950's, there was a notable lack of social concern displayed in his writings. From the middle fifties until the end of his life, however, that pattern was reversed; he began to dedicate more and more time to social issues, and during the decade of the sixties most of what he wrote related directly or indirectly to the problems of society, chiefly those dealing with war and race. For convenience and for want of anything more imaginative, in subsequent discussion of these two phases in Merton's writing I will refer to the first as the other-worldly phase and to the second as the this-worldly phase.

In the other-worldly phase Merton devoted himself primarily to poetry which dealt almost exclusively with religious themes, to biography, to hagiography and to meditative prose. Among specific titles which can be cited are *Thirty Poems, A Man in the Divided Sea, Figures for an Apocalypse, What Are These Wounds?, Exile Ends in Glory, The Waters of Siloe* and *The Seven Storey Mountain.* At this point in his career Merton was advocating, implicitly if not explicitly, a rather strict separation between the religious life which he had adopted by becoming a monk, and the "world," the secular society from which he had withdrawn. Clearly, life in the monastery was superior to that outside the walls.

> These sheds and cloisters
> The very stones and beams are all befriended
> By cleaner sun, by rarer birds, by lovelier flowers.[4]

In contrast to this idyllic setting there was the secular alternative:

> The pale world, white as plaster,
> (Its doors are dumb, its windows far too blind
> for lamentation)
> Dies like problematical news.
>
> We have receded from the things
> You printed on those unidentified facades.
> We barely dream about the frontispiece
> Of your collapsing palaces.
> We can refuse your tin.[5]

At this time he was more concerned with the individual than with the community, and this concern sprang directly from the attitude toward religion which was then governing his life, an attitude which was heavily tinged by Romanticism. He saw the religious quest as a highly private affair, a lonely, Byronesque confrontation between the single soul and God. According to this point of view each person works out his salvation pretty much in isolation from the rest of mankind; in fact, society or the "world" can prove to be a serious obstacle along the road to perfection.

> Here in these white-hot solitudes
> We have outstripped the level of deception;
> We are beyond the doors of devil-trap.[6]

He believed that a person draws closer to God in spite of human society rather than because of it, and that consequently the monastic life he was leading was the most efficient means to sanctity.

No Man Is An Island, published in 1955, was the book which first heralded the fact that there was to be a distinct shift in emphasis in his attitude toward society. The very first sentence contains the clue: "A happiness that is sought for ourselves alone can never be found, for happiness that is diminished by being shared is not big enough to make us happy."[7] But it was in *Disputed Questions* (1960) that the case became abundantly clear and he began to treat explicitly of specific social problems and to demonstrate that he had definitely moved away from his other-worldly attitude and was adopting a new stance. There are two essays in the book which are worth calling special attention to, "Christianity and Totalitarianism," and a lengthy (sixty-seven pages) critical commentary on the Russian novelist Boris Pasternak. The thesis of the first essay is that both the Eastern and Western camps are in imminent danger of succumbing completely to totalitarianism. The antidote to this poisonous progression, he argued, was Christianity, for Christianity stands opposed to a totalitarian view of life. Bringing it down to the level of the individual, he maintained that it was the duty of each Christian to dedicate all his energies to combatting the spread of totalitarianism. The most significant aspect of the essay was his clearly stated contention that it will no longer do for the Christian to turn his back on society and run off to the mountains. Each individual has serious responsibilities toward society. "The task of the Christian in our times is the same as it has always been: to build the Kingdom of God in this world."[8]

When Merton spoke of Christianity as unalterably opposed to totalitarianism he was proceeding from one of the fundamental assumptions of his thought: that not every person, or group, which is called Christian is in fact Christian. He subscribed to Kierkegaard's distinction between Christianity and Christendom, and, like Kierkegaard, he seemed to believe that the number of true Christians, that is, those whose belief in the Gospels is actually reflected in the way they conduct their lives, would never be large. If the habit did not make the monk—a truism

with which he was quite familiar—by the same token simply the name Christian did not make a Christian. He was well aware that there are many so-called Christians, citizens of Christendom, who in one way or another further the cause of totalitarianism, but by reason of the fact that such people were not true Christians, what they did could not be laid at the feet of Christianity.

The essay on Boris Pasternak has a special significance because it provides us with a solid, albeit disguised, rationale for Merton's change of heart regarding social issues. In the main, the essay is a rhapsodic eulogy for a writer whom he admired deeply, as well as for a friend and correspondent.[9] From it we conclude that he admired Pasternak as much, perhaps more, for the way he lived, for his attitude toward his society, as for the way he wrote. To Merton, Pasternak was a man of complete, unimpeachable integrity, a man who, in addition, had to pay dearly to preserve his integrity. He lived in a society whose leaders eventually came to regard him as an enemy and, because he would not modify his views to please the regime, made life very difficult for him. In time, his identity as a writer and as a man came to rest in great part upon his role as an opponent of the status quo. Merton went from admiring this kind of integrity to imagining it was his duty to imitate it. He began to regard himself as a writer who had essentially the same kind of obligation toward society which Pasternak had envisioned for himself. But in doing so, and because of the depth of his conviction on issues such as the Vietnam war, he allowed himself to see more analogues between Soviet and American society than in fact existed. For a sensitive intellectual, there were undoubtedly many frustrating aspects to life in America during the decade of the sixties, but conditions were still a far cry from those to be found in Russia. Specifically, an American writer was subjected to nowhere near the kind of pressures and prohibitions which were the predictable lot of the Russian writer who wanted to produce anything but formulistic socialist realism. But whatever exaggerations there were in Merton's tendency to liken his plight to Pasternak's, it did show that henceforth he was going to involve himself more directly in the society in which he lived.

In order to highlight the basic distinction between Merton's otherworldly and this-worldly phase, I have painted with rather broad strokes. Some important qualifications are necessary. It would be a distortion, for example, to maintain that there was nothing in Merton's earlier writings (i.e., pre-1955) to indicate a man who was sympathetic toward his fellows in the world and sensitive to the problems of society. One has only to note that while he was a student at Columbia his social consciousness was acute, as is evidenced by such things as his membership in the Communist Party. He was reading widely at the time in Marx and other social philosophers and occasionally took part in demonstrations, and he had taken the "Oxford Pledge" not to become involved in any

war for whatever cause. His decision to convert to Roman Catholicism (1938) and his subsequently joining a monastic community (1941) can, it is true, be interpreted as indications that much of his original social concern had cooled—in large measure because of his disillusionment with Communism—but it did not die. In his early monastic writings we detect him regularly referring to the thesis that the monk's action of turning from the world to lead a life of seclusion is praiseworthy only to the degree that in rejecting the world he accepts it. The idea behind the paradox is that the monk rejects the material accoutrements of his society, but he does not reject its human components. In fact, the monk's life of prayer and sacrifice is primarily for the people in the world, that they, like he, may come to see that the "one thing necessary" is to love God above all else and to lead one's life according to that love. Merton saw an important bond of responsibility which united the monk, on a spiritual plane, with the society of which he was inextricably a part. After his views altered, he continued to argue that the essential responsibility of the monk toward the world was spiritual; the difference lay in the fact that he had other responsibilities as well. It was still vitally important that he pray and sacrifice for his fellow man, but he must also aid him by more direct means as well. This meant, among other things, taking a stand on social and political issues.

That qualification provides an important link between the two phases of his thought, for Merton continued throughout his life to emphasize the primacy of the spiritual. If he saw it as necessary for the monk to become more actively involved in the problems of society, he was adamant in insisting that such involvement must be based upon and motivated by considerations which were supported by transcendent principles. Action which lacked a metaphysical dimension, he argued, soon degenerated into activism, action for the sake of action. Activism was the fruit of the fallacious notion that so long as you were "involved," doing something, anything, you were having a good effect; you were furthering the cause of peace or racial justice.[10] Not only was this a fallacious notion; it was also dangerous, for the person or group who makes a be-all and end-all of action inevitably succumbs to the non-solution of violence. Those who put all their trust in action eventually suffer the frustration which follows upon the realization that their action is not changing things in the manner that they thought it would, or as fast as they thought it would, and in their frustration they attempt to force the issue. If others are too blind to see the rightness of the cause, then, by God, they will *make* them see. The sad end result, too often, is that there is no difference whatsoever between the antagonists.[11] Those who claim to be for peace and for love are just as violent and hateful as the avowed proponents of war and hatred. We are reduced to the final absurdity of having desperately dedicated people who are quite willing to kill for peace, to hate for the sake of love.

His total commitment to non-violence and his sensitivity to how easily the activist mentality can degenerate into violence are both illustrated by his sharp reaction to the two protest suicides which took place in this country, within eight days of one another, in 1965. In the first instance, a young Quaker burned himself to death in front of the Pentagon; in the second a staff member of *The Catholic Worker* (a paper to which Merton contributed many articles) did the same in front of the United Nations building. The second incident, according to Gordon Zahn, almost led Merton to sever ties with organized peace activity, specifically with the Catholic Peace Fellowship, one of the peace groups with which he was closely associated. Initially, he requested that his name be withdrawn as a supporter of the group, for fear that people would think that he condoned such nihilistic acts. In the end he was persuaded to continue in his position as a sponsor of the group, with the understanding that such sponsorship did not "imply automatic approval of any and every move made by this group, still less of individual action on the part of its members, acting on their own responsibility."[12] Toward the end of his life he seemed to grow more and more skeptical of organized activity, no matter how noble the cause toward which it was directed, and more than once he officially "signed-off" from public involvement, giving notice that he had said all he could say and done all he could do for peace. It was time for him to concentrate on being a monk, he claimed, for insofar as he made any contribution toward the betterment of human-kind, it was primarily to the degree that he was loyal to his monastic identity.

One can easily see that the two phases of Merton's writing, which roughly coincide, respectively, with the decades of the fifties and the sixties, reflect the attitude toward social issue which predominated in each of those decades. Americans in the fifties were supremely conscious of living under the shadow of the bomb, and the main effect of this consciousness was an inclination to withdraw into a smaller, safer world. A highly confined togetherness was the watchword. Concern for social problems was minimal, probably because of an unadmitted conviction that society as presently known was not going to be around all that much longer. Incongruously juxtaposed to this tacit doomsday outlook was a business-as-usual ethic. Though living on the brink, Americans were frenetically active in adding to their affluence, as if an accumulation of material goods would, by some sort of magical process, effectively dissipate the shadows which brooded in the background. The basic selfishness which fed this kind of activity served to obviate the possibility of a balanced social consciousness. Popular religious leaders of the decade, though not exactly condoning America's rampant materialism, nonetheless did little to emphasize the social dimension of the religious messages they conveyed. Billy Graham was able to draw thousands to his evangelistic crusades, but what he stressed was personal conversion. Little or

nothing was said of the need to reform society. This other-worldly orientation is tellingly reflected in three religious books which were very popular during the fifties: Fulton J. Sheen's *Peace of Soul,* Joshua Liebmann's *Peace of Mind,* and Norman Vincent Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking.*

There is little doubt that Merton was influenced, at least indirectly, during the late forties and the fifties by what was then the prevailing attitude of American churchmen, and intellectuals generally, toward social issues. At any rate, given the fact that that attitude roughly coincided with his own, which he had arrived at in a fairly independent fashion, there was not much reason why he should have stood out as one who was attempting to buck the current. The situation is considerably different, however, when we focus attention upon his this-worldly phase. Here Merton, though certainly not beyond the influence of others, was on the whole more the influencer rather than the influenced, and in fact it was he who contributed as much as anyone in bringing about among American churchmen a renaissance of social concern during the sixties. He was definitely a leader in this respect.[13]

I have already mentioned *No Man Is An Island* and *Disputed Questions* as being pivotal books, in that they were the first to display his new attitude toward society. After these two, the titles were to multiply rapidly, and Merton tended to state his views more and more forthrightly as time progressed. Among the books which best characterize his this-worldly phase are *Breakthrough to Peace, Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander, Emblems of a Season of Fury, Faith and Violence, Redeeming the Time* and *Seeds of Destruction.*

There were two specific issues which Merton focused on in his writing on social issues, race and war. The choice was a deliberate one. He considered these two issues to be the most pressing which faced the modern world, and the former, of course, was of particular importance to the United States. He was especially sensitive to the race issue in this country, a fact which very likely had its roots in the experience he had working in a Harlem settlement house before he entered the monastery. Out of this experience came the moving description of the degraded condition of ghetto blacks which is found in *The Seven Storey Mountain,* a passage which so impressed Eldridge Cleaver that he regularly referred to it as part of his Black Muslim lectures. Part of it reads: "All the senses and imagination and sensibilities and emotions and sorrows and desires and hopes and ideas of a race with vivid feelings and deep emotional reactions are forced in upon themselves, bound inward by an iron ring of frustration: the prejudice which hems them in with its four insurmountable walls."[14] When the black ghettoes exploded in the summer of 1967 Merton was perhaps the least surprised of all Americans, for he had effectively predicted the outbreak some three years before. In *Seeds of Destruction,* published in 1964, he wrote that "we can now expect

violent, though perhaps disorganized and sporadic, initiatives in force around the edges of the Negro slums."[15] The historian Martin Marty reviewed the book the same year it came out and chided Merton for his unwarranted pessimism. After the riots, however, Marty returned to the book and came up with a revised analysis. "What bothers me," he said in a review addressed to Merton, "is the degree of accuracy in your predictions and prophecies in general."[16]

Merton was reluctant to take any credit for prophecy in this instance, for he felt that what he had predicted could have been predicted by anyone who had even an inkling of the conditions under which the majority of black Americans were living. In 1941 Harlem seemed to him a "seething cauldron."[17] He knew that the conditions he observed there at the time had not substantially improved in the intervening twenty years. If anything, they had grown worse. It took neither genius nor preternatural perspicuity to conclude, then, that if the pressure continued to build within the black communities, and if the larger and controlling white community took no appreciable steps to alleviate that pressure, which he felt it did not, then the blow-up was only a matter of time. The fact was, however, that when it did come it was a shock to many white Americans. This, for Merton, only underscored the total obliviousness of white America to the nature and extent of the crisis. Conversely it is a tribute to Merton's perceptiveness as an amateur sociologist that he, who was living in a secluded monastery, seemed often to be ahead of the professionals in the accuracy of his assessment of not only the situation of blacks in America, but sociological realities in general. At least one sociologist, Professor Gordon Zahn, saw fit to take note of Merton's abilities in this respect.[18]

Merton turned out to be one of the most outspoken critics of the Vietnam war. He regarded it as an "overwhelming atrocity,"[19] a war which was clearly "immoral and eminently hurtful to American interests."[20] That is categorical enough. As we have seen, he had demonstrated a consistent aversion to war since his youth. Put simply, his attitude was that war, though at times appearing to be an effective expedient, is in fact a non-solution to human problems. "There is one winner, only one winner, in war. The winner is war itself. Not truth, not justice, not liberty, not morality. These are vanquished."[21] He never adopted a position of total pacifism, however, stopping short of maintaining that war under any and all circumstances was immoral and leaving the door open for the justification of defensive warfare. This was a concession to the standard Christian theological position on war, formulated by St. Augustine, a position which he generally abided by although he found many difficulties with it.[22] The advent of nuclear weapons had profoundly altered the nature and meaning of war, with the result that many of the old formulas would no longer do.

It was in great part because he felt that many professional theologians

were shirking their responsibility in not dealing with contemporary warfare that Merton decided, though he did not look upon himself as a theologian, to tackle the subject himself. He felt that the situation was extremely volatile, given the nature of American society at the beginning of the sixties. Americans were displaying "almost total passivity and irresponsibility on the moral level," and on the other hand, a "demonic activism in social, military, and political life."[23] It was this combination, he felt, which led to the pathological merry-go-round of the arms race. The stock-piling of nuclear weapons was a puerile game, the consequences of which could be disastrous for the human race. He scoffed at attempts to rationalize America's "first strike capability," and expressed serious concern over President Kennedy's policies. In sum, his attitude toward nuclear war was much more definite than his attitude toward war in general: nuclear war was immoral.

Merton's attempts to compose formal theological statements on the subject of war are unsystematic and at times confusing, and in the long run they were not very influential. Of much more weight were his impassioned, impressionistic essays, wherein he launches out against war, not from the point of view that it goes contrary to certain theological or philosophical tenets, but from the point of view that it is inhuman, an insult to the dignity of man. When we read what Merton had to say about the Vietnam war today, much of it may sound hackneyed, but this is so only because a large and vociferous group of American intellectuals eventually came to adopt a position which he was among the first to take. In 1963, for example, a year before the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, when stories about Vietnam ran on the back pages of the newspapers, Merton was awarded the Pax Medal from the Massachusetts Political Action for Peace in recognition of his anti-war writings.

His influence in the anti-war movement of the sixties was substantial, as is indicated, among other things, by the frequency with which several activist groups such as the American Friends Service Committee used his writings as source material for the development of their ideologies of resistance. Moreover, as John J. Carey rightly observes, Merton exerted influence on American Catholic radicals, not only in the matter of the war, but on many other matters as well.[24] He did this primarily through his writing, but another means he employed, peculiar to his role as a monk and a priest, was the retreat. On several occasions Merton invited people to the Abbey of Gethsemane for conferences in which he expounded his views on war and various other social issues. One such retreat is noteworthy for suggesting the extent of his influence on anti-war activists. It was held in November, 1964, and its theme was the "Spiritual Roots of Protest." Among the participants were A. J. Muste, John Howard Yoder, Rev. Daniel Berrigan, Rev. Philip Berrigan, Rev. Robert Cunnane and James Forest. Five of the participants were subsequently to be imprisoned for their anti-war activities. The Berrigan

brothers were to be numbered among the "Baltimore Four" and "Catonsville Nine," and Cunnane and James Forest were to become two of the "Milwaukee Fourteen."[25]

We have seen that in all of his social philosophy, Merton preserved a steady suspicion of activism and a firm commitment to non-violence. These two characteristics lend a unique quality to his thought, and they set him apart from many other intellectuals of the sixties who, like him, experienced an awakening of social consciousness. Recall that, for Merton, the activist was, in essence, the "actor" who has gone berserk, one who has come to put almost absolute value on action itself, even to the point where the purposes of the action, if any, are either regarded as of secondary importance or ignored altogether. Such a state, besides the critical fact that it indicates serious mental imbalance on the part of the person in it, is from a practical point of view self-defeating. In the final analysis the activist accomplishes nothing because his activity is directionless, unguided by prudent reflection.

Merton, of course, was trying to be just the opposite of the activist in his own social activity. In attempting to stir up others to commit themselves to social involvement he continually warned of the dangers of activism. This concern about activism, indeed the very concept itself, was a direct product of Merton's religious faith and of his identity as a monk belonging to a contemplative religious order, as I will attempt to show presently. First we must examine the make-up of the "actor," whom Merton sees as the opposite number of the activist. What qualities did Merton want him to have? Above all else he had to be a man of faith, which meant, among other things, that he never lost sight of his essential contingency. He realized that he was a dependent creature living in a world which—however difficult it might be at times to understand—was providentially ordered. This faith, in turn, gave the person in question a core of inner peace, an eye of tranquility in the midst of the storm, which provided the basis of his stability. It was to that peaceful center of his being which he habitually returned to renew himself, and which, to mix a metaphor, prevented him from going off the deep end. The third quality of the "actor" was a lively sense of the limitations of his own actions; it was precisely the lack of this sense which more than anything else transformed a man into an activist. But not only was the "actor" cautious about his own limitations. He was very skeptical of social panaceas—those grandiose schemes which promised overnight to make all the world right for one cause or another. Finally, in a healthy, non-debilitating way, he was acutely conscious of his own complicity in the social evil he was attempting to overcome. This prevented him from being transformed into a self-righteous, stainless crusader who sees himself at war with diabolical forces whose evil is irreversible. For Merton, Hitlers come into the world because there is a bit of the Hitler in us all.

An intriguing aspect of Merton's analysis of the activist personality is

his discussion of the despair which ultimately becomes the dominant factor in the activist's life. On the surface, this despair is the result of the conviction that one's actions are ineffectual. On a deeper plane, however, it is an index of Merton's peculiar brand of prometheanism, whereby a man, in stealing the divine fire, commits an act of gratuitous egotism because the fire was there for the taking in the first place, a gift of God. Promethean man, the activist, goes into despair not because there is no hope but because the hope lies outside himself, and the sign of his despair is his frenetic activity. "For since Prometheus cannot conceive of a true victory, his own triumph is to let the vulture devour his liver: he will be a martyr and a victim, because the gods he has created in his own image represent his own tyrannical demands upon himself. There is only one issue in his struggle with them: glorious defiance in a luxury of despair."[26] Thus the activist is doubly doomed, by a world which has become too much for him, and by his own torturing ego which will not leave him in peace.

In view of what has been said, it is perhaps already evident how Merton's whole concern for activism emerged naturally from his religious faith. It is, of course, a major tenet of the Judaeo-Christian tradition that man depends totally upon God and that what man can do to bring about changes in his environment is always bounded by factors over which he may have no knowledge and/or over which he may have no control. But a more direct, and I think more interesting, influence upon Merton's formulations on this concept was the fact that he was a monk belonging to a community which was traditionally identified as non-active. Though the Order of the Cistercians of the Strict Observance numbers many priests among its members, these clerics do not engage in an active ministry, but, like the rest of the monks, live a quiet, sequestered life whose two main ingredients are prayer and work. Though Merton radically changed his attitude toward society at a certain period in his life, as we have seen, this change was brought about very much within the context of his role as a monk. The question was, How can I, as a monk whose life is dedicated to contemplation, become more involved in social issues? It was never, How can I become less a monk? His strong and fundamental commitment to monasticism, then, acted as a curb on his personal involvement. And that commitment, as well as his total monastic consciousness with its built-in wariness of activity, contributed substantially to his ideas on activism.

It is my judgment that these ideas contributed positively to Merton's activity on behalf of racial justice and world peace, as well as to his social philosophy in general. Particularly, I think it lent to both activity and philosophy an impressive balance. Very seldom did he advocate any kind of activity which was not founded on a rational basis. In the matter of race, he several times made it clear that he could understand the sense of frustration and impatience which prompted American blacks, especially

young militants, to turn to violence to effect the social changes they felt were crucial. But it was one thing to understand activity, another to condone it, and in this matter, despite his deep sympathy for blacks and their cause, Merton never allowed himself to slip carelessly from the one to the other. He probably tried as hard as any white intellectual in America to understand the minds and motivations of his black fellow citizens ("Most of us are congenitally unable to think black," he once said, "and yet that is precisely what we must do before we can even hope to understand the crisis in which we find ourselves."),[27] but he was always careful not to confuse false sympathy with true. True sympathy would recognize the violent route as a dead end, and would not hesitate to call it that, no matter what accusations of "compromiser" or "traitor" it might bring down upon one's head for doing so. Violence is more often than not inspired by hatred, and hatred is a poison which leaves no survivors, which makes the price for using it prohibitive: "If I hate my brother and seek to destroy him, I destroy myself also."[28] Eldridge Cleaver, who agreed with Merton on other issues as well, came eventually to adopt his view on this matter when he admitted that "the price of hating other human beings is loving oneself less."[29]

Perhaps Merton came closest to intemperance in the matter of the Vietnam war. Like many other sincere critics of the conflict, he at times dabbled in simplifications, as when he entertained rather complicated conspiratorial theories to explain American involvement in Vietnam, momentarily forgetting perhaps the variable human capacities for simple bungling on a massive scale. But that was the exception rather than the rule. His tack was to avoid facile dichotomies of good guys versus bad guys, for, whatever might be the temporary psychological comfort of such black-and-white vision, it had little to do with the real world. If he castigated America's role in Vietnam, which he did, it was not to look upon Russia or China or North Vietnam as stalwart and impeccable defenders of all that was just and right and enduringly human. He was not among those intellectuals, many of whom should have known better, who pressed for the instant canonization of Mao Tse-tung and Ho Chi Minh. It is interesting that in his Preface to the Vietnamese edition of *No Man Is An Island,* he makes a judicious effort to avoid tracing the causes of the war to any specific ideological or national sources. Rather, he sees the war as the eruption of a deep sickness which plagues all of mankind, a manifestation of an "inner confusion of men in other nations in different parts of the earth."[30]

This balance in Merton's social philosophy is most clearly manifested, with regard to both racial issues and the war, in his continuing estimate of America and its culture. Ever since his Columbia days he had been a critic of American culture, but only obliquely so. The real target was Western civilization, which he regarded as mortally wounded and stumbling toward its grave. Besides the fact that this has been a favorite notion of

European intellectuals and artists since World War One, it had the peculiar value, for Merton, of putting into a larger perspective what he thought of American culture. In a word, he was much less extreme in his estimate of that culture than were, say, the bitter blacks for whom America became Amerika, or the intense anti-war proponents for whom the country was suddenly transformed into the epitome of everything which was hypocritical and vulgar and generally unconscionable. Thus a Daniel Berrigan, striking the pose of a latter-day St. John of the Cross, could speak of "the pervasive horror and violence of American history."[31] And he was apparently convinced, or at least he said, that "most Americans would find the words of their Constitution and Declaration intolerable."[32] Philip Berrigan spoke of "the long years of my devotion to the flag, to an unreflecting justification of law and order . . . ," a devotion and a justifying process which eventually were to be negated when "the exorcism of [his] soul began,"[33] and he came to see his country in a new, hyper-critical light. The source of these, and so many comparable, attitudes, is a deep and painful disillusionment, a sense of wounded innocence at the harsh revelation that America the pristine was not that pristine after all.

Merton was spared any such disillusionment because he was never under any illusions in the first place as to the nature of the country and its culture. He had a much more cosmopolitan outlook than did the majority of his fellow American intellectuals. Born in France, and receiving most of his basic education in that country and in England, he did not come to live permanently in the United States until he was nineteen. He became an American citizen at the age of thirty-six, mainly, he explained, on account of Emily Dickinson and Henry David Thoreau. Because of this background he was never imbued with the kind of uncritical patriotism which was the burden of other intellectuals and which they divested themselves of, often with trauma, and often not without producing as part of the aftermath a severely distorted conception of the relative virtues and vices of their national culture.

Violence, as we have seen, is inextricably tied up with the activist temperament, for violence is fed by hatred and the activist is one who has long since despaired of the possibilities of love. Non-violence, besides being the concomitant and natural expression of love, was, for Merton, the *sine qua non* of any kind of concerted social activity. It is difficult to say exactly when he espoused the principles of non-violence, but most likely it was before the decade of the sixties began. As to where he came upon those principles, no conjecture is necessary: he was an ideological disciple of Mohandas K. Gandhi. Following Gandhi, Merton stressed the point that non-violence was not simply another tool by which one gained certain political ends, or even brought about unity among men. The concept was "incomprehensible if it is thought to be a means of achieving unity rather than as the fruit of inner unity already achieved."[34] The man of

non-violence, then, was one who had "gotten himself together" in the sense that he was not at war with himself, and not being at war with himself he was not at war with any other man.

Internal unity, the result of the individual loving himself, was the hallmark of the non-violent man, and his goal was to bring about external unity, a state in which individuals love one another. This striving for unity necessarily entailed the breaking down of false divisions, for example, the division between Friend and Enemy or between the Sacred and the Secular. The non-violent person has no one whom he hates and wants to destroy, thus, "the only way truly to 'overcome' an enemy is to help him become other than an enemy."[35] By disregarding the distinction between the sacred and the secular in favor of making all things sacred, Gandhi was in effect transforming politics into a holy enterprise. Merton was never able sufficiently to overcome his deep-set antipathy for things political to allow him to go quite that far, but unquestionably the Gandhian position did influence him to go as far as he did in involving himself in social issues.

Though Merton advocated non-violence for those who would involve themselves in social activity, he realistically conceded that in fact very few people would be capable of faithfully adhering to the doctrine. Contrary to the opinion of disparagers, non-violence, far from being an index of weakness, in fact often called for strength of heroic proportions. He felt that Martin Luther King was an exemplary proponent of non-violent direct action, but he also knew that the Martin Luther Kings are few and far between.

To be sure, Merton's advocacy of non-violence had not a little to do with the fact that many of its tenets were an intrinsic part of the spirituality of the monastic tradition. One need only mention, for example, that tradition's emphasis upon the goal of unity between the individual and a larger, transcendental reality, the internal freedom which that unity guaranteed, and the love which should bind individual to individual. There is no question that love, a love which sought unity and abhorred divisiveness, was what chiefly prompted Merton radically to change the course of his life in the 1960's and to engage in various activities for which, however important he thought them, he had no natural liking. This is not to say that he was not motivated by ideology, for he was, but in the end he was convinced that if peace and unity and justice were the goal, among races or among nations, then nothing was better calculated to clear the path to that goal than the disarming simplicity of love.

We are still too close to the sixties to be able to interpret that decade and its many explosive events with the kind of thoroughness and assurance they deserve. It certainly was among the most interesting decades of the century, and it may one day prove to be among the most significant in the history of the nation. One of the reasons for this would be that

during it many of the country's intellectuals awoke to a new social consciousness and, in turn, and by virtue of their influence, heightened the social consciousness of the nation as a whole. Among these intellectuals was the unlikely figure of a Trappist monk who, throughout all the tumult, never left his monastery in the hills of Kentucky, and yet who certainly exerted great influence upon his fellow intellectuals and very probably upon the country at large. Many have discovered in both his temperament and the role he played vis-a-vis his society remarkable comparisons to Thoreau, and it would not come as a surprise to me if we see over the years a growing consciousness of the similarities between these two men, both recluses, after a fashion, both social critics, both possessed of a resilient and ultimately redeeming sense of humor.

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footnotes

1. Jack Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums* (New York, 1958), 32.
2. Merton was sensitive about being regarded as a "spiritual writer," believing the term carried with it unfortunate connotations. If we think of it as applying to a writer of meditative prose, then it fits him well and there was no need for his apologizing for it. His books in this genre, such as *Seeds of Contemplation* and *No Man Is An Island,* are of lasting worth.
3. This is Merton's most popular book. It continues to sell steadily twenty-five years after its publication.
4. "A Letter to My Friends," in *A Man in the Divided Sea* (New York, 1946), 54.
5. "Three Postcards from the Monastery," in *Figures for an Apocalypse* (New York, 1947), 35.
6. "Two Desert Fathers," in *Figures for an Apocalypse,* 52.
7. *No Man Is An Island* (New York, 1955), 3.
8. *Disputed Questions* (New York, 1960), 127.
9. The Pasternak-Merton correspondence is held by the library of the University of Kentucky. There is talk that it will be published in the near future.
10. "And when all action has become absurd, shall one continue to act simply because once, a long time ago, it made a great deal of sense? As if one were always getting somewhere? There is a time to listen, in the active life as everywhere else, and the better part of action is waiting, not knowing what to do next and not having a glib answer." Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York, 1966), 156.
11. "He who resists force with force in order to seize power may become contaminated by the evil which he is resisting and, when he gains power, may be just as ruthless and unjust a tyrant as the one he has dethroned." Merton, *Faith and Violence* (Notre Dame, Ind., 1968), 12.
12. Gordon C. Zahn, ed., *Thomas Merton on Peace* (New York, 1971), xxxiv.
13. This is a judgment in which Gordon Zahn concurs. See *Thomas Merton on Peace,* xxvii. xxvii.
14. Quoted in Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul On Ice* (New York, 1968), 44.
15. *Seeds of Destruction* (New York, 1964), 6.
16. Martin Marty, "To: Thomas Merton—Re: Your Prophecy." *National Catholic Reporter* (August 30, 1967), 6.
17. *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York, 1948), 345.
18. Zahn, *Thomas Merton on Peace,* ix.
19. *Faith and Violence,* 87.
20. Merton, Letter to F. L. (December 3, 1967), unpublished.
21. Merton, "Target Equals City," in Zahn, ed., *Thomas Merton on Peace,* 94.
22. There seems little basis for Professor Zahn's view that Merton's adherence to the "just war" theory was "a 'hang-up' on traditional theology with little or no foundation in intellectual conviction."
23. Merton, "Nuclear War and Christian Responsibility." *The Commonweal* (February 9, 1962), 511.
24. John J. Carey, "An Overview of Catholic Theology." *Theology Today* (April 1973), 29.
25. Zahn, xiv.
26. *The Behavior of Titans* (New York, 1961), 18.

27. *Seeds of Destruction,* 60.
28. Zahn, 63.
29. Cleaver, 29.
30. Zahn, 65.
31. Daniel Berrigan, *The Dark Night of Resistance* (New York, 1970), 8.
32. *Ibid.,* 124.
33. Philip Berrigan, *Prison Journals of a Priest Revolutionary* (New York, 1971), 127.
34. Merton, ed., *Gandhi on Non Violence* (New York, 1965), 6.
35. *Ibid.,* 15.