

Thomas Merton and Nonviolence

Throughout his adult life, Merton consistently maintained an antiwar mentality. As a Columbia undergraduate in the mid-1930s, he took the Oxford Pledge never to participate in any war. After his conversion to Catholicism in 1938, he acquainted himself with the Christian “just war” theory and began to question Christians’ involvement in any war.

The Vietnam War, which Merton referred to as “an overwhelming atrocity,”¹ served as the chief impetus for his speculation on the Christian philosophy of war. With his usual dialectical approach, he treated the subjects of war and peace in numerous articles, essays, and books. He never formulated a tightly constructed, completely developed theory as such, but his writings taken together as a continuum form a philosophy, or better yet, a way of nonviolence, based on his critique of war and search for peace.

Merton believed and stated unequivocally that “the root of all war is fear,” not so much the fear people have of one another as “the fear they have of everything.”² He stated as early as 1949 that “it is not merely that they do not trust one another; they do not even trust themselves.”³

In his presentation of fear and lack of trust as the core root of all war, Merton gives a view into his concept of contemporary humanity. He laments that if people are not sure when someone else may turn around and kill them, they are even less sure when they may turn around and kill themselves.⁴

People today cannot trust anything or anyone, and thus precipitate violence and war because they have ceased to believe in God. In Merton’s perspective, people who have become estranged from or have ceased to believe in God can never attain the fullness of humanity or their own destiny. People do violence to their own inner nature when they deny, ignore, or only pay lip service to God. This, in turn, gives rise to violence in their dealings with other people, stemming from their own incompleteness, frustration, and disunity.

“It is not only our hatred of others that is dangerous but also and above all our hatred of ourselves.”⁵ This is especially true of that self-hatred that is often too deep and too powerful to be honestly confronted. This fear of confronting our own inner violence often compels us to project our violence on others. Sometimes this occurs under the guise of trying to destroy the evil in the other, but in reality we often end up destroying the other person, or country, in the process. Merton applied this interesting dynamic to the Vietnam conflict in relation to the American consciousness and society.

In the application of this psychology of war and violence to Vietnam, Merton maintained that our external violence was “rooted in an inner violence which simply ignores the human reality of those we claim to be helping.”⁶ He saw the essential evil of the Vietnam conflict stemming from the commitment to violence in utter disregard for the rights of the individuals the war had come to represent.

This basic fear and mistrust among people is also at the foundation of the arms race. Merton repeatedly condemned the arms race. In the mid-1960s he frequently quoted Pope John XXIII as a deeply religious and rational man who “deplored the gigantic stockpiles of weapons, the arms race and the cold war.”⁷

Pope John XXIII was among the first world leaders to call the great powers to end the arms race and come “to an agreement of a fitting program of disarmament, employing mutual and effective controls.”⁸

Pope Paul VI was even more forceful in his statement presented in June 1978 to the United Nations Special Session on Disarmament in which he gives the final objective as “completely eliminating the atomic arsenal.” Pope Paul, like Merton, stated that “the problem of disarmament is substantially a problem of mutual trust. . . .” And like Merton’s prophetic warnings, the pontiff added, “tomorrow may be too late.”⁹ Pope Paul VI also stated, without hesitation, “There will be no disarmament of weapons if there is no disarmament of hearts.”¹⁰

The social justice message issuing from the Vatican is clear and strong. It has, however, to a great degree fallen on deaf ears. Like Merton, the Holy See has sought to move people’s hearts and awaken the consciences of Christians.



Pope John Paul II has constantly brought his message of peace forcefully and visibly to the world through his numerous trips and strong messages to all peoples. The pope's statement for the World Day of Peace, January 1, 1979, was entitled "To Reach Peace, Teach Peace." This message is extremely Mertonian in its language and content. The pope says that "peace is something built up by everyone. . . . The great cause of peace between peoples needs all the energies of peace present in man's heart."¹¹ Pope John Paul II assures us that he takes the "pilgrim's staff of peace. I am on the road, at your side, with the Gospel of peace."¹²

Pope John Paul II enumerates several principles for the attainment of peace that are very similar to those enunciated by Merton in his way of nonviolence. Among the principles the pope states: "Human affairs must be dealt with humanely, not with violence." He calls for negotiation, not force, and a climate of open dialogue. A major principle reads: "Recourse to arms cannot be considered the right means for settling conflicts."¹³ We shall treat this again in Merton's critique of the just war theory.

Although Merton was silenced for a while and forbidden to write or publish his views on Vietnam or war, the bishops in the United States have begun the attempt to educate their people for peace. On the occasion of the ordination of a new bishop for the Military Ordinariate, John Cardinal Krol of Philadelphia condemned the "folly of the arms race"¹⁴ by calling for a gradual disarmament. Cardinal Krol called the arms race "an act of aggression, because of the incalculable outpouring of economic resources and human energies, to the detriment of resources to schools, health, agriculture, and civil welfare."¹⁵

Merton asked the same question Cardinal Krol asked after the Philadelphia cardinal cited current figures on armament spending and asked if such expenditures are not "a crime against God and man?"¹⁶

Merton saw the problem of violence coming not only from individuals but emanating from within the whole social structure "which is outwardly ordered and respectable, and inwardly ridden by psychopathic obsessions and delusions."¹⁷

Merton presented some of the basic tenets of his social philosophy in an incisive essay entitled, "Toward a Theology of Resistance."¹⁸ In his essay he strongly contended that theology today needs to focus more carefully upon the crucial problem of violence. Violence is closely interwoven with a society that itself is violent.

This violence within society is nourished by a brutal and convenient mythology "which simply legalizes the use of force by big criminals against little criminals—whose small-scale criminality is largely *caused* by the large-scale injustice under which they live. . . ."¹⁹

Merton derides the mythology of force which is "systematically kept in existence by the mass media," which presents nonviolence as being inadequate to cope with social problems. This is so because nonviolence is based on principles that call into question the popular self-understanding of the society in which we live.²⁰

The societal influence on violence is traceable to the highly complex bands of organizations whose operations are global. Merton intended to defend the dignity and rights of people against "the encroachments and brutality of massive power structures which threaten either to enslave [them] or to destroy [them], while exploiting [them] in their conflicts with one another."²¹

Catholic moral theology and philosophy have fallen short of their responsibilities in adequately treating the complex questions of violence and war. Merton felt that these questions of social justice were among the crucial areas of theological investigation and should be the concern of society and philosophy.²²

This does not mean, however, that he was calling for a pacifism that was denying all forcible resistance against unjust aggression. Often this is the only way, because as Pope John XXIII admitted, "unfortunately the law of fear still reigns among peoples."²³ This is especially true when the claims of the powerful and of the establishment are heavily favored against the common good or against the rights of the oppressed.



Merton's critique goes even further as he maintains that much of the violence today is white-collar violence—the systematically organized bureaucratic and technological destruction of people. The real problem is often not the individual with a gun, but death and genocide as big business. We can just imagine the outcry from the monastery for the plight of the “boat people” refugees in the Far East or of Lebanese civilians who indiscriminately are being slaughtered. Merton constantly asked American Christians whether they were willing to accept responsibility for the worldwide activities of their country in the areas of war, arms sales, big business, and exploitation.

The real crimes of modern warfare are committed as much on the home front as they are in the war offices and ministries of defense. “Modern technological mass murder . . . is abstract, corporate, businesslike cool, free of guilt feelings and therefore a thousand times more deadly and effective than the eruption of violence out of individual hate.”²⁴

Contemporary society is violent, too, in the daily pressures and tensions that it brings to so many people. Even the idealist fighting for peace by nonviolent methods can easily succumb to this modern form of violence, namely, activism and overwork. The rush and pressure of modern life is a form, perhaps the most common form, of society's innate violence.

Merton enumerates some of the ways this can occur by allowing oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, surrendering to too many demands, committing oneself to too many projects, wanting to help everyone and accomplishing nothing.²⁵ This style of life is tantamount to cooperation in violence and neutralizes one's work for peace. It destroys the inner capacity of the individual for peacefulness. It nullifies the fruitfulness of one's work because it kills the root of inner wisdom and peaceful unity that makes work fruitful. Again we see that what is needed is contemplation to restore unity, energize the individual from within, and establish an inner peace from which all else will flow.

Another area in which Merton applied his analysis of society and presented his social philosophy of nonviolence as a solution was that of racism. He was in deep sympathy with the plight of many black people in the United States. He saw their frustration as the result of much injustice in American society. He viewed the nonviolent protests of Martin Luther King Jr. as one of the best and most effective uses of nonviolent philosophy and action in social and political issues.

The eventual turn to Black Power and violence Merton attributed as much to the fact that American society would only heed violent actions and rhetoric as to the frustrations of black Americans.²⁶

Endnotes

1. Merton, *Faith and Violence*, part III.
2. McDonnell, ed., *A Thomas Merton Reader*, p. 276.
3. Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation*, p. 66.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 66.
5. McDonnell, *A Thomas Merton Reader*, p. 276.
6. Merton, *Faith and Violence*, p. 92.
7. Merton, *Seeds of Destruction*, p. 116.
8. Pope John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris* (Boston: Daughters of St. Paul, 1963), N.C.W.C. translation, no. 122; quoted in Merton, *Seeds of Destruction*, p. 116.
9. Pope Paul VI, “On Disarmament,” in *The Catholic Standard and Times*, Philadelphia (June 15, 1978): 6.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
11. Pope John Paul II, “To Reach Peace, Teach Peace,” reprinted by Pax Christi, USA (Chicago, IL: Pax Christi Newsletter Documentation, 1979), p. 4.
12. *Ibid.*



13. Ibid., p. 5.
14. John Cardinal Krol, "Arms Race Folly Condemned," in *The Catholic Standard and Times*, Philadelphia (June 28, 1979): 13, Joseph Ryan, reporter.
15. Ibid. Numerous American bishops have publicly denounced the arms race, nuclear war, and arms spending. One of the most publicized cases is that of Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen of Seattle, Washington, who on January 26, 1982, announced that he would refuse to pay 50 percent of his federal income tax in opposition to the nuclear arms race, *National Catholic Reporter* (Feb. 12, 1982): 42–43.
16. Ibid., p. 13.
17. Merton, *Faith and Violence*, p. 3.
18. Ibid. (cf. ch. 1, pp. 3–13).
19. Ibid., p. 4.
20. Ibid., p. 35; cf. ch. 3, "Non-Violence and the Christian Conscience," pp. 30–39.
21. Ibid., p. 4; this is Merton's aim in writing this book.
22. Pope John Paul II has called for just such an investigation since he has called the arms race "a consequence of an ethical crisis that is disrupting society in all its political, social and economic dimensions." In his statement to the United Nations General Assembly's special session on disarmament, delivered on June 11, 1982, by Agostino Cardinal Casaroli, secretary of state, the pope called for an "ethical renewal." Cf. *The Catholic Standard and Times*, Philadelphia (June 17, 1982): 1.
23. Merton, *Faith and Violence*, p. 5. See also Thomas Merton, "Nuclear War and Christian Responsibility," *The Commonweal* 80 (Feb. 9, 1962): 510, where he writes that "the use of force does not become moral just because the government and the mass media have declared the cause to be patriotic. The cliché 'My country right or wrong' does not provide a satisfactory theological answer to the moral problems raised by the intervention of American power in all parts of the Third World."
24. Ibid., p. 7.
25. Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 86.
26. See Merton, *Faith and Violence*, part III, "From Non-Violence to Black Power," pp. 121–82, and a short summary in Robert Voight, *Thomas Merton: A Different Drummer* (Liguori, MO: Liguori Pub., 1974), pp. 63–92.

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