

## **Interior Freedom and an Activist Conscience: Thomas Merton's Journey with Social Movements**

**Gordon Oyer**

"I guess Merton is really about the journey." So an infrequent reader of the monk's work recently conceded. Indeed, Merton's openness to share how he engaged life, welcomed new ideas, and grew from his experiences—including mistakes—drives his appeal for many. This holds especially true for those drawn to his journey's often-noted "Turn toward the World" during his last decade of life. Despite many consistencies across the "early" and "late" works of Merton, equally grounded in his monastic commitments, a recognizable reorientation of focus during his latter years remains evident. As he entered middle age, Merton sought to simultaneously transcend boundaries behind which he initially sought to keep out "the world," yet also remain skeptical of external social forces that dominate and drown out the voice of divine mystery.

A useful point of departure in considering Merton's journey with social engagement may be found in Merton scholar Ephrem Arcement's distinction between the presence of prophetic personal conviction or *insight* and its public expression or *communication*.<sup>1</sup> This distinction also begs added questions, however, of how we then move beyond mere communication of insight toward its implementation, or how we seek prophetic *transformation*, not just personally, but broadly as part of shared social practice. For Jesus-followers, this includes asking, What do we really mean when we pray: "May Your kingdom come and Your will be done on earth"? Writing in 1959, Merton responds: "'Building the Kingdom of God in this world' ... means in fact *building a better world here and now*. ... The Kingdom of God is the Kingdom of Love: but where freedom, justice, education, and a decent standard of living are not to be had in society, how can the Kingdom of Love be built in that society? ... We who have been called ... must take care that we build for one another a world of justice, decent living, honest labor, peace and truth."<sup>2</sup> And in this context of building the Kingdom as a better world here and now, questions of the connection between faith commitments and movements for social transformation come to the fore. In many ways, Merton's personal journey with social issues reflects this trajectory that starts from gaining social insight, to publically communicating that insight, to grappling with how his words and actions and vocation intersect with movements that seek transformation sympathetic to his insights—grappling with how he might retain his interior spiritual freedom when faced with the demands of an activist conscience.

### **Merton's Compass for Engagement—Four Key Points for Navigation**

As a rule, Thomas Merton harbored suspicion toward most "mass" human activity, toward social dynamics that might ensnare our God-endowed human freedom. He therefore exercised great care as he began his foray into dialogue on contemporary social and political issues. When we read his resulting commentary on social evils of his day, at least four core priorities often surface. In keeping with a journey metaphor, they might be framed as four interdependent points on a compass he used to navigate social terrain.

The first may seem obvious, yet especially in today's environment of alternative facts, fake news, and skepticism in general, must still be named: Merton held to the notion not only that ultimate *Truth* actually exists, but that humans can access it to shape our vision for society. We may not be able to fully grasp its scope or harness its mystery, but we can encounter it and let it inform our responses to life. In a 1966 essay on nonviolence, he shared that the activist is

“not fighting simply for ‘his’ truth ... [but] for *the* truth, common to him and the adversary, *the* right which is objective and universal.”<sup>3</sup> Earlier, in a 1958 journal entry, he noted: “Truth is a Way and a Person ... to be found and followed. Truth is to be lived. There are, in fact, no simple formulas that will suffice. ... Can we use words simply to *find* Truth? Is this not an illusion?”<sup>4</sup> Rather than rely on propositional statements or formulas, Merton felt that humans access the truth on which we build social relationships through our spiritual freedom and express it through love. As he wrote in 1959, “To build the Kingdom of God is to build a society that is based entirely on freedom and on love.”<sup>5</sup>

Merton’s second compass point emerges from his belief that all embody some portion of truth: his *personalism*, or appreciation for the personhood of each, their intrinsic value and dignity. Not all are equally guided by that truth within, however. He distinguished between the *person*, the true self—where awareness is grounded in freedom and ultimate Being, i.e., in God; and the *individual*, the false self—where awareness is artificially constructed through the ego grasping after illusory whims offered up for consumption by society’s “mass-mind”; where one is reduced to an alienated and atomized particle within a “mass society.” For Merton, “the person must be rescued from the individual.”<sup>6</sup> He prioritized both nurturing our own personhood and eliciting the person in others. Socially, Merton contrasted *communities*—comprised of mutually grounded persons—with *collectivities*—comprised of adrift, fragmented ego-driven individuals. And he especially viewed our deference to modernity’s industrial and technological processes as a major force that perpetuated fragmentation and helped extend the power of the mass-mind over individuals.

*Nonviolence* provided a third point of reference that bridges the first two. Merton was drawn to it even before he became a monk. He had defended Gandhi’s campaign as a prep student at Oakham<sup>7</sup> and registered as a non-combatant conscientious objector prior to World War II.<sup>8</sup> Over time the models of Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and others deepened his grasp of nonviolence as a fundamental posture for social relationships. His 1966 essay explicitly names nonviolence as the primary means to both seek and express truth through love, similar to how Gandhi linked nonviolence and truth in his idea of satyagraha, or the “truth-force” of nonviolent civil disobedience. When affirming African-Americans’ nonviolent struggle for rights, Merton added that “even for them the struggle should be primarily for *truth itself*—this being the source of their power.”<sup>9</sup> Since each person holds or embodies only a partial grasp of truth, and if we ground our work in the power of truth, we need to embrace the truth held by others—even enemies, oppressors as well as oppressed. And so for Merton (and Gandhi and King), nonviolence testifies “to the truth that is incarnate in a concrete human condition involving living persons whose rights are denied or whose lives are threatened.”<sup>10</sup> This cannot be accomplished through physical or spiritual violence to their personhood that seeks domination over them. We point toward truth and encourage others to encounter it, rather than coerce them to accept it. Finally, Merton’s fourth compass point likewise reflects his commitment to recognize the truth embodied in each person: *solidarity* or *identification* with others, particularly those oppressed and marginalized by the priorities of mass society. This identification with others, something quite distinct from paternalistic benevolence, in turn helps *us* remain grounded in our own personhood and strengthens the role of truth in our social engagement. Merton did not often use the language of “solidarity”—it’s more implicit in his writings than explicit and sometimes couched in mystical terms or in relation to the incarnational work of Christ. But it is there. In a 1959 essay, for example, he advocates the “identification of oneself with the foreigner and stranger, this ability to find oneself in another, which alone can preserve world peace.”<sup>11</sup> When preparing to discuss protest at a 1964 gathering of peace activists, he observed: “The *real*

[spiritual] root [of protest is] identification with the underprivileged [and] dedication to their ‘universe’ as an ‘epiphany.’”<sup>12</sup>

Viewed together as integrated priorities that support each other, these four compass points offer a certain symmetry, where nonviolence and solidarity serve as core social postures that both point toward the power of truth and toward our shared human personhood and genuine community.

So just what was the social engagement journey this compass helped navigate? Reading Merton’s journals, viewed together with the timing and circumstances of selected published writings and correspondence, permits one to sketch its contours, and doing so suggests it had four discernible legs. Their boundaries are fuzzy, but each offers a recognizable focus.

### **1957-1960: Expanding Social Insight and Consciousness**

The first leg of this journey, covering roughly 1957 through 1960,<sup>13</sup> was marked by experiences that expanded Merton’s social insights and his perception of social movements before he began to publish about them. This period usually brings to mind his March 1958 epiphany at Fourth and Walnut in Louisville, which he poetically described eight years later in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* with language that expresses his deepening awareness of solidarity with other humans. Though a profound moment in Merton’s life, it reflects more a point along a continuum than an isolated flash from elsewhere. His perceptions on social matters, global awareness, and sense of identification crescendo across these years. As he wrote just one week *before* his Louisville epiphany: “Solitude can [no] longer mean, for me, indifference to or separation from what is happening to the rest of the human race.”<sup>14</sup>

During these years Merton increasingly cast his gaze outward through a personalist lens. One suspects that his mid-1956 reading of Emanuel Mounier’s *Personalism* offered a catalyst to better focus this gaze, just as his engagement with works on Karl Marx (1957)<sup>15</sup> and Soviet bloc literary figures Boris Pasternak and Czeslaw Milosz (both initiated in 1958)<sup>16</sup> highlighted for him the anti-personalist nature of the mid-twentieth century’s Soviet and fascist movements. His sense of this personalist/mass movement tension gained public voice in 1959/60 through essays on Boris Pasternak, “The Power and Meaning of Love,” “Christianity and Mass Movements,” and in his preface to *Disputed Questions*.<sup>17</sup> A couple years later, his insertions of personalist ideas would comprise several of the 1961 revisions that make up *New Seeds of Contemplation*.<sup>18</sup>

Another noteworthy dynamic that expanded Merton’s social insight during this period coalesced around his emerging Latin American connections. The work of Malgorzata Poks on Merton’s appreciation for and connections with Latin American poets,<sup>19</sup> sparked through the arrival of Latin American novices to Gethsemani Abbey in the late 1950s, greatly expands our awareness of their significance for Merton and further illuminate how his poetic and literary sensibilities were tightly woven into his expanding social awareness and insight. These interactions exposed him to the region’s synthesis of Old World Iberian Catholicism with its indigenous peoples, in which (along with other global south population centers) he saw alternatives to priorities that dominated the two Cold War blocs.<sup>20</sup> One of his earliest published statements with political overtones appears as his April 1958 preface to an Argentinean volume of his *Complete Works*.<sup>21</sup> This piece echoes journal comments made two months earlier that described his new Latin American awareness as a vocation “*to see and to understand and to have in myself the life and roots and the belief and the destiny and the Orientation of the whole hemisphere. ... To be oneself a whole hemisphere and help the hemisphere to realize its own destiny.*”<sup>22</sup>

Along with his interest in Latin American poets and interactions with a handful of Latin American novices, his engagement with Gethsemani Abbey's exploration of a monastic foundation in Latin America<sup>23</sup>—from about mid-1957 to mid-1958—also deepened his solidarity with the region and forced greater reflection on social forces. Early in this process, for example, he noted in his journal: “The great problem of every South American project – entering a country where the hierarchy in fact always supported conservatism, injustice, and tyranny. And in that environment ... being on the side of progress and social justice. For instance, something for the Indians in the Sierra region of Ecuador.”<sup>24</sup> Elsewhere he calculated how much land a monastic foundation might fairly consume, based on Mexico's post-revolutionary land reforms of the 1920s and 30s.<sup>25</sup> And the implications of infusing North American priorities into a Latin culture through a Gethsemani foundation haunted Merton. When his abbot shared intentions to send US monks to Latin America and direct them from Gethsemani rather than rely on local recruitment, Merton envisioned “a horror” of “the monotony of good, empty headed, generous, rather dizzy American monks who are not horrified by commercialism”;<sup>26</sup> “men without originality and not too inclined to be Latins or to understand Indians.”<sup>27</sup>

Merton would revisit indigenous cultures during his last two years of life,<sup>28</sup> but during the late fifties he shows an almost mystical regard for indigenous Latin Americans. In 1958 he commissioned Ecuadoran sculptor Jaime Andrade to carve a statue of Mary and Child that revealed “the truth about God being ‘born’ Incarnate in the Indians of the Andes. Christ poor and despised among the disinherited of the earth. The Christ of the Poor who are to inherit the earth.”<sup>29</sup> In a 1960 letter to Herbert Mason, Merton described the completed statue as one that portrayed Mary as an indigenous Andean who embodied the “great mystery of poverty,” the child as “the Resurrection to be born from the despised peoples of Mexico and the Andes,” and a “mystical bit of fruit” the child held as salvation itself. He told Mason the statue inspired “complete solidarity with you and Louis Massignon” in their mystical reliance on “salvation ... coming from the most afflicted and despised,” adding, “I want badly to go ahead ... in somewhat the same direction, but over here.”<sup>30</sup> Mason had recently shared how he and the 77-year-old Massignon—a French scholar of Islam and Catholic mystic—publically protested in Paris against French brutality toward Muslim prisoners in its Algerian war.<sup>31</sup> For Merton, Massignon modeled public protest as a mystical act of solidarity with both oppressed and oppressor.

Other signs of Merton's maturing social perspective and the sharpening of his navigational “compass points” also bubble up during these years. Some reflections demonstrate his growing identification with distant humans, as in this passage from the closing days of 1957:

In a world with a complicated economic structure like ours, it is no longer a question of my “brother” being a citizen in the same country. ... Hence – *my obligation to study questions of history, economics, etc.* ... It is absolutely true that here in this monastery we are enabled to systematically evade our real and ultimate social responsibilities. In any time, social responsibility is the keystone of the Christian life. In no time more than ours has this been so urgent—and too poorly understood.”<sup>32</sup>

Besides his desire to “understand and to have in myself” the life of both American hemispheres, he likewise wrote during these years of hoping to “unite *in myself* ... the thought of the East and the West of the Greek and Latin Fathers” to help reconcile Roman and Orthodox traditions,<sup>33</sup> and to “unite in myself all that is good in both Russia and America”<sup>34</sup>—all expressions of a solidarity with others in service toward reconciling human division. And in his journal during the summer of 1960, Merton confirmed the centrality personalist priorities in his social vision:

To discover *all* the social implications of the Gospel not by studying them but by living them, and to unite myself explicitly with those who foresee and work for a social order – a transformation of the world – according to these principles: primacy of the *person* – (hence justice, liberty, against slavery, peace, control of technology, etc.). Primacy of *wisdom and love* (hence against materialism, hedonism, pragmatism, etc.).<sup>35</sup>

Regarding nonviolence, his first journal quotes of Gandhi—the ambassador of a decidedly *non*-totalitarian mass movement—appear in January 1958,<sup>36</sup> and in 1959 he mentioned Gandhi as “very important” background reading to a fellow novice master.<sup>37</sup>

### **1961-1965: Lending Public Voice to Social Movements**

This journey’s second leg, a time of active and public communication on behalf of the peace movement (and to a lesser degree the civil rights movement), covers 1961 through late 1965. It began with some poetic and figurative pieces published in mid-1961,<sup>38</sup> but exploded with the October 1961 publication of Merton’s essay, “The Root of War is Fear.” In it Merton addressed political implications for US Christians, and in publishing a direct, prose challenge to Cold War wisdom, he began to explicitly lend his public voice to the movement that opposed nuclear war. In late October 1961 he wrote, “[I am] convinced again that I must set everything aside for the abolition of war. Primarily of course by prayer ... but as for writing, contacts, letters, that kind of effort: here it seems to me everything should yield first place to the struggle against war. This means first of all getting in contact with the others most concerned.”<sup>39</sup> Which he promptly did, reaching out to organizations like the British Pax movement, the American Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), the New York Catholic Worker, and to individual activists, such as Jim Forest, Dan Berrigan, and John Heidbrink of the FOR.<sup>40</sup> By December he was thinking in terms of a Catholic “peace movement we are now starting.”<sup>41</sup> A year later he later joined the Fellowship of Reconciliation<sup>42</sup> and would eventually serve as an official sponsor of its affiliate, the Catholic Peace Fellowship, affiliations that formally, organizationally linked him to the peace movement.<sup>43</sup>

William Shannon felt that “The Root of War is Fear” launched Merton’s most intensive year of writing about peace.<sup>44</sup> During the 12 months that followed he edited an anthology, *Breakthrough to Peace*; published over a dozen articles on the topic; reworked several of them into a book manuscript, *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*; and wrote numerous letters to diverse people of interest. This prompted censorship by his Trappist order, which felt such commentary was unbecoming a contemplative monk, and this led Merton to circulate mimeographed copies of his letters and manuscripts, or occasionally publish under a pseudonym.<sup>45</sup>

One of his correspondents, the polish dissident Czeslaw Milosz, also pushed back on Merton’s articles, but Merton remained undeterred in speaking out as able. He could dismiss Milosz’s concern that his writing was too utopian, and he saw ample counter-evidence to discredit Milosz’s claim that the evils of nuclear aggression were too self-evident to bother writing about. But Merton took to heart the Pole’s caution that peace movement rhetoric might alienate and harden many who might otherwise support peace, and this concern that protest should invite rather than alienate colored Merton’s views on social movements during his remaining years.<sup>46</sup>

In 1963 Merton received a Pax Medal for his contribution to the movement,<sup>47</sup> and he also began to publish articles on race,<sup>48</sup> though he apparently never formally joined any civil rights

organizations. The imagery of dogs and water hoses turned on children that spring also inspired him to pen the poem, “And the Children of Birmingham.”<sup>49</sup> His 1964 book *Seeds of Destruction* included chapters on race and reworked material once intended for *Peace in the Post-Christian Era*. In November 1964 he hosted a retreat for Christian activists, co-sponsored by the FOR and another organization, the Church Peace Mission. This retreat was the only formally sponsored movement event in which Merton directly participated, perhaps a high-water mark in his personal alignment with social movements. It gathered both Protestants and Catholics, a rare occurrence prior to the close of Vatican II. Through its theme, “The Spiritual Roots of Protest,” the retreat explored spiritual grounding for protest and examined social forces, such as technology, that drove the violence against which they protested.<sup>50</sup>

Another Milosz/Merton exchange in early 1965 portends Merton’s transition out of this particular journey phase. Milosz, on faculty at the University of California-Berkeley since 1960, reflected in a New Year’s Eve letter on the campus’s 1964 Free Speech Movement. He described its name as “demagoguery” and explained he had “bolted” from his initial sympathy upon seeing in it “the birth of a ferocious community applying intimidation to those students and those professors who would not comply.” Faculty supporters hated the US either genuinely or simply “because it is fashionable.” He saw in it 1917 Russia on a “minor scale,” complete with “a leader—Mario Savo—dictating his conditions.”<sup>51</sup>

Merton’s response, just four months after the peacemaker retreat, betrays a significant shift since he first sought movement relationships over four years earlier. Though he confessed to Milosz an “innocence of real politics,” he recognized how “fine, simple upright intentions” easily morph into “ambiguous, sinister” actions. “Thus, I find myself in a position where I do not identify myself with groups,” and “it would be quite absurd and most ambiguous to get myself drawn into a movement of one sort or another, and I think the monastic life is a life of liberation from movements.” At this point, he had “come around a corner, as you have, and I simply feel ... that there is no further reason to imagine having an identity that is made up of relationship with new movements,” but added, “Still, it is true I do write for pacifist publications.”<sup>52</sup>

That August, after ending his decade-long tenure as novice master, Merton entered into full-time residence at his hermitage, a significant transition that marks the end of this leg and anticipates the next. This move reduced his social interaction and intensified the solitude he had sought for years, which in turn complicated his ability to respond to accelerating changes of the mid-1960s.

### **1965-1966: Conflict and Reassessment**

Confusion, conflict, and reassessment typify this journey’s third phase, covering just four months that followed mid-October 1965. In virtual fulfillment of his observations to Milosz regarding “upright intentions” begetting “ambiguous, sinister” actions, it began with rapid-fire peace movement responses to escalating US military involvement in Vietnam that unfolded shortly after Merton moved to his hermitage. Individuals began to act increasingly on their own rather than in step with organized leadership, and it grew harder to know which peace organizations sanctioned what actions. War resisters began to fight fire with fire—literally—through public draft card burnings and self-immolation.

On October 15 New York Catholic Worker David Miller publicly burned his draft card.<sup>53</sup> Two weeks later, on November 2, Quaker Norman Morrison stood in front of the Pentagon, dropped his one-year-old daughter he held, and burned himself to death in protest of the war.<sup>54</sup> Four days later, on November 6, at a rally planned in part by Catholic Workers, Tom Cornell, a Catholic Peace Fellowship staff member, and four others publically burned their cards.<sup>55</sup> Three

days later, on November 9, Roger LaPorte, a volunteer at the New York Catholic Worker, also burned himself to death, this time in front of the United Nations building. LaPorte's act set off a storm of media attention on Catholic peace activism and raised public scrutiny of what actions Catholic organizations did and did not support. It also drove a wedge between Merton and his peace activist friends.<sup>56</sup>

Hearing the cries and watching the smoke rise, piecemeal, from behind monastery walls 700 miles away, Merton looked on with horror and confusion. Some blamed Merton's influence; others asked him to bring clarity and wisdom to the spectacle. Understandably, his peace movement associations now weighed heavily and compelled deep soul-searching to navigate this apparent no-win dilemma. Jim Douglass, a theologian of nonviolence and professor at Bellarmine College, first reported the Morrison self-immolation and Catholic Worker anti-draft rally to Merton and commented: "The apocalyptic symbols deepen. I was shocked by this. ... The mass media broadcast it ... and next week several more desperate people will be doing it," adding, "Please write on these things. We need your vision."<sup>57</sup>

Merton's reply is telling. He described the events to reveal "a kind of political vertigo that could be in part demonic in origin," and added, "more and more I see that I am simply incompetent to comment on events, as such, .... I am too out of contact, never hear anything until it is all over, almost never have a chance for reasonable discussion or debate, and when I have made up my mind about something I discover that the whole situation has radically changed and calls for a new decision."<sup>58</sup>

After hearing of the LaPorte self-immolation three days later, again through Douglass,<sup>59</sup> he immediately sent telegrams of concern to Dorothy Day and Jim Forest, asking Forest to remove his name as CPF sponsor.<sup>60</sup> In a longer letter to Forest the same day, he explained that, although he knew the CPF did not encourage self-immolation, he feared it had become caught up in a peace movement turned "pathological."<sup>61</sup> As Merton later shared to Forest, he worried that draft card burning by CPF staff undermined its mission and, more to the point, that use of his name as sponsor might encourage some to imitate these actions. He remained personally supportive of the CPF and would do what he could to help—but not as a public sponsor. He explained: "There is no question that people, at least in this area, tend to hold me responsible for what you guys do. I know this because I am told it. ... They are associating the card burning with my ideas about peace."<sup>62</sup> Merton also chafed a bit at what he perceived as his friends' desire to leverage association with him to promote their agenda. Though he did not share that concern with these friends he noted in his journal: "[T]here *is* this question of their interest in using my name, and to this they will cling mightily,"<sup>63</sup> and "I suppose it is not important to me if they insist on keeping me (for my name)."<sup>64</sup>

Merton's movement friends Jim Forest, Dorothy Day, Dan Berrigan, Tom Cornell, and John Heidbrink all promptly encouraged him to reconsider his position. Merton appreciated their letters, though he somewhat resented Heidbrink's harsh reprimand, which he felt implied, "I am a bastard, traitor, etc. [and their active life] is vastly superior to the life of ease and evasion which I am living in a hermitage 'quilted in mist'!"<sup>65</sup> He eventually did reconsider, agreeing to remain a sponsor under the condition he could publically state that his sponsorship did not imply consent with all actions of the CPF or any of its members.<sup>66</sup> By the end of the year he could write, "The business with Jim Forest and the Catholic Peace Fellowship is settled charitably. ... These are authentic Christians."<sup>67</sup>

Merton's personal anguish over these events comes through clearly in journal entries. In mid-November he recorded what transpired up to rescinding his sponsorship and expressed "a

certain incompatibility between my solitary life and active involvement in a movement,”<sup>68</sup> concluding that, “I am through with playing with any peace movements. It is no game.”<sup>69</sup>

It appears that he then took his reflections “off-line” from his regular journal for several days to process it further in a separate working notebook, filling seven pages.<sup>70</sup> A sampling of these comments illustrates the depth of his internal struggle:

Spirit of *response* and dialogue. Reaction is not response. (Reaction to objects – response to persons.) / I can’t be a militant in the peace movement and a hermit at the same time. / Need ... for the development of a new unexplored consciousness, which has nothing directly to do with the strategies of active movements and the proving of an activist conscience—yet is not alien<sup>71</sup> to their struggles. / My need for genuine interior freedom is now urgent. / ... my job is to get loose from the mental tangle I got myself in by wanting too much to identify myself with a particular movement and with groups in it.<sup>72</sup>

My running after “causes” has been a delusion, though some things had to be said. / I have relied too much on the support and approval of others – and yet I do need others. .... To seek merely to placate these people ... would make me deaf to whatever real message they might have. / [T]he problem of the climate of pseudo-charismatic action in politics now ... This kind of irrationality ends in wild symbolic action and immolations. That is why I want none of it, and will be very circumspect about listening to prophets or wanting to be one.<sup>73</sup>

In early December Merton returned the topic to his regular journal, noting that he remained a CPF sponsor but would not “identif[y] with any special program or movement” and now act “personally, and not in a parade.”<sup>74</sup>

Back in early November, Merton had responded to Jim Douglass’s request to write about the events by suggesting: “I will say something about the basic principles that may be involved, when I can, as I can.” But his isolation confined him “to questions of more or less abstract principle.”<sup>75</sup> This focus on principle and his distaste for extreme actions sparked a stream of published statements and articles.

In one sequence, Merton began in mid-November with two versions of a statement on protest—the first, a one-page statement<sup>76</sup> given to the Louisville *Courier-Journal* for an upcoming feature article that was later widely distributed through the Associated Press;<sup>77</sup> the second, a four-page expansion of the first to which he added the title, “Peace and Protest: A Statement.”<sup>78</sup> It culminate two months later with a further-expanded article titled simply “Peace and Protest,” for the winter issue of *Continuum* magazine.<sup>79</sup>

A second thread of writing emerged from the statement of clarification he wrote for negotiations with the Catholic Peace Fellowship, which included his denial of rumors he had left the Abbey and his move to greater solitude, as well as clarification of his position on draft card burning and his independence from CPF activism. The CPF released it late December to religious news agencies,<sup>80</sup> but it is hard to assess its distribution.<sup>81</sup> The Louisville archdiocese paper and *National Catholic Reporter* printed only summaries, with the latter failing to mention his comments on draft card burning or lack of endorsement for all CPF actions.<sup>82</sup> *The Catholic Worker, America*, and *Commonweal* failed to report on his statement at all. *Road to Joy*, a collection of Merton’s letters to friends, includes an altered version of the statement, described as a 1966 circular letter.<sup>83</sup>

A third publication thread was prompted by the December request of Hildegard Goss-Mayr, an Austrian with the International FOR, who asked that he write an article on “humility.”<sup>84</sup> In response he cranked out “Blessed are the Meek: The Christian Roots of Nonviolence”—his most complete articulation of his vision for nonviolence—in late December and early January.<sup>85</sup> And a fourth thread was prompted by Jim Forest’s response to these articles—one of despair and doubts that anyone would listen.<sup>86</sup> Merton’s reply to his concerns so impressed Forest that he circulated it among friends, and *The Catholic Worker* eventually published an edited version as “Letter to a Young Activist.”<sup>87</sup>

The gist of output during this journey leg encourages nonviolent protest that serves as constructive communication which does not alienate, but instead invites others to think deeply and plants seeds of change. It also encourages a posture that all, even our opponents, have the capacity to reason, engage in open exchange, and remain open to alternatives, and it focuses on nonviolence as a discipline rather than simply a pragmatic tactic. Merton consistently discouraged ambiguous symbolic acts like draft card burning, even alluding to it in his summary of the new Vatican Council’s statement on “the Church in Modern the World,” which Merton had drafted that same December as a section for the British book, *Redeeming the Time*.<sup>88</sup>

### **1966-1968: Speaking from Solitude with Interior Freedom**

During Merton’s final three years, he mostly maintained his resolve to further pursue his vocation of deepening solitude (his summer 1966 affair with “M” notwithstanding) and minimize entanglement with movement activism. But he also continued to write incisive commentary on race and the Vietnam War, publishing a book of such essays, *Faith and Violence*, in 1968 before departing on his final journey to Alaska then Asia.

Although he maintained distance from the mechanics of organized movements, Merton continued close personal relationships with members of the peace movement. This comes through strongly in his friendship with Daniel Berrigan. When the Jesuit cryptically hinted at “violence against military or government property” prior to the October 1967 Baltimore Four draft board raid,<sup>89</sup> Merton—with no clear idea what was in store—encouraged a firm and consistent Catholic position within a Gandhian framework, but failed to prescribe or proscribe any specific activity.<sup>90</sup> In early 1968, after Berrigan invited Merton to join him for campus lectures,<sup>91</sup> Merton shared he was “against any form of public appearance” as “not consistent with what my life has been and has become. I have become committed to this solitary pitch.”<sup>92</sup> And after the May 1968 Catonsville draft board raid, Merton published a statement to clarify that although he understood their motives, affirmed their intent, and did not condemn the action outright, he could see it as “borderline” non-violence and encouraged the movement to clearly express classic nonviolent principles.<sup>93</sup>

Vincent Harding provides another example of Merton’s personal support of movement figures, this time a key player in the civil rights movement. Harding had drafted Martin Luther King’s controversial April 1967 Riverside Church sermon, which inaugurated King’s vocal opposition to the Vietnam War and his forceful denouncement of US society’s captivity to the triplets of militarism, racism, and poverty. That fall Harding visited Merton, and later wrote to him that unlike his usual struggle to communicate black experience to whites: “I sensed you knew—or intuited—what I am trying to say, to write, to become.... I sensed that you ... were enough at peace with the scandal of your whiteness and all of its implications that you could be at peace with me and my searchings.”<sup>94</sup> At the time of King’s assassination, Merton was discussing a possible retreat with King, Harding and others as a “quiet, informal, deeply

reflective” gathering. He described his role by that time as “half way between in and out of the action. Not just all the way out.”<sup>95</sup>

Merton’s desire to distance himself from extreme political activism and remain focused on his commitment to solitude—while still publically and prophetically communicating on social issues—also surfaces in other ways during these last years. For example, when he forcefully voiced his support of Catholic Joseph Mulloy’s conscientious objector status to a Louisville draft board in February 1968, Merton made it quite clear that he acted strictly as a priest regarding a matter of personal conscience, asserting his stance was decidedly not “an illegal act, nor is it political.”<sup>96</sup> One can also read in Merton’s responses to theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether during the spring and summer of 1967 his effort to articulate a stance reflective of his sense of vocation in the face of pressures to respond pragmatically to a social movement spirit, similar to John Heidbrink’s critique that he faced in late 1965.<sup>97</sup>

Merton offered some especially intriguing, perhaps unguarded glimpses of his continued reservations toward movements in comments given to nuns at two 1968 conferences: at Gethsemani in May and in Alaska that September. Channeling the thought of Herbert Marcuse, he told the nuns at Gethsemani: “The so-called prophetic movements of today are failures because they simply fit into society in another way. ... we live in a society that incorporates dissent into it,”<sup>98</sup> and “Today’s society ... neutralizes protest and can absorb it a lot.”<sup>99</sup> Rather than invest in movements, he advised them “to be a prophetic community”<sup>100</sup> itself that becomes a “sign of contradiction” to the illusions the world offers.<sup>101</sup> This meant to not “seek community in all sorts of power movements [but to] maintain our position in a Christian community—a community built by God.”<sup>102</sup> Merton also showed that some bruising from the LaPorte affair lingered three years later, telling the Gethsemani nuns, for example, that: “Political protest in the long run helps the system. Like the protest of the young man who burned himself alive. Some people tried to say this was prophetic. It wasn’t—it was absurd.”<sup>103</sup> Similarly, Merton cautioned the Alaska nuns of the potential to be used by movement activists for their own agenda, this time recounting an experience of Quakers June Yungblut and her husband, friends of Martin Luther King, Jr., who had “joined up with some activists who didn’t seem to have the highest motives... and [the Yungbluts] found themselves...forced to break a law they never intended to break...so that they could be used and the activists could say, ‘So-and-so was arrested on our side.’ ... You are dealing with a bunch of operators ... in power politics and this is dangerous.”<sup>104</sup> Though it is impossible to predict how Merton’s views on social movements may have evolved had he lived longer, throughout his remaining years he seemingly sustained his late-1965 commitment to carefully speak on particular social issues “personally, and not in a parade.”

### **Summary Reflections**

Thomas Merton’s understanding of social movements expanded over his final decade—from his early focus on Soviet and fascist totalitarian movements, to his embrace of nonviolent movements and protests modeled by Gandhi, Massignon, and King, to wrestling with confrontative expressions by US citizens opposing embedded racism and their government’s prosecution of an oppressive war. Throughout this journey, Merton remained steadfast to his principles of personalism and Gandhian nonviolence; to his confidence in Truth and the spiritual imperative of solidarity with those marginalized. As a consequence, he expressed greater confidence in the earlier nonviolent phases of the civil rights movement than in the unsettling challenges of anti-draft/anti-war civil disobedience that destroyed property designated as government-owned.<sup>105</sup> Yet even then, he supported the personal consciences of those with whom he disagreed<sup>106</sup> and he refused to condemn the transition many young members of the Black

community made from non-violence to Black Power, seeing it as the consequence of Whites' inadequate response to the nonviolent civil rights movement.<sup>107</sup>

Like Merton, we must make our own choices about how we relate to the social movements of our time. His priority focused on transforming society through contemplative disciplines that transform individual consciousness, through free persons grounded in love and truth and communities of these persons, rather than through movements seeking political power. But If we truly seek identification with those marginalized and abandoned, we can't avoid an urgency to reach out and act in solidarity, especially during an era when those who suffer hear offerings of "thoughts and prayers" as a cynical euphemism for doing nothing. So while Merton's priority of personalist transformation is valid, it does not dismiss his other insight that we must also "build for one another a world of justice, decent living, honest labor, peace and truth" before personhood can flourish. That requires breaking down entrenched barriers to freedom and personhood, even though simply dismantling those barriers will not *of itself* create free and loving persons. It also requires, as Canadian activist Naomi Klein notes, imagination and a shared vision of what a transformed world can look like.<sup>108</sup> We cannot participate in this by working in isolation nor simply from mere membership in a prophetic community. We also need to invest in broad movements of social transformation.

Merton does give us good reasons not to place ultimate hope in movements, however. They *can* become mired in power games. Oppressive social forces *do* find ways to neutralize dissent and continue on their way. In the US, movements like Occupy Wall Street, the Standing Rock encampment, and others seemingly came and went without accomplishing their goals. Yet when faced with this grim prospect, we might look to a powerful metaphor from Merton's 1964 peacemaker retreat, where they invoked the imagery of water to symbolically remind us of delayed and unpredicted outcomes due more to God's movement than ours. They asked, Will we seek openings "after the manner of power, or of water,"<sup>109</sup> which seeps through crevices and crannies to find open space? Remain watchful for "springs in the desert," they advised, the surfacing of unexpected outcomes that have been forming unseen over time. Remember that those who saw water "disappearing on the mountainside [had] no idea it would [later] spring up in the desert."<sup>110</sup>

The point: the true power of movements remains subtle, runs deep and broad, and cannot be easily controlled, measured, or quantified. Wall Street's Zuccotti Park was cleared, but the language and imagery deployed by the Occupy movement remains with us. Oil now flows through the Dakota Access Pipeline, but networks of indigenous people that formed to support the Standing Rock movement remain connected globally regarding their rights and responsibilities as protectors of the earth. Police shootings continue, but so do reminders that Black Lives Matter. Even if they prove to be token gestures, gun access has been curtailed in response to Florida student activism following the Parkland mass shooting. And although Donald Trump remains in office despite the Women's March following his inauguration, its impact continues empowering women to overturn entrenched abuse.

But if and when we engage such movements to dismantle barriers to personhood, we would do well to remember and learn from Merton's journey, and at least five points of reflection emerge from this study. For one, Merton aspired to *respond* rather than *react* to events and issues and people, and he recognized the limits of his capacity to adequately process the rapidly paced changes around him to discern a meaningful response. That pace has increased exponentially over the past fifty years, so even though most of us are not hermits, it becomes even more important to face the limits of our capacity to absorb and adequately process the meaning of today's chaotic, rapid-fire events before we respond.

Secondly, Merton also grasped that one's relationship to privilege—to what mass society prioritizes and rewards—affects how we seek change. He anchored his primary input at the 1964 peacemaker retreat around the concept of privilege in various forms, and lamented “the arrogance and stupidity of the privileged.”<sup>111</sup> A year later he noted that the protestor “who belongs to one of the most powerful nations and who is himself in some sense a privileged member of world society will have to be clearly not *for himself* but *for others*, that is for the poor and underprivileged.”<sup>112</sup> Despite this, however, his deference to the nonviolent civil rights movement as a model over and against the efforts of the anti-draft/anti-war peace movement seems to miss the contrast between “under-privileged” black civil rights protest and “privileged” US anti-war protest. To be fair to Merton, destruction of draft cards/records conflates motives of opposing the draft law and opposing the war itself, and Merton interpreted those actions as primarily targeting the draft law. He saw such “anarchistic” acts as focused more on demonstrating the personal outrage and moral superiority of the protestor than exposing the immorality of the law itself. This sort of ambiguity speaks to his concern about protest as clear communication and its potential to alienate rather than invite many who might otherwise sympathize. Yet he offers no real guidance for what specific acts the privileged might take to help dismantle the oppression wreaked by their own society upon distant people. How civil disobedience toward racist structures by the underprivileged differed substantively from civil disobedience toward militaristic structures by the privileged. At the least, this ambiguity in Merton's journey helps bring into focus one's relationship to “privilege” when seeking social change. When we stand as privileged, how do we listen, relate, and respond to those suffering marginalization and oppression? To what extent are we willing to sacrifice our privilege and its accumulated benefits in solidarity with those oppressed by forces intent on sustaining that privilege?

A third lesson involves awareness of what Merton called the “mass mind” that drives western culture—a mass-mind now amplified through social media and artificial intelligence. At one point Merton named this “the Unspeakable,” a void and abyss that lurks behind “public and official declarations.” He cautioned, “Those who are at present so eager to be reconciled to the world at any price must take care not to be reconciled with it under this particular aspect: *as the nest of the Unspeakable.*”<sup>113</sup> He encouraged the nuns at Gethsemani to seek the “factors behind the facts,”<sup>114</sup> reminding them that modern society predetermines many of our most important choices, even as it promises an unlimited supply of them. “It's the freedom to choose your product,” he asserted, “but not the freedom to do without it.”<sup>115</sup> He paraphrased Herbert Marcuse's warnings about modern degradation of communication: Our “language [becomes] compressed into capsules so that it cuts down on any length or development of thought. You get the facts through the impact of these small packets thrown at you. The rest is by implication.”<sup>116</sup> A truly prophetic description of a 2018 Presidential Tweet.

Fourth, Merton reminds how easily this mass mind invades the very movements dedicated to resisting it. As he complained when processing his relationship with the CPF, “the philosophy ... behind most of the peace movement is exactly the sort of thing I am protesting against – the rationalistic and utilitarian spirit, the Bertrand Russell type of humanism.”<sup>117</sup> His warnings about the ubiquity of technological and economic measures of success—like quantified, maximized efficiency—suggest those also can become our measures of movement success, distracting from our focus on truth itself and lived experience. Naomi Klein has noted how segments within movements can seek to promote their unique “brand,” implying an effort to capture a particular “market share” of activist “consumers.”<sup>118</sup> This focus can also dehumanize persons within and without. Merton advised the Alaskan nuns that although there is “a great deal

of good will in [social] movements ... power takes priority ... [and] you come up against not love, but loveless means.”<sup>119</sup> This concern remains relevant. A recent article titled, “Why I’ve Started to Fear My Fellow Social Justice Activists,” echoes Merton, describing practices that “abandon the person ... out of a desire to experience power by humiliating another community member.”<sup>120</sup> As theologian Miroslav Wolf reminds: “The fiercer the struggle against the injustice you suffer, the blinder you will be to the injustice you inflict.”<sup>121</sup> And the personalist Merton would likely have sympathized with educator/activist Lorretta Ross’s distinction that: “A group of people moving in the same direction thinking the same thing is a cult. A group of people moving in the same direction thinking different things is a movement.”<sup>122</sup>

Which alludes to a fifth reflection: Beware the temptation to construct our identity—our personal sense of worth and virtue—from simply belonging to a movement. Merton asserted that a nonviolent resister must not aim “to prove *to himself* that *he* is virtuous and right, and that his hands and heart are pure,” nor seek mainly to “justify ourselves in our own eyes and in the eyes of ‘decent people’” through our involvements.<sup>123</sup> We can also slip into a careerist mindset that seeks personal advance up a ladder of movement hierarchy more than it seeks the truth behind the movement. Jim Forest tells how during the mid-seventies he spoke out against violence committed by the victorious North Vietnamese, only to be criticized by a peace movement that had idolized Vietnamese self-determination and made it immune to critique. Forest chuckled over being warned by a movement leader that he jeopardized his “career” in the peace movement—as though advocating for peace were a career rather than a calling.<sup>124</sup>

As we navigate today’s movements, we recognize many issues that echo those Merton faced. His era’s specter of nuclear destruction has not gone away. Meantime, we’ve added accelerating climate change to this list of humanity’s truly existential threats. Both of these global, cataclysmic perils suggest that how we have chosen to measure human progress—measures often motivated by hubris, greed, fear—have ironically propelled us closer to our own self-destruction. As Merton understood so well, to survive we must realize that our journeys are really not ours alone. They are intertwined with all humanity, with all of life in *any* form, and with the landscapes on which we all reside together. Although he ultimately sought detachment from the mechanisms of movements that address such threats, his ongoing commitment to speak truth from his heart simply positioned him as a transformative presence in their midst, not outside them. Regardless of our own relationship to the mechanics of current social movements, the legacy of Thomas Merton’s journey with movements both challenges and encourages us to do likewise in our journeys—to become a transformative presence among the movements that face today’s life-and-death issues.

---

<sup>1</sup> Ephram Ercement, *In the School of the Prophets: The Formation of Thomas Merton’s Prophetic Spirituality* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015), 77.

<sup>2</sup> *Disputed Questions* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy, 1960), 128.

<sup>3</sup> *The Nonviolent Alternative*, ed. Gordon C. Zahn (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1980), 209.

<sup>4</sup> *A Search for Solitude. The Journals of Thomas Merton, Volume 3: 1952-1960*, ed. Laurence S. Cunningham, (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 20 Apr. 1958, 192.

<sup>5</sup> *Disputed Questions*, 142.

<sup>6</sup> *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1962), 38.

<sup>7</sup> *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1964), 222.

<sup>8</sup> *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Inc, 1948), 342.

<sup>9</sup> *Nonviolent Alternative*, 212.

<sup>10</sup> *Nonviolent Alternative*, 211.

<sup>11</sup> *Disputed Questions*, 131.

<sup>12</sup> Gordon Oyer, *Pursuing the Spiritual Roots of Protests: Merton, Berrigan, Yoder, and Muste at the Gethsemani Abbey Peacemakers Retreat* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014), 242.

---

<sup>13</sup> A nearly four-year lacuna in Merton's journal from March 1953 to April 1957 (broken only by two months of entries in mid-1956) hinders tracing Merton's progression of personal thoughts on social issues during the 1950s prior to 1957. *Search for Solitude*, 41-85.

<sup>14</sup> *Search for Solitude*, 13 Mar. 1958, 181.

<sup>15</sup> His first journal entries to quote/reflect on Marx appear 13 May and 18 May 1958, *Search for Solitude*, 89-92.

<sup>16</sup> See Merton's correspondence to Pasternak in *Courage for Truth: Letters to Writers* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1993), 87-93 and the Merton/Milosz correspondence in *Striving Towards Being: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Czeslaw Milosz*, ed. Robert Faggen (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1997).

<sup>17</sup> Merton first published the essay on Pasternak titled "The People with Watch Chains" in July 1959 *Jubilee*, "The Pasternak Affair in Perspective" in November 1958 *Thought*, "Love and Person" in September 1960 *Sponsa Regis*, "Love and Maturity" in October 1960 *Sponsa Regis*, and "Christianity and Mass Movements" in July 1959 *Cross Currents*. All were republished the following year as chapters in *Disputed Questions*, the two *Sponsa Regis* essays under the title "The Power and Meaning of Love" and the last under the title "Christianity and Totalitarianism."

<sup>18</sup> Published in January 1962. This becomes especially explicit in new material inserted to chapters 4 – 8 of *New Seeds of Contemplation*. Merton's added sentence, "The person must be rescued from the individual" (38) closely paraphrases a quote from Mounier's *Personalism* that Merton noted in his 1956 journal: "The person only grows in so far as he continually purifies himself from the individual within him" (*Search for Solitude*, 19 Aug. 1956, 69). The original *Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1949) discusses the pitfalls of a "false self" (chapter 2) but does not address it in the context of a "true self," nor in relation to the "person," "community," or "collectivity" as found in *New Seeds of Contemplation*.

<sup>19</sup> *Thomas Merton and Latin America: A Consonance of Voices* (Saabrücken: LAP LAMBERT, 2011).

<sup>20</sup> This comes through most clearly in his 1961 open "Letter to Pablo Antonio Cuadra Concerning Giants" [*The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1977), 372-91]; about the same time Merton noted this in his journal: "The important thing is to keep alive the concept of a Third World, genuinely free and peaceful and not committed to power politics based on a nuclear threat" [*Turning Toward the World. The Journals of Thomas Merton, Volume Four: 1960-1963*, ed. Victor A. Kramer (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 5 Oct. 1961, 169]. This theme is elaborated upon by Poks (*Consonance*, esp. 16-52). In 1963 Merton also shared his belief that the Cuban revolution may have offered potential for a "third force" in geo-politics, but the Church's rigid anticommunism forced it into the Soviet realm. See Merton to Napoleon Chow, 14 May 1963 in *Courage for Truth*, 169-70.

<sup>21</sup> "Honorable Reader": *Reflections on my Work* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1991), 35-44.

<sup>22</sup> *Search for Solitude*, 15 Feb. 1958, 168-69; Merton's emphasis.

<sup>23</sup> US monasteries in the 1960s (presumably also the 1950s) were encouraged to pursue Latin American relationships: "[T]he Church has urged dioceses and religious houses of the united States to send priests and religious to help in South America," Merton to Archbishop Paul Philippe, n.d., ca. 23 Oct. 1965 [*From the Monastery to the World: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Ernesto Cardenal*, ed. Jessie Sandoval (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2017), 242]. Regarding letter date, Merton journal entry: "I gave Ernesto three letters – ... one for Archbishop Paul Philippe..." [*Dancing in the Water of Life. The Journals of Thomas Merton, Volume 5: 1963-1965*, ed. Robert E. Daggy (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), 23 Oct. 1965, 308]. In 1966 Gethsemani assumed responsibility for Miraflores Abbey in Chile, originally founded by Spencer Trappist Abbey in Massachusetts [Dianne Aprile, *The Abbey of Gethsemani: Place of Peace and Paradox. 150 Years in the Life of America's oldest Trappist Monastery* (n.p.: Trout Lily Press, 1998), 161-62]. At the time Merton recorded in his journal: "Dom J. is thinking of taking over the Spencer foundation in Chile. ... I perfunctorily mentioned he might need someone who knew Spanish (myself). He was profuse in denying that he wanted me to go! Oh no, no, no, no!! And he said 'The old hermit idea would come back again.' Come back? It has not left, and I hope it won't! What else is there?" [*Learning to Love. The Journals of Thomas Merton, Volume 6: 1966-1967*, ed. Christine M. Bochen (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), 5 Mar. 1966, 24].

<sup>24</sup> *Search for Solitude*, 29 Aug. 1957, 113.

<sup>25</sup> *Search for Solitude*, 16 Feb. 1958, 169-70.

<sup>26</sup> *Search for Solitude*, 23 Mar. 1958, 183.

<sup>27</sup> *Search for Solitude*, 8 May 1958, 201.

<sup>28</sup> See especially Merton, *Ishi Means Man* (Greensboro: Unicorn, 1976).

<sup>29</sup> *Search for Solitude*, 6 Mar. 1958, 177.

<sup>30</sup> Merton to Mason, 3 Sep. 1960 as quoted in Herbert Mason, *Memoir of a Friend: Louis Massignon* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 122-23.

<sup>31</sup> *Search for Solitude*, 8 May 1960, 388.

- 
- <sup>32</sup> *Search for Solitude*, 29 Dec. 1957, 150-51; Merton's emphasis.
- <sup>33</sup> *Search for Solitude*, 28 Apr. 1957, 87.
- <sup>34</sup> *Search for Solitude*, 11 Apr. 1958, 191.
- <sup>35</sup> *Turning Toward the World*, 6 June 1960, 9.
- <sup>36</sup> *Search for Solitude*, 16 Jan. 1958, 156.
- <sup>37</sup> Merton to Mark Weidner, 15 Apr. 1959, in *The School of Charity: Letters on Religious Renewal and Spiritual Direction*, ed. Brother Patrick Hart (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1990), 119.
- <sup>38</sup> "Original Child Bomb" (Jan 1961, *Pax*); *Behavior of the Titans* (March 1961; contents written during the prior three years); "Chant to be used in Processions around a site with Furnaces" (July 1961, *The Catholic Worker*); "Letter to Pablo Antonio Cuadra Concerning Giants" (distributed informally starting September 1961; published February 1962 in *Blackfriar*).
- <sup>39</sup> *Turning Toward the World*, 30 Oct. 1961, 175-76. Merton had expressed similar sentiments during the prior August: "I need to ... find some way of saying NO to the warmakers ... with meaning and even with some effect" (16 Aug. 1961, *Turning Toward the World*, 153); "As for writing: ... I think I have to face the big issues, the life-and-death issues" (Merton to Dorothy Day, 23 Aug. 1961 [*The Hidden Ground of Love: Letters on Religious Experience and Social Concerns*, ed. William H Shannon (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985), 140]).
- <sup>40</sup> Merton's 30 Oct. 1961 journal entry also commented: "It seems there is *no peace movement to speak of* in this country, except the F.O.R." (176, Merton's emphasis). Perhaps he was only concerned with religious organizations; the War Resisters League, Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy (SANE), and Committee for Non-Violent Action [CNVA] had been publically opposing nuclear proliferation for some time. The following summer he referenced the CNVA in his journal (e.g., *Turning Toward the World*, 3 July 1962, 229), though as a rule Merton rarely mentions these groups.
- <sup>41</sup> Merton to Eric Fromm, Dec. 1961, *Hidden Ground of Love*, 317.
- <sup>42</sup> Merton to Jim Forest, 22 Sep. 1962, *Hidden Ground of Love*, 271.
- <sup>43</sup> See also Jim Forest, *The Root of War is Fear: Thomas Merton's Advice to Peacemakers* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2016), 97-105.
- <sup>44</sup> William Shannon, *Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1996), 215.
- <sup>45</sup> These included Benedict Moore, Benedict Monk, Marco J. Frisbee. See *The Root of War is Fear*, 104.
- <sup>46</sup> Milosz to Merton, n.d., *Striving Towards Being*, 138-45. *Turning Toward the World*, 6 Feb. 1962, 200-201. Milosz wrote from the perspective of a Polish peace movement ineffective in stopping Hitler in 1939 and specious Soviet rhetoric for peace at a 1948 peace congress in Poland, and he described "any talk on peace as part of the ritual in the Soviet bloc, as a smokescreen spread by officialdom," 141.
- <sup>47</sup> See "In Acceptance of the Pax Medal, 1963," *Nonviolent Alternative*, 257-58.
- <sup>48</sup> Merton published two essays on race in 1963: "The Negro Revolt: A Review of 'A Different Drummer' by William Melvin Kelly" (September 1963, *Jubilee*) and "The Black Revolution: Letters to a White Liberal" (November and December 1963, *Blackfriars*).
- <sup>49</sup> Published in *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (New York: New Directions, 1963). See *Collected Poems*, 335-37.
- <sup>50</sup> Oyer, *Spiritual Roots of Protest*, e.g. 102-106.
- <sup>51</sup> Milosz to Merton, 31 December 1964, *Striving Towards Being*, 164-66.
- <sup>52</sup> Milosz to Merton, 30 March 1965, *Striving Towards Being*, 166-70.
- <sup>53</sup> Patricia McNeal, *Harder Than War: Catholic Peacemaking in Twentieth-Century America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 146.
- <sup>54</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/vietnam-critics-end-was-the-start-of-familys-pain/2015/11/01/b50e1d54-7cdf-11e5-b575-d8dcfedb4ea1\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.c8c1a661c695](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/vietnam-critics-end-was-the-start-of-familys-pain/2015/11/01/b50e1d54-7cdf-11e5-b575-d8dcfedb4ea1_story.html?utm_term=.c8c1a661c695) (accessed 23 May 2018)
- <sup>55</sup> McNeal, *Harder Than War*, 147-48.
- <sup>56</sup> Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (New York: Harcourt Brace, and Co., 1984), 427-30.
- <sup>57</sup> Douglass to Merton, 3 Nov 1965. "James William Douglass" correspondence, Thomas Merton Center Archives (TMCA).
- <sup>58</sup> Merton to Douglass, 6 Nov. 1965, *The Hidden Ground of Love*, 161. Self-immolation as protest was not new, especially in the Buddhist tradition, and Merton perhaps did not take into account the precedents on which they rested: Alice Herz (16 Mar, 1965) and Hiroko Hayasaki (12 Oct. 1965) had done so in the US against the Vietnam war; five Vietnamese Buddhist monks had self-immolated in protest of repression by the regime of Catholic Ngo Dinh Diem in the summer of 1963. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_political\\_self-immolations](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_political_self-immolations)
- <sup>59</sup> *Dancing in the Water of Life*, 11 Nov. 1965, 314.
- <sup>60</sup> Merton to Douglass, 11 Nov. 1965, *Hidden Ground of Love*, 162.

---

<sup>61</sup> Merton to Forest, 11 Nov. 1965, *Hidden Ground of Love*, 285-86.

<sup>62</sup> Merton to Forest, 19 Nov. 1965, *Hidden Ground of Love*, 288. Also: “I think they are doing good work – apart from card-burning which they do not “sponsor” – but Tom Cornell is nevertheless the next most important member of the Catholic Peace Fellowship” [*Dancing in the Water of Life*, 21 Nov. 1965, 318]. A good example of the pressure on Merton to distance himself from the CPF is an 18 November 1965 letter from Justus George Lawler, who edited the magazine *Continuum* and worked for Herder and Herder, one of Merton’s publishers. Lawler wrote: “I don’t know what is with the CPF, tho I suspect it a combination of dumb-kind youthfulness, prophetic OT simplism, and general discontent with the status quo. ... I don’t think there is righteousness among the CPF people, but there is a kind of self-inflation with their own rhetoric, even among the kids a kind of intoxication at being on the side of truth, purity, honesty, etc. ... Every poll has shown that support for the onslaught against North Vietnam has increased since the protests have grown more and more aggressive. This is a political fact, however unfortunate, that the CPF with its advocacy of draft-card burning and all these other stunts ought to consider.” The letter is located in the “James Fox” file in “Publishers Correspondence: Herder and Herder,” TMCA, suggesting it found its way to the abbot’s hands, with the potential to influence the abbot’s view of the CPF and perhaps fuel pressure for Merton to distance himself from it.

<sup>63</sup> *Dancing in the Water of Life*, n.d., 341.

<sup>64</sup> *Dancing in the Water of Life*, 21 Nov. 1965, 318.

<sup>65</sup> *Dancing in the Water of Life*, 21 Nov. 1965, 318.

<sup>66</sup> Merton to Forest, 3 Dec. 1965, *Hidden Ground of Love*, 289-90.

<sup>67</sup> *Dancing in the Water of Life*, 30 Dec. 1965, 328.

<sup>68</sup> *Dancing in the Water of Life*, 20 Nov. 1965, 317.

<sup>69</sup> *Dancing in the Water of Life*, 21 Nov. 1965, 318.

<sup>70</sup> These pages are published in a separate section titled “Some Personal Notes” at the end of *Dancing in the Water of Life*, 340-43, 347-48. Due to Merton’s habit of writing initial journal entries on right-hand facing pages and inserting later comments on the left-hand facing pages, the published version fails to capture the actual flow of his writing. Examination of the original manuscript copy of Merton’s “Notebook 17” in the TMCA is needed to accurately interpret these entries. The material on pages 340-43 is not dated, but reference to John Heidbrink’s letter indicates Merton began these entries November 20 or later. Material on pages 347-48, inspired by reflections on Rainer Maria Rilke, is dated December 2 and 4.

<sup>71</sup> The published version transcribed this word as “akin,” but examining the original shows it to be “alien.”

<sup>72</sup> *Dancing in the Water of Life*, n.d., 341-43.

<sup>73</sup> *Dancing in the Water of Life*, 2 Dec. 1965 and 4 Dec. 1965, 347-48.

<sup>74</sup> *Dancing in the Water of Life*, 3 Dec. 1965, 321.

<sup>75</sup> Merton to Douglass, 6 Nov. 1965, *Hidden Ground of Love*, 161.

<sup>76</sup> Merton to James Morrissey, 21 Nov. 1965, “James Morrissey” correspondence, TMCA.

<sup>77</sup> *Louisville Courier-Journal Magazine*, Sunday, 23 Jan. 1966, copy in TMCA. The author of the article reported to Merton that the AP story “was carried by practically every major newspaper in the country” including the *Baltimore Sun*, *The New York Times*, and *Newsweek*. James Morrissey to Merton, 8 Feb. 1966, “James Morrissey” correspondence, TMCA.

<sup>78</sup> Copy sent to Jim Douglass 24 Nov. 1965 per *Hidden Ground of Love*, 162. Merton indicates he would not send it to the *Catholic Worker* fearing that would “antagonize” those at the FOR and CFP. Douglass submitted the article to the diocesan paper, *Pittsburgh Catholic*, which Douglass indicates published it—the only currently known publication of it during Merton’s lifetime. Douglass to William H. Shannon, 12 Jun. 1983, “James Douglass” correspondence, TMCA. It was published posthumously in *Nonviolent Alternative*, 67-69. These two documents are undoubtedly what Merton refers to in his “Personal Notes” written in the latter weeks of November 1965: “Even when writing the inadequate ‘statement’ on Peace and Protest, realized the big hole in it. The short version is ok for public, says little.” *Dancing in the Water of Life*, n.d., 342.

<sup>79</sup> *Continuum*, Winter 1966 (Vol. 3, Issue 4), 509-512. [Note: Vol. 3, Issue 3 is Autumn 1965; Vol. 4, Issue 1 is Spring 1966, so this appeared in the early months of 1966, not at the end of 1966.] Merton also included this version in *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 40-46.

Merton’s rationale for opposing draft card burning had changed between the November 1965 versions and the winter 1966 version three months later. The first two both state, “I do not advocate the burning of draft cards. It is not my opinion that the law is so unjust that it calls for civil disobedience.” The *Continuum* version states, “I do not advocate the burning of draft cards; I can understand the arguments of those who have burned their cards. I just do

---

not know if their position is comprehensible to a lot of frightened and confused people.” All three then call for protest to “give a clear and reasonable account of itself,” and the last two versions also go on to warn of ambiguity in the message of protest. The change in rationale for opposing draft card burning most likely originated from Merton’s interactions with Tom Cornell on the topic. Cornell had published a statement in the 19 November 1965 *Commonweal* issue which Merton described as “lucid” (*Dancing in the Water of Life*, 20 Nov. 1965, 317) and “the first real information I have on the positive arguments for card burning” (Merton to Jim Forest, 19 Nov. 1965, *Hidden Ground of Love*, 287). Merton also directly corresponded with Cornell on the topic (Cornell to Merton, 22 Nov. 1965; Merton to Cornell, 5 Dec. 1965; both in “Thomas Cornell” correspondence file, TMCA). The gist of this correspondence is Merton’s acceptance of Cornell’s action as something required by his personal conscience, but something that also carried an ambiguous public message with the potential to hinder the CPF’s mission.

<sup>80</sup> Forest sent it to the CPF’s “press list and main contacts,” Forest to Merton, 22 Dec. 1965, “James Forest” correspondence, TMCA.

<sup>81</sup> Forest reported back to Merton of coverage as the “lead story of the day” by the NCWC [National Catholic Welfare Council, a Catholic news service] and “front page coverage” by *The Catholic Messenger*, presumably the diocesan paper of Davenport, IA. He anticipated a story from the RNS [Religious News Service], but had not seen one (Jim Forest to Merton, 6 Jan. 1965; “James Forest” correspondence, TCMA). Since the NCWC was mainly a news service, not for popular consumption, the *Messenger* had limited readership, and other known coverage was truncated, it would seem Merton’s statement did not receive wide readership. This may be due in part to being overshadowed by the mid-December release of the Vatican Council statement on “The Church in the Modern World,” which received extensive coverage in the Catholic press that December and January.

<sup>82</sup> *National Catholic Reporter*, 12 Jan. 1966, 7; *The Record*, Louisville, KY, 30 Dec. 1965.

<sup>83</sup> *The Road to Joy: Letters to New and Old Friends* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1989), 92. There is no indication in TMCA files as to when he may have sent it or to whom.

<sup>84</sup> Goss-Mayr, along with Jim Douglass, had visited Merton on 22 Oct. 1965 during which she “urged me ... to write more on non-violence” [*Dancing in the Water of Life*, 23 Oct. 1965, 308]. She then wrote him early December asking for an article on “Demut” (humility) for her periodical *Christ in der Welt* [acknowledged in Merton to Goss-Mayr, 8 Dec. 1965, *Hidden Ground of Love*, 336].

<sup>85</sup> Sent to Goss-Mayr on 14 January 1966 [Merton to Goss-Mayr, 14 Jan. 1966, *Hidden Ground of Love*, 337]. It appeared in the April-June 1966 issue of *Christ in der Welt*, the May 1967 issue of *Fellowship*, and was published separately as a CPF pamphlet in July 1967. Merton also included it in *Faith and Violence* (14-29), and it has been republished in *Nonviolent Alternative* (208-218), and *Passion for Peace: The Social Essays* [ed. William H. Shannon (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1997), 248-259].

<sup>86</sup> Forest to Merton, 15 Feb. 1966, “James Forest” correspondence, TMCA. Forest writes, “Earlier today I began to type out a few thoughts on your paper concerning protest. ... But the question comes up, as I work on such a response, Who is listening?” It is not clear whether “your paper concerning protest” refers to “Blessed are the Meek,” which Merton had sent to Forest on 17 January 1966 [Merton to Forest, 17 Jan. 1966, *Hidden Ground of Love*, 293] or the *Continuum* version of “Peace and Protest.” There is no record Merton shared the latter with Forest, but it better fits with Forest’s description, and Merton appears to have finished it in early February—Merton having written, “Many thanks for the carbon of Peace and Protest” to *Continuum* editor Justus George Lawler on 18 Feb. 1966 [Merton to Lawler, 18 Feb. 1966, “Justus George Lawler” correspondence, TMCA].

<sup>87</sup> Merton’s response: Merton to Forest, 21 Feb. 1966, *Hidden Ground of Love*, 294-97. For the story of its distribution and publication, see *The Root of War is Fear*, 190-200.

<sup>88</sup> London: Burns and Oats, 1966. As a whole, *Redeeming the Time* is comprised of material from the 1964 American edition, *Seeds of Destruction*, which adds as new material the opening section “The Church and the ‘Godless World’”—Merton’s overview and commentary on “The Church in the Modern World” (7-92)—and omits the original edition’s sections on “Black Revolution,” “A Tribute to Gandhi,” and “Letters in a Time of Crisis.” Merton wrote that although the Council approved of “those who seek non-violent ways of resolution,” this “applies to true non-violence as a most serious form of spiritual and political discipline,” not to “forms of protest which are merely *substitutes for violence*, and which often contain elements of psychological and emotional violence which are incompatible with true non-violence” (78-79). He also asserts that “The Council distinguishes between conscientious objection and negative, anarchistic protest, by suggesting that objectors should offer an alternative peaceful service in society” (80). See also *Love and Living* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979), 165, 167.

<sup>89</sup> Berrigan to Merton, 6 Oct. 1967, “Daniel Berrigan” correspondence, TMCA.

<sup>90</sup> Merton to Berrigan, 10 Oct. 1967, *Hidden Ground of Love*, 96-98.

<sup>91</sup> Berrigan to Merton, 29 Jan. 1968, “Daniel Berrigan” correspondence, TMCA.

- <sup>92</sup> Merton to Berrigan, 8 Feb. 1968, *Hidden Ground of Love*, 99-100.
- <sup>93</sup> “Non-Violence Does Not... Cannot... Mean Passivity” in 7 Sep. 1968 issue of *Ave Maria*, also published as “Note for *Ave Maria*” in *Nonviolent Alternative* (231-33), and in *Passion for Peace* (322-25).
- <sup>94</sup> Harding to Merton, 1 January 1968, “Vincent Harding” correspondence, TMCA.
- <sup>95</sup> Merton to June Yungblut, 20 Jan. 1968, *Hidden Ground of Love*, 640.
- <sup>96</sup> Merton to Local [Draft] Board #47 – Louisville, 19 Feb. 1968, “Joseph Mulloy” correspondence, TMCA.
- <sup>97</sup> See *At Home in the World: The Letters of Thomas Merton and Rosemary Radford Ruether*, ed. Mary Tardiff, OP (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995).
- <sup>98</sup> *Springs of Contemplation: A Retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani*, ed. Sister Jane Marie Richardson, S.L. (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1992), 105.
- <sup>99</sup> *Springs of Contemplation*, 111.
- <sup>100</sup> *Springs of Contemplation*, 108.
- <sup>101</sup> *Springs of Contemplation*, 108.
- <sup>102</sup> *Thomas Merton in Alaska: The Alaskan Conferences, Journals, and Letters*, ed. David D. Cooper and Robert E. Daggy (New York: New Directions, 1988), 109.
- <sup>103</sup> *Springs of Contemplation*, 74.
- <sup>104</sup> *Thomas Merton in Alaska*, 107-108.
- <sup>105</sup> For example: “Contrast non-violence in civil rights with non-violence in peace movement. ... Doubtless, entirely new approach needed in peace movement” [*Dancing in the Water of Life*, n.d., 340-41]; *Redeeming the Time*, 78.
- <sup>106</sup> For example, *Springs of Contemplation*, 74.
- <sup>107</sup> For example, *Faith and Violence*, 121-129; *Nonviolent Alternative*, 231; *Other Side of the Mountain. The Journals of Thomas Merton, Volume 7: 1967-1968*, ed. Patrick Hart, O.S.C.O. (HarperCollins, 1998), 8 Feb. 1968, 51. Both Merton’s primacy of personalism and the ambiguity of the transition to Black Power for Merton are highlighted in his response to a draft of Jim Douglass’s book, *The Non-Violent Cross*. Merton discouraged inclusion of the example of Gandhi’s followers being beaten down in waves when attempting to nonviolently access salt works, by saying “(1) The human *personality* of the individual workers is lost in its total mass-effect” (Merton’s emphasis) and “(2) When the suffering is not only passive but massive, it ceases to be really comprehensible by a critical Western reader. ... [It] will be repudiated lock stock and barrel by SNCC and the Negro movement in general. ... In the South, to let yourself be beaten does not convey the message of human dignity so much as the message that you are a Negro and therefore naturally take a beating, thereby proving you are inferior.” Merton to Douglass, 17 April 1967, *Hidden Ground of Love*, 165.
- <sup>108</sup> [https://www.ted.com/talks/naomi\\_klein\\_how\\_shocking\\_events\\_can\\_spark\\_positive\\_change](https://www.ted.com/talks/naomi_klein_how_shocking_events_can_spark_positive_change) (accessed 11 Mar. 2018)
- <sup>109</sup> Oyer, *Pursuing the Spiritual Roots of Protest*, 115, 247.
- <sup>110</sup> Oyer, *Pursuing the Spiritual Roots of Protest*, 156.
- <sup>111</sup> Oyer, *Pursuing the Spiritual Roots of Protest*, 242.
- <sup>112</sup> *Nonviolent Alternative*, 212.
- <sup>113</sup> *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966), 4-5.
- <sup>114</sup> *Springs of Contemplation*, 122.
- <sup>115</sup> *Springs of Contemplation*, 110.
- <sup>116</sup> *Springs of Contemplation*, 120-21.
- <sup>117</sup> *Dancing in the Water of Life*, n.d., 343.
- <sup>118</sup> [https://www.ted.com/talks/naomi\\_klein\\_how\\_shocking\\_events\\_can\\_spark\\_positive\\_change](https://www.ted.com/talks/naomi_klein_how_shocking_events_can_spark_positive_change) (accessed 11 Mar. 2018)
- <sup>119</sup> *Thomas Merton in Alaska*, 108.
- <sup>120</sup> Frances Lee, <http://www.yesmagazine.org/people-power/why-ive-started-to-fear-my-fellow-social-justice-activists-20171013> (accessed 30 March 2018)
- <sup>121</sup> Quoted in Joanne Gallardo, “Looking back in order to move forward,” *The Mennonite*, August 2017, 32.
- <sup>122</sup> Quoted by adrienne mare brown in [http://www.yesmagazine.org/peace-justice/the-world-is-a-miraculous-mess-and-its-going-to-be-alright-20180327?utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=YTW\\_20180330&utm\\_content=YTW\\_20180330+CID\\_f16a9b2c175ab67993969e07b5156f3d&utm\\_source=CM](http://www.yesmagazine.org/peace-justice/the-world-is-a-miraculous-mess-and-its-going-to-be-alright-20180327?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=YTW_20180330&utm_content=YTW_20180330+CID_f16a9b2c175ab67993969e07b5156f3d&utm_source=CM) (accessed 30 March 2018)
- <sup>123</sup> *Nonviolent Alternative*, 208.
- <sup>124</sup> Jim Forest, interview by author, 29 May 2011.