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Ishi, Messenger of Hope

MERTON TOOK A SPECIAL interest in the ancient wisdom of Eastern religions, especially Buddhism. Merton believed he could also learn from the traditions of first peoples, including Inca and Mayan cultures overwhelmed by the Spanish conquest. Merton observed, “neither the ancient wisdoms nor the modern sciences are complete in themselves. They do not stand alone. They call for one another.”¹ He also discerned, “Our task now is to learn that if we can voyage to the ends of the earth and there find ourselves in the aborigine who most differs from ourselves, we will have made a fruitful pilgrimage.”²

After reading *Ishi in Two Worlds: A Biography of the Last Wild Indians in North America*, by Theodora Kroeber, Merton wrote a piece entitled “Ishi: A Meditation.” The article was first published in the March 1967 issue of *The Catholic Worker*. Subsequently, it was included along with four others in *Ishi Means Man*. The collection reflects Merton’s concern for not only the first inhabitants of North Americas but also the cargo-cult phenomenon described to him by Matthew Kelty.

Ishi (c. 1860–March 25, 1916) was the last known Yahi-Yana who lived in the foothills around present-day Lassen National Peak in California. In 1911, alone and starving, Ishi left his ancestral homeland. He spent his last five years in San Francisco as research subject and assistant for University of California anthropologists Alfred and Theodora Kroeber.

In the Yahi-Yana culture, it was rude to ask someone’s name. When asked his name, Ishi said, “I have none, because there were no people to name me.” Ishi meant that no Yahi-Yana had ever spoken his name. The Kroebers named him Ishi, meaning “man.” Merton praised “loving kindness” lavished

1. Merton, *Gandhi on Non-Violence*, 1.
2. Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters*, 112.

on Ishi by the Kroebers but lamented that Ishi's people had been "barbarously, pointlessly destroyed."³

Merton remonstrated against what he perceived to be a grave problem of institutional religion. He condemned "the almost total lack of protest on the part of religious people and clergy in the face of enormous social evils."⁴ Writing in the context of the growing violence against people of color—Vietnamese, African Americans, and America's first people—Merton considered the treatment of Ishi as an extension of a frontier mentality, replete with enemies who were of an "inferior race." For Merton, the death of Ishi and extinction of his people were extreme examples of the capacity of technology potentially to eliminate entire tribes and ethnic groups, which Merton characterized as genocide.

"Genocide" is a new word. Perhaps the word is new because technology has now got into the game of destroying whole races at once. The destruction of races is not new—just easier. Nor is it a specialty of totalitarian regimes. We have forgotten that a century ago white America was engaged in the destruction of entire tribes and ethnic groups of Indians. The trauma of California gold.⁵

Merton praised Theodora Kroeber's role in having saved Ishi and her writing about him with "impeccable objectivity" and "compassion." Merton wrote, "To read this story thoughtfully, to open one's ear to it, is to receive a most significant message: one that not only moves, but disturbs. . . . Unfortunately, we learned little or nothing about ourselves from the Indian wars."⁶

Merton condemned his own country with its incomparable technological power, its unequalled material strength, its psychic turmoil, its moral confusion, and its profound heritage of guilt. He condemned equally the pious declarations of the Catholic hierarchy, and the moral indifference of so-called realists who did nothing to change the situation.

For the reflective reader who is—as everyone must be today—deeply concerned about man and his fate, this is a moving and significant book, one of those unusually suggestive works that *must* be read, and perhaps more than once.⁷

3. See "Ishi: A Meditation" in Merton, *Passion for Peace*, 265.

4. Merton, *Passion for Peace*, 127, review under a pseudonym, Benedict Monk, of *The Christian Failure*, by Ignace Lepp.

5. See "Ishi: A Meditation" in Merton, *Passion for Peace*, 263.

6. See "Ishi: A Meditation" in Merton, *Passion for Peace*, 264.

7. See "Ishi: A Meditation" in Merton, *Passion for Peace*, 268, Merton's emphasis.

Merton believed that much can be learned from traditional people like Ishi about community, ritual, and the spirit world. He saw the story of Ishi as a prologue to United States involvement in Vietnam. “What is most significant is that Vietnam seems to have become an extension of our old western frontier, complete with enemies of another ‘inferior’ race. This is a real ‘new frontier’ that enables us to continue the cowboys-and-Indians game which seems to be part and parcel of the national identity. What a pity that so many innocent people have to pay with their lives for our obsessive fantasies.”⁸ Merton decried the killing of innocent women and children. “In the end, it is the civilians that are killed in the ordinary course of events, and combatants only get killed by accident. No one worries any more about double effect. War is waged against the innocents to ‘break enemy morale.’”⁹

In her forward to *Ishi Means Man*, Dorothy Day wrote that, after reading the essays in the book, she could only cry out, as did another staff member, “More, more.” She continued,

One feels a great sense of guilt at knowing so little about the Indians of the Americas. As children, when we played the game of Indians and cowboys, it was always the Indians who were the aggressors, the villains. And then in my late teens I read an account of the Jesuits among the Indians in upper New York state and in Canada, and remembered only the tortures undergone by the missionaries. . . . We quite forgot the story of our earliest colonists and the aid the Indians had given them, teaching them how to survive in what was, to them, a harsh and barren land, during those first winters.¹⁰

Born and raised in California, I was part of a generation that, in fourth grade, built models of church missions out of poster board to celebrate the role in the late 1700s of the Franciscan missionary Junípero Serra in establishing missions along the West Coast, including Mission Santa Clara, which hosted the general ITMS meeting in 2019.¹¹

8. See “Ishi: A Meditation” in Merton, *Passion for Peace*, 269.

9. See “Ishi: A Meditation” in Merton, *Passion for Peace*, 269.

10. Day, *Ishi Means Man*, vii.

11. There is a statue of Father Serra, who in 1777 founded the mission. Nearby, and especially moving to me, were the memorial crosses recalling the Jesuit martyrs in El Salvador: Ignacio Ellacuría Beascochea, SJ, the rector of the university; Ignacio Martín-Baró, SJ, vice-rector of the university and a leading expert on Salvadoran public opinion; Segundo Montes, SJ, dean of the department of social sciences; Juan Ramón Moreno, SJ; Joaquín López y López, SJ; Amando López, SJ; Elba Ramos, their housekeeper; and Celina Ramos, her sixteen-year-old daughter.

On Sunday afternoon outings, my family and I enjoyed visiting many of the beautiful buildings that are now historic landmarks. Only during my undergraduate work at the Berkeley campus of the University of California, where I enrolled in several anthropology courses, did I begin to understand the role of the church in a less benevolent light. This led to controversy in 2015, when, during his first visit to the United States, Pope Francis named Junípero Serra a saint.¹²

During the summer of 1965, I worked in Lassen Volcanic National Park in Northern California with a grassroots, student-led ministry, A Christian Ministry in the National Parks. The organization began in 1951 with the dream of providing Christian community for the people working in, living in, and visiting national parks. Reading local history, I learned of Ishi's fate and the extinction of the native population of the area.

The tragic story of Ishi culminated in 2000. After a long legal battle, a jar of "medical solution" containing the preserved brain of Ishi was removed from a shelf at the Smithsonian Institute and returned to a related tribe, the Pit River, for appropriate burial.¹³

There are many parallels of Merton's account of Ishi in the history of settler treatment of the indigenous populations of Canada and Australia. Settlers from Europe brought diseases that decimated indigenous communities. One unexpected consequence was the need to encourage immigration to work in the new settler colonies.

In Australia, England transported prisoners to work due to the absence of sufficient survivors among the indigenous population. In 1830, George Arthur, governor of the state of Tasmania, drew a line across the island to demark that part in which no aboriginal person could live. A woman named Truganini (c. 1812–May 8, 1876) was among those displaced. According to historian Henry Reynolds, a descendant of Tasmanian aboriginal people, settlers treated her death as an event of great significance and denunciation. Like Merton, Reynolds regarded the fate of Tasmanian aborigines as a chapter in the history of genocide.¹⁴ Similarly, in *Brave New World*, Aldous Huxley warned that what was done to Truganini could be the fate of any population.

We live at a time of climate catastrophe, the destruction of the Amazonian rainforests, and the melting of Greenland's glaciers and of Arctic and Antarctic ice caps. There are some signs of hope. Social movements

12. For controversy surrounding the sainthood of Junípero Serra, the Franciscan missionary who founded nine missions, see Holson, "Sainthood of Junípero Serra Reopens Wounds."

13. Cienski, "Remains of Last Member of California Tribe."

14. Reynolds, *Why Weren't We Told?*, 13.

such as 350.org and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change have generated activism by many citizens around the world who are concerned for our common future.

In 1998, during a sabbatical in Australia, I visited Tasmania, where I learned of protests that led to a blockade of efforts to build dams on the Franklin and Gordon rivers and, ultimately, cancellation of the project.¹⁵ Five principles of the movement have shaped my understanding of a way to honor the legacy of Ishi, Truganini, and the “wisdom of the elders,” title of a book by Canadian environmentalists David Suzuki and Peter Knudtson. The first principle is that earth has values for humankind that no scientist can synthesize, no economist can price, and no technological distraction can replace. The second principle is interconnection. All things are connected. What we do to the Earth, we do to ourselves. The third principle is the indivisibility of ecological justice, social justice, and peace. The fourth principle is the custodianship of the earth. The fifth principle is resistance.

These principles shape an earth first ethic. We should protect in perpetuity wild places, not only for our own sake, but for the sake of the plants, animals, and earth itself. In particular, we must let some wilderness areas exist intact solely for its own sake; no human justification, rationale, or excuse is needed. However challenging it may be to prioritize concern for our fellows and all creation, we must respect both past generations who lived closer to nature, and current or future generations that are more urban. Especially challenging is to balance our need for resources upon which we depend to live with respect for wild and scenic places and for those like Ishi who have cared for earth over the centuries.

15. Wilderness Society, *Franklin Blockade*.