

Introduction: Why Merton Matters

He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to act justly and to love kindness
and to walk humbly with your God.

—Micah 6:8 (NRSV)

ANOTHER BOOK ON THOMAS Merton? Absolutely! More than any other North American writing between the Second World War and 1968, when he died, Merton called people to act justly, love kindness, and walk humbly. By his critique of technology, a major impediment for people to follow Jesus; by his writing on contemplative prayer; by his interfaith outreach, and through his witness against racism, war, and degradation of nature, Merton still matters.

In a June 2010 interview, Martin E. Marty, Fairfax M. Cone Distinguished Service Professor of the History of Modern Christianity at the University of Chicago, senior *Christian Century* editor, Lutheran pastor, and co-supervisor of my doctoral work responded to a question about the view of some in the church, even senior leaders, who thought Merton was passé, problematic, and should be ignored. Marty replied, “Come back in twenty years and see who is remembered! Of course, this is the ying/yang, there will always be conflicting interpretations, but a *dismissal* of him [Merton] would be absurd.”¹

On September 24, 2015, in a speech before a joint session of the US Congress, Pope Francis cited Merton along with Dorothy Day of the Catholic Worker movement, President John F. Kennedy, and Dr. Martin Luther

1. Marty, “Interview about Thomas Merton,” 29, Marty’s emphasis.

King Jr., as notable Americans who have inspired and continue to inform the path of dialogue needed to resolve the myriad tensions and conflicts of our day. Concerning Merton, the pope said,

A century ago, at the beginning of the Great War, which Pope Benedict XV termed a “pointless slaughter,” another notable American was born: the Cistercian monk Thomas Merton. He remains a source of spiritual inspiration and a guide for many people. In his autobiography he wrote: “I came into the world. Free by nature, in the image of God, I was nevertheless the prisoner of my own violence and my own selfishness, in the image of the world into which I was born. That world was the picture of Hell, full of men like myself, loving God, and yet hating Him; born to love Him, living instead in fear of hopeless self-contradictory hungers.” Merton was above all a man of prayer, a thinker who challenged the certitudes of his time and opened new horizons for souls and for the Church. He was also a man of dialogue, a promoter of peace between peoples and religions.²

The context of the speech was crucial for two reasons. One was Pope Francis’s understanding of leadership. At a time of deep fissures in the United States, he spoke to its political leaders of their duty to recognize and help overcome their differences and walk a path of dialogue.

As well, Pope Francis highlighted Merton as a notable American along with a lay Catholic, a former president, and a Protestant minister. The pope did not hail anyone else associated with the Roman Catholic Church. By contrast, ten years earlier, the editors of the first Catholic catechism for adults in the United States excluded Merton despite the fact that an earlier draft highlighted the story of his conversion. By omitting Merton, the editors acceded to the view of some Merton critics that he was not sufficiently Catholic.³

Merton still matters not simply as a quintessential Catholic but also as one who called people to work to heal divisions in the United States and worldwide. In Merton’s lifetime, the so-called Cold War divided the United States and its allies from the former Soviet Union and its allies. While movements for civil rights, gay rights, and women’s liberation gained traction, with some victories, they also fueled divisions, wounds too deep to be healed by legislation or courts of law. Nevertheless, Merton remained

2. Francis, “Transcript: Pope Francis’s Speech to Congress,” para. 27. The pope quoted the first paragraph of the North American edition of *The Seven Storey Mountain*, published in Britain as *Elected Silence*.

3. Berger, “What Pope Francis Can Teach.”

steadfast in his support for Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and others promoting freedom, justice, love, and truth.

On the last day of January 2015, the centenary of Merton's birth, *The Merton Seasonal* published a number of essays on *Why Merton Still Matters*. The editor Pat O'Connell observed, "Perhaps Gosia Poks sums up best what all the essays are saying in one way or another: 'Ultimately, Merton matters because he shows that the Sermon on the Mount still matters.'"⁴

As a monk from 1941 to 1968 in the traditions of Western Christian monasticism, Merton committed to live in poverty, chastity, obedience, and stability. He followed *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, a document that has proved a durable guide for monastics in the west since the sixth century.

Benedict was a monk in Norcia, traditionally known in English by the Latin name of Nursia in Umbria, a province in central Italy. Benedict wrote *The Rule* at a time when the monastic ideal had come under threat. Western society crumbled in the face of invasion by so-called barbarians. *The Rule* provided stability and enabled monasteries to sustain people through good as well as dark times. Crucial to its success, Merton regarded Benedictine life as "perfectly simple—the Gospel pure and simple—it liberates us from ourselves by enabling us to give ourselves entirely to God."⁵

Until a schism in 1054, Orthodox and Catholic Christian monastics adhered to common practices. After the break of communion, monks in the East and in the West developed some differences while sharing values common to most religious, ethical, and spiritual traditions.⁶ In 1098, Benedictine monks founded the Cistercian order that includes Merton's monastery, the Abbey of Our Lady of Gethsemani.

My journey in reading Merton and other monastic writers began at the University of California at Berkeley where I studied between 1961 and 1965. Living through one of those rare periods in which people made a difference, I participated in civil rights, feminist, anti-Vietnam War, anti-nuclear, and Free Speech protests. Did we believe we could change the world and promote the common good? Many did. Were we also worried that the economic life of the United States with its production of weapons and other technologies of mass destruction endangered human survival? Many did. Did we see that our comfortable lifestyles had made it easy for many people

4. O'Connell, "Editor's Preface," 2.

5. Merton, *Entering the Silence*, 145, entry for December 14, 1947. Merton's *The Waters of Siloe* provides a history.

6. For an introduction to the order, see Aprile, *Abbey of Gethsemani*. Merton's *The Waters of Siloe* also introduces the way of life of a Cistercian monk. Gethsemani retreatants who have visited since Vatican II will find Merton's description of his life during his first decade as a monk as considerably more austere.

to ignore or to be passive regarding the military-industrial complex? Many did. Did people anticipate the consequences of such developments? Many did. Did we agree with prophetic figures like Martin Luther King Jr., who warned of the breakdown of community, erosion of civic consciousness, and immorality of modern war? Many did.

My academic advisor at Berkeley was Eugene Burdick, coauthor of *The Ugly American*, a book that depicts the failures of the US diplomacy in Southeast Asia. Reading the book, and viewing the 1963 film adaptation starring Marlon Brando, influenced me at a very immediate and personal level. Increasingly aware that US involvement in Southeast Asia was misguided, I questioned how to protest. By legal means? By civil disobedience? If the latter, might an arrest threaten my professional goal at the time, to become a lawyer or diplomat?

I joined demonstrations against bomb shelters during which I was handed copies of *The Catholic Worker* with articles by Thomas Merton. The October 1961 issue had an article entitled “The Root of War Is Fear.” The November 1961 issue had an article entitled “The Shelter Ethic.” These encouraged me to read Merton further.

During my Berkeley years, I frequented City Lights, a literary meeting place and publishing hub founded in 1953 near San Francisco’s North Beach and Chinatown districts. The bookstore was a gathering place for Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and William Burroughs, writers identified as the “Beat” generation. I bought Merton titles—*Gandhi on Non-Violence*, *Original Child Bomb*, and *Faith and Violence. Christian Teaching and Christian Practice*—and a collection of poems by the Lawrence Ferlinghetti, who sent books to Merton on May 15, 1968.⁷

The student uprising at Berkeley introduced me to several figures crucial in Merton’s story such as Mark van Doran, Gandhi, Nhat Hahn and Martin Luther King Jr. As well, I was reading, discussing, and looking for ways to promote social justice, the common good, and responsible use of technology in pursuit of human freedom and dignity. Especially significant was my involvement during the summer of 1964 in a community development and voter registration organization associated with Saul Alinsky (1909–1972). His *Rules for Radicals* inspired me to dream a new world:

The great American dream that reached out to the stars has been lost to the stripes. We have forgotten where we came from, we don’t know where we are, and we fear where we may be going. Afraid, we turn from the glorious adventure of the pursuit of

7. Merton, *Other Side of the Mountain*, 101, entry for May 16, 1968. Merton visited the bookstore on May 15, 1968 (Mott, *Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton*, 523).

happiness to a pursuit of an illusionary security in an ordered, stratified, striped society. Our way of life is symbolized to the world by the stripes of military force. At home we have made a mockery of being our brother's keeper by being his jail keeper. When Americans can no longer see the stars, the times are tragic. We must believe that it is the darkness before the dawn of a beautiful new world; we will see it when we believe it.⁸

Gradually, I came to accept active nonviolence as a and perhaps the only legitimate way to establish God's peace in a world of violence, I joined protests against US military intervention in Southeast Asia. Questioning my career objective, law or diplomacy, I opted to attend Colgate Rochester Divinity College for a trial year.

Throughout my studies, I had a deferment from military service. At seminary, courses in the Bible, history, and ethics confirmed my growing pacifist views. On April 4, 1967, Dr. King spoke at the Riverside Church in New York and urged ministers to give up ministerial immunity and to do alternative service as conscientious objectors. After I read Dr. King's speech, and with needed support from my future wife Nancy, I gave up my seminary exemption, went before my draft board to register as a conscientious objector, and offered to do alternative service. In my application, I cited passages in the Bible as well as such contemporary figures as Thomas Merton as sources of my pacifist views.

My application was accepted. I joined the US Department of State as a Foreign Service Officer with the aspiration I could contribute to ending the expanding war in Vietnam and to nation-building by appropriate development. I served in Cameroon with two ambassadors, Robert L. Payton (1926–2011) and Lewis Hoffaker (1923–2013), who supported recommendations I made with respect to US foreign policy. Returning to Washington, DC, I served briefly at the State Department, took a leave of absence, and finally resigned.

At the time, I knew little if anything of Merton's writings on contemplation and interfaith relations, nor of controversy that led to an attempt by his superiors to restrain Merton from writing on war. Later, I identified his plight with that of one of my favorite teachers, theologian William Hamilton, who had to resign due to his exploring death of God theology.

Attending CRDS both nourished my increasingly radical theological views, and seeded my interest in Merton, monasticism, and Biblical studies. In "Introduction to Old Testament," taught by Darrell Lance, I wrote an exegetical paper on Micah 6:6–8. In a course with Werner Lemke, I wrote

8. Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*, 196.

an exegetical paper on the Twenty-third Psalm. In a course with theologian William Hamilton, I wrote a paper entitled “Being Toward the New Humanity: Developing Reflections on Human Freedom in a Cybernetic Society.” In an ethics course with Prentiss L. Pemberton, I wrote a paper titled “Deranged Stations on the Road to Confusion: Berkeley and the New Left.”

In a course on modern Roman Catholicism with church history professor Winthrop S. Hudson, we read “Problems and Prospects” in which Merton mentioned the renewal of primitive Benedictine communities like Mount Saviour Monastery. Developments in the 1950s exemplified an emerging trend that culminated in the Vatican II reforms.

The keynotes of the new monasticism was a simple, natural, more or less hard life in contact with nature, nourished by the Bible, the monastic fathers and the liturgy, and faithful to the ancient ideal of prayer, silence and that “holy leisure” (*optium sanctum*) necessary for a pure and tranquil heart in which God could be experienced, tasted, in the silence and freedom of the monk’s inner peace . . . the older monasteries soon began in various ways to imitate them and attempt changes along lines which the Primitive Benedictine experiments had suggested. Thus even before the Council decree *Perfectae Caritatis* all the monks were working more or less at renewal.⁹

Hudson encouraged me to do a retreat at Mount Saviour Monastery in Pine City, New York, and to study at the University of Chicago. I did both. Monasticism figured prominently in courses surveying Christian history: early (Robert M. Grant), medieval (Bernard McGinn), reformation (Jerald C. Brauer), and modern (Martin E. Marty). For the Master of Arts degree, I wrote a paper for Professor McGinn on Bernard of Clairvaux’s Song of Solomon sermons.

On April 4, 2006, in a lecture at Rhodes College in Memphis, Tennessee, I reconnected with Professor McGinn. Discussing “Why Monasticism Matters,” McGinn cited Merton’s talk in Calcutta, India, on October 23, 1968: “In speaking for monks I am really speaking for a very strange kind of person, a marginal person.”¹⁰ McGinn noted that monks were like hippies and poets and the desert mothers and fathers of early Christianity. Despite their geographic isolation, monks gave themselves entirely to God. McGinn underscored that monks such as Merton united contemplation, action, and freedom to be for the world while yet apart.

9. Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, 31–32.

10. Merton, *Asian Journal*, 305.

In 1996, shortly after I moved to Memphis, I attended a conference at Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Kentucky. A colleague with whom I briefly taught at Central Michigan University in Mount Pleasant, Michigan, offered to drive to Gethsemani, about seventy miles away. We arranged a visit during which we attended one of the Daily Offices. We walked the grounds, stopping at a remarkable group of statues donated in memory of Jonathan M. Daniels, an Episcopal seminarian murdered in 1965 while registering black voters. Journaling, I noted it was a beautiful day, a wonderful drive, and a peaceful place.

I learned that E. Glenn Hinson, who taught church history at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, had met and befriended Merton. Hinson offered a course for students to do a retreat at Gethsemani. After the conference, I introduced a similar course entitled “Merton, Monasticism, and Religious Pluralism.” On one occasion, I met Hinson, who explained, “I may have been the first to take a class to Gethsemani in November 1960. My initial interest was to introduce students to medieval Christianity through a visit to the monastery. Merton, who was at the time novice master, did the presentation. He greeted the group wearing what I came to recognize as his customary monastery denim work clothes, looking like any farmer.”¹¹

In the early 1960s, Protestant seminarians began visiting Gethsemani regularly.¹² Hinson and his students may have seeded this significant contribution by Merton to the ecumenical movement. In a journal entry for April 18, 1961, Merton mentioned their coming to Gethsemani.

A good group from the Southern Baptist Seminary here yesterday. Very good rapport. I liked them very much. An atmosphere of sincerity and understanding. Differences between us not, I think, minimized. Dr. Hinson, a good and sincere person, with some other faculty members, will come down again. We will talk., perhaps, about the Church. I am glad they will come. Yet each time some new arrangement is made, I wonder if I have not committed myself again too much, The hermitage is “for” that. (Really it is “for nothing,”) It seems to be part of the game to have people come to the hermitage. A strange, humorous game of God that I cannot quite take seriously. A mystifying game, in which, no doubt, He will make all things well, and very well. But

11. Conversation in Louisville, Kentucky, on August 20, 2002. In an October 30, 1961 journal entry, Merton mentioned having spoken briefly about peace with a group of church history students during a visit to Gethsemani. Merton, *Turning toward the World*, 175. Jim Forest, Gordon Oyer, Edward Rice, and other Merton biographers confirm Hinson’s description.

12. O’Hare, “Thomas Merton and Educative Dialogue.”

I must not play it too madly, or become too engrossed in it. It is the game of another, not mine.¹³

Hinson made a crucial point about Merton's ongoing importance.

Merton was taking part in a critical phase of an ecumenical revolution set in motion by Pope John XXIII. Initially, Merton was far from ready for this revolution. But after what he called his "submarine earthquake" in 1949 and 1950, he lent himself in a remarkable way to it. He embodied it in his own personality and outlook, and, in his commitment to Catholic tradition, gave it an anchor to which others could hold. He helped them to see that true ecumenism must occur at the deepest levels of human experience if it is to be unafraid.¹⁴

In the summer of 1997, I offered the Merton course the first time, and subsequently seven more times. In the syllabus, I prepared students for their experience in a "personal note":

I first started reading Merton in the 1960s. Like millions (literally) of readers, I was familiar with his monastic writings. However, it was his writings after 1958, after his epiphany at the corner of Fourth and Walnut in Louisville, that most influenced me. Merton's defining moment brought him to a deeper identification with humanity and led him to become an agent for justice, racial reconciliation, peace and Christian-Buddhist dialogue. His meetings with D. T. Suzuki, Thich Nhat Hanh, the Dalai Lama, and other Buddhists bore fruit in writings that prompted the Zen scholar Suzuki to identify Merton as the leading interpreter of Asian religions in the West.

Tragically, Merton died by accidental electrocution on December 10, 1968 (the same day as theologian Karl Barth) during a conference of Catholic and Buddhist monks. In his address to the conference that day, he stated, "The monk is essentially someone who takes up a critical attitude toward the world and its structures, just as these students identify themselves essentially as people who have taken up a critical attitude toward the contemporary world and its structures What is essential in the monastic life is not embedded in buildings, is not embedded in clothing, is not necessarily embedded even in a rule It is concerned with this business of total inner transformation. All other things serve that end. I am just saying, in other words,

13. Merton, *Turning toward the World*, 109.

14. Hinson, "Thomas Merton, My Brother," 89–90.