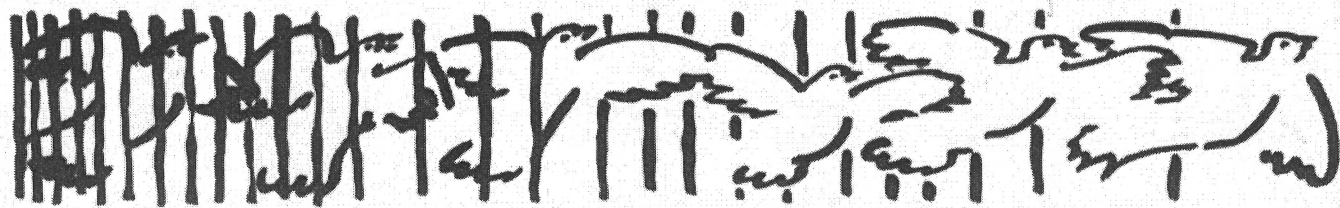


BOOK REVIEW

PEACE IN THE POST-CHRISTIAN ERA
by Thomas Merton. Orbis Books,
Maryknoll, New York, 2004. Reviewed
by Bill Griffin.

Thomas Merton (1915-1968) wrote this convincing critique of modern war in 1961 in Kentucky at the Trappist monastery of Gethsemane. This essay grew out of his urgent sense of the danger posed by nuclear weapons. He composed it, prophetically, just months prior to one of the worst Cold War confrontations between the US government and the Soviet Union which threatened the use of these horrendous weapons of mass destruction. The Cuban Missile Crisis of October 1962 nearly triggered an all-out nuclear attack by both sides, under the official US deterrence strategy of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD). This unimaginable catastrophe for the world was only just narrowly averted, according to the conclusions of scholars and Soviet and American government officials at the time, who took part in a fortieth anniversary conference in 2002.

In 1961, Thomas Merton had been a monk for more than twenty years in a contemplative religious order, the Cistercians, dedicated to praying for the salvation of the world and all its people. A gifted writer, Thomas Merton articulated in this cogent essay a loud dissent, founded on early Christian tradition and doctrine, against the mounting war-fever of his day and against, as he said, "the scientist secularism of the big men with computers" and "the atmosphere of bellicosity they have given us to breathe." His essay is being published in its entirety for the first time here, because it was censored by Thomas Merton's religious



Rita Corbin

superiors for its "pessimism." (Much of his essay did appear in 1964 however, in a different form, in his book, *Seeds of Destruction*, which is also very much worth reading.)

Orbis Press must be thanked for giving us the original form of Thomas Merton's well-structured and nuanced argument, which reveals a Catholic consciousness fully engaging all the moral implications and Cold War absurdities of proclaiming oneself willing to use nuclear weapons in order to establish peace. Furthermore, this essay will help all who want to understand the intellectual falsehoods and presuppositions which underlie the war policies of our militarized nation-state both yesterday and today. For it becomes clear in reading Thomas Merton that the narrowly defined security concerns and imperialist temptations he describes during the Cold War and the "war on Communism," find their analogy and counterpart again, today, in the midst of our government's fixation on and propaganda campaign for an endless "war on terrorism."

This August 6th and 9th we will memorialize the sixtieth anniversary of the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki which together killed hundreds of thousands of civilians (children, women, the elderly) in an instant. No one seriously doubts that it is possible for human society to be completely destroyed in a nuclear war and all modern wars are potentially nuclear. Today, however, the absolute horror of the September 11th terrorist attacks is being constantly magni-

fied by corporate media for profit and exclusively and persistently harped on by the neo-conservatives. For this latter group, the attacks are a key excuse and rationale for expanding a global American empire. Their agenda pre-existed 9/11. (The tragic fact is that we live in an age of terror; this April was the 10th Anniversary of the Oklahoma City bombing. President Bush had little to say about this example of home-grown American terrorism.)

The result of such manipulations is that the greater threat posed by nuclear weapons is being intentionally dismissed or minimized. Neo-conservative ideologues such as Irving Kristol and Robert Kagan wrote in 1998 that the United States, as the world's only remaining superpower, must "project force" and can "set about making trouble" and can freely engage in "regime change." Another who shares this ideology and who is in power today is Paul Wolfowitz who advocates the "tactical use" of "small" nuclear weapons to preserve and expand a Pax Americana. Albert Wohlstetter, his mentor, pooh-poohed dire warnings about the dangers of nuclear escalation and annihilation as mere "pacifist terrorism." (See *Leo Strauss and the Politics of American Empire* by Anne Norton, Yale University Press, 2004.)

Thomas Merton confronted remarkably similar ideological warriors in the Cold War, such as Herman Kahn and Edward Teller. It is striking how their Machiavellian theories of power politics mesh with today's belligerent neo-conservatives. Both groups of ideologues set up their theories by creating obsessions; they focus on generating "fear for the future of our affluent society with its privileges, its soothing irresponsibilities and its comforts" so that "we come to feel our insecurity as a basic spiritual reality." In his chapter on the legacy of Machiavelli, Thomas Merton describes how a progressive degradation in Western political thought has finally reduced all human morality to a pure will to power. The "advances" in murderousness of military technology have exacerbated our modern political crisis far beyond the point where the "ruthless response" to security fears, recommended in the 16th century by Machiavelli in his book, *The Prince*, can have any application.

For Thomas Merton, Machiavelli cannot

simply be the culprit behind our spiritual paralysis. For, in contemporary politics "the 'prince' was replaced by the 'sovereign state' and the revolutions which sought to liberate man [sic] from the tyranny of absolute monarchs brought them under the more subtle tyranny of an abstraction. Just as business and technology needed the discovery of zero to develop, so too political and economic power needed the faceless abstractions of state and corporation with their limited irresponsibility, to attain unlimited sovereignty."

Today, we are living in a post-Christian era according to Thomas Merton, in spite of all our superficial religiosity. He uses the term "post-Christian" provocatively, adopting it from C.S. Lewis, because we live in a time when so many have cut themselves off from any belief in the transcendent, let alone in a God Who is a person. As a result most of our institutions are directed by unlimited assumptions about short-term advantage and impersonal calculations about "the greatest happiness for the greatest number." We have lost a sense of the good as what it is just and right in itself. We are dangerously adrift in a makeshift morality which predicates our security and peace on the threat of war and nuclear annihilation. We have amputated ourselves off from Christian beliefs and ideals and even more so from Christian love and the living presence of Christ.

Thomas Merton addressed his essay to the Catholic community for a very important reason. He believed that the Catholic doctrine of the Incarnation, a foundational article of faith, had tremendous implications in an age of threatening nuclear war. If the Christian is one who believes that Christ became fully human, then the Christian also believes that every person "must in some sense be regarded as Christ." This means that there are strict limits on the Christian's behavior for we are necessarily our brother's and our sister's keepers. Furthermore, the Christian is and must be, by his or her adoption as a child of God, in Christ, a peacemaker. (Matt. 5:9) Thomas Merton's hope was that an awakened Christian community, fully engaged with the hard questions of war and peace, could awaken, in its turn, a sleepwalking secular society caught in a nightmare, filled with siren calls for "preventive nuclear war."

Thomas Merton's voice must echo for us today just as urgently as it did in the past. Our concerns and our dangers are similar. The totalitarian ideology of the present administration has led the American people into one disastrous war after another: first in Afghanistan, then, in Iraq and soon, possibly in Iran or North Korea. The "war on terrorism" could go on "for decades" according to Vice-President Cheney. It has dragged on for nearly four years now and as the number of killed and wounded multiply, it is destabilizing the world community more and more. The US military corporate complex is in the process of restarting manufacture of small nuclear weapons even as the United Nations is meeting to try and salvage the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Thomas Merton asks us the crucial question: Can we choose peace? As he writes, "The present state of mind is one of truculence and suspicion, based on fear. In such a mood, it becomes difficult to see any other solution than violence... To protect ourselves we have to stand back and try and recover our Christian perspective, instead of rationalizing, in moral terms, the familiar mental clichés that are dinned into our ears by the mass media... We cannot expect a peaceful world society to emerge all by itself from the turmoil of a ruthless power struggle—we have to work, sacrifice and cooperate to lay the foundations on which future generations may build a stable and peaceful community."

Private Plan for NYC Park

By JONATHAN GREENBERG

A short walk west of Maryhouse or St. Joseph House brings you to what has long been one of the most open and diverse public spaces in the United States—Washington Square Park. On any sunny day, many thousands of New Yorkers from all backgrounds and incomes gather freely here, to relax, play music, bask in the sun and be among the throngs of people from our multicultural community. Here, in the heart of Greenwich Village, the spirit of our urban community thrives. It costs nothing and all are welcome.

This summer, if the New York Parks Department has its way, all this will change. The park that so many of us know and love will be turned into a construction zone for two years. When the construction fences come down, this incredible space that is the soul of our community will forever be transformed.

The sunken center, one of the places that you walk into to experience the vitality of the people around you, will be shrunk and "reprogrammed" as a street-level pedestrian pass-through plaza. Open pathways where seniors stop to chat with friends will be turned into manicured two-way malls with garden beds in the middle, to encourage "traffic circulation." Meaning, "move on."

It gets worse. The four quietest seating areas in the park will be eliminated in favor of "great lawns," which will only be open during the summer season, when it doesn't rain. The Parks Department designer behind this plan shrugged when asked why he would eliminate the quietest areas of the park. "Only homeless people use these areas," he said.

Supporters of the plan, who are few and far between in Greenwich Village, but powerful and wealthy, talk in coded language about making the park more for "local residents," and of "getting rid of the drug dealers

and homeless."

Nearly everyone in the area supports a long-needed renovation of the park's cracked pavements, public restrooms, benches and water fountains. The City has \$6.8 million in funding available that would be more than sufficient to improve and renovate the park, while keeping it open to everyone throughout the repair process. Instead, it is insisting on a \$16 million plan that will force much of the park to close for years, while creating a reliance on private funding for the first time in the park's 178-year publicly funded history.

A Washington Square Park Conservancy, similar to the Central Park Conservancy, is in formation. Well-heeled Fifth Avenue million dollar co-op owners already speak of the need for a high fence to "protect" their "investments" in the new park. They say that this park is an "embarrassment," that it is shoddy, and that "people from the community don't use it." Yet on a spring or summer weekend, tens of thousands of New Yorkers gather there. And many of us are part of the local community also, even if we don't live in co-ops perched over the park. When the construction fences come down in three years or so, after people have been unnecessarily deprived of the use of our wonderful park, the new owners of Washington Square will effectively be those individuals and institutions willing to write the big checks. And what will become of free assembly, and free speech? Rallies and social justice vigils have been held in this park for generations, including many by Catholic Workers and other peace activists. Once the public loses control of our precious parkland, will the back door privatization funders "allow" us to still gather?

The City of New York anticipates a \$3 billion budget surplus this year, yet private funders are being wooed by a billionaire mayor to transform our public parks. Now this unfortunate trend has reached this remarkable park in the heart of Greenwich Village. We are joining with others in our community to fight this, to keep Washington Square Park open, publicly funded, and ungated. We hope it is not too late.



Brian Kavanagh