

Merton on Faith and Violence

At the root of war is fear: not so much the fear people have of one another, as the fear they have of **everything**. It is not merely that they do not trust one another; they do not even trust themselves . . . They cannot trust anything because they have ceased to believe in God . . .

Consider the utterly fabulous amount of money, planning, energy, anxiety and care which go into the production of weapons which almost immediately become obsolete and have to be scrapped. Contrast all this with the pitiful little gesture: "Pray for Peace" piously cancelling our four-cent stamps! Think too, of the disproportion between our piety and the enormous act of murderous destruction which we at the same time countenance without compunction and without shame! It does not even seem to enter our minds that there might be some incongruity in praying to the God of peace, the God Who told us to love one another as He had loved us. Who warned us that they who took the sword would perish by it, and at the same time planning to annihilate not thousands, but millions of civilians and soldiers, men, women and children without discrimination, even with the almost infallible certainty of inviting the same annihilation for ourselves!

It may make sense for a sick man to pray for health and then take medicine, but I fail to see any sense at all in his praying for health and then drinking poison . . .

If people really wanted peace they would sincerely ask God for it and He would give it to them. But why should He give the world peace which it does not really desire? The peace the world pretends to desire is really not peace at all.

To some, peace merely means the liberty to exploit other people without fear of retaliation or interference. To others peace means the freedom to rob others without interruption. To still others it means the leisure to devour the goods of the earth without being compelled to interrupt their pleasures to feed those whom their greed is starving . . .

Many men and women like these have asked God for what they thought was 'peace' and wondered why their prayer was not answered. They could not understand that it actually was answered. God left them with what they desired, for their idea of peace was only another form of war.

(The Root of War, October 1961)

We assume without question that Western society equals Christendom and Communism equals Antichrist. And we are ready to declare without hesitation that "no price is too high to pay for our religious liberty." The cliché sounds noble, perhaps, to those who are not shocked by its all too evident meaninglessness. The fact is that genocide is too high a price, and no one, not even Christians, not even for the highest ideals, has the right to take measures that may destroy millions of innocent noncombatants . . .

The bland assumption is always, of course, that nuclear warheads . . . are dictated by "prudence," indeed "Christian prudence." There seems to be very little awareness that this position is not only psychologically irresponsible, but plainly immoral according to all Christian standards and by that very fact supremely **imprudent**. Such thinking, or rather thoughtlessness, is due to the slow corruption of the Christian ethical sense by theorizing in a vacuum, juggling with moral clichés devoid of serious content, and the weakening of genuine human compassion.

In a situation like ours we may be forced to choose "the ultimate weapon of meaningful suffering" or deny the Christian faith itself. It is absurd and immoral to pretend that Christendom can be defended by the H-bomb.

As St. Augustine would say, the weapon with which we would attempt to destroy the enemy would pass through our own heart to reach him. We would be destroyed morally and no doubt physically as well.

(Christian Ethics and Nuclear War, March 1962)

In the moral thinking of many Catholics, there is a tacit assumption that the fulfillment of the minimal obligation and nothing more, is normal for a Christian! That anything beyond the very minimal becomes "heroic" and "cannot be demanded" of everyone. Perhaps we forget there are situations in which even the minimum demanded of a Christian can be "heroic" . . .

Fallout does not dispense me from the basic obligation to love my neighbor as myself . . . The Christian is committed to the belief that Love and Mercy are the most powerful forces on earth. Hence all Christians are bound by our baptismal vocation to seek, as far as we can, with God's grace, to make those forces effective in our life to the point where they dominate.

(The Shelter Ethic, November 1961)

Our times can be called apocalyptic in the sense that we seem to have come to a point at which all the hidden, mysterious dynamism of the "history of salvation"

revealed in the Bible has flowered into final and decisive crisis. The term "end of the world" may or may not be one that we are capable of understanding. But at any rate we seem to be assisting at the unwrapping of the mysteriously vivid symbols in the last book of the New Testament. In their nakedness they reveal to us our own selves as those whose lot is to live in a time of possibly ultimate decision. . . . It is for us to decide whether we are going to give in to hatred, terror and blind love of power for its own sake, and thus plunge the world into the abyss, or whether restraining our savagery, we can patiently and humanely work together for interests which transcend the limits of any national or ideological community. We are challenged to prove we are rational, spiritual, and humane enough to deserve survival, by acting according to the highest ethical and spiritual norms we know . . .

Christ Our Lord did not come to being in the world as a kind of spiritual tranquilizer. He brought to His disciples a vocation and task, to struggle in the world of violence to establish His peace not only in their own hearts but in society itself. This was to be done not by wishing and fair words but by a total interior revolution in which we abandoned the human prudence that is subordinated to the quest for power and followed the higher wisdom of love and of the cross . . .

The tragedy of our time is not so much the malice of the wicked as the helpless futility of the best intentions of "the good." There are warmongers, war criminals, indeed. They are present and active on **both sides**. But all of us, in our very best efforts for peace, find ourselves maneuvered unconsciously into positions where we too can act as war criminals.

(We Have to Make Ourselves Heard, May 1962)

In all-out nuclear war, there is no longer question of simply permitting an evil, the destruction of a few civilian dwellings, in order to attain a legitimate end: the destruction of a military target. It is well understood on both sides that all-out nuclear war is purely and simply massive and indiscriminate destruction of targets chosen . . . for their importance in a calculated project of terror and annihilation . . .

The free choice of global suicide, made in desperation by the world's leaders and ratified by the consent and cooperation of their citizens, would be a moral evil second only to the Crucifixion. The fact that such a choice might be made with the highest motives and the most urgent purpose would do nothing whatever to mitigate it. The fact that it might be a gamble, in the hope that some might escape, would never excuse it. After all the purposes of Caiaphas were, in his own eyes, perfectly noble. He thought it was necessary to let "one man die for the people."

We have to be convinced that there are certain things . . . clearly forbidden to all men, such as the use of torture, the killing of hostages, genocide . . . The destruction of civilian centers by nuclear annihilation is genocide . . .

It is no longer reasonable or right to leave all decisions to a largely anonymous power elite that is driving us all, in our passivity, towards ruin. We have to make ourselves heard.

Every individual Christian has a grave responsibility to protest clearly and forcibly against trends that lead inevitably to crimes which the Church deplores and condemns. Ambiguity, hesitation and compromise are no longer permissible . . . Obviously war cannot be abolished by mere wishing. Severe sacrifices may be demanded and the results will hardly be visible in our day. We still have time to do something about it but the time is rapidly running out.

(We Have to Make Ourselves Heard II, June 1962)

During the last twenty years of his life Thomas Merton made the following contributions to the *Catholic Worker*:

Articles: *Poverty*, April '49; *The Root of War*, Oct. '61; *The Shelter Ethic*, Nov. '61; *On the General Strike for Peace*, Feb. '62; *Christian Ethics and Nuclear War*, March '62; *Ethics and War*, A Footnote, April '62; *We Have to Make Ourselves Heard*, May '62 part two, June '62; *St. Maximus the Confessor on Nonviolence*, Sept. '65; *No More Strangers*, Feb. '66; *Albert Camus and the Church*, Dec. '66; *Ishi—A Meditation*, March-April '67; *The Shoshoneans*, June '67; *Auschwitz, A Family Camp*, Nov. '67; *War and Vision, The Autobiography of a Crow Indian*, Dec. '67; *The Sacred City*, Jan. '68; *The Vietnam War: An Overwhelming Atrocity*, March '68; *The Wild Places*, June '68; *Letter to a Young Activist* (posthum.), Dec. '77.

Book Review: *Zen in Japanese Art*, July-Aug. '67.

Poetry: *Clairvaux Prison*, Jan. '48; *Chant To Be Used in Processions Around a Site With Furnaces*, July-Aug. '61; *Advice to a Young Prophet*, Jan. '62; *Soldiers of Peace*, Jan. '63; *An Ideal City*, Jan. '68.

Most of these writings are available in *Thomas Merton on Peace*, (McCall Pub., 1969); *New Seeds of Contemplation*, *New Directions*, 1961; *Ishi Means Man*, Unicorn Press, 1976; *Selected Poems*, *New Directions*, 1967.